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### *Speaking in Silence:*

#### *F. W. Murnau's Expressionist Films (1917-1931)*

**ABSTRACT:** *This article argues that the appeal of F.W. Murnau's 1920s German Expressionist films ("Nosferatu," "Phantom," and "Faust") stems from his particular blend of fantasy and humanity. It examines the importance of lighting in his films; it analyzes how Expressionist characteristics enabled him to portray horror, separate reality and dreams, and represent good and evil; and it assesses why Murnau's films were attractive to 1920s audiences.*

**KEYWORDS:** *modern history; Germany; World War I; Weimar Republic; Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau; silent film; Expressionism; Nosferatu (1922); Phantom (1922); Faust (1926)*

#### *Introduction*

Film offers a unique experience as it captivates the viewer simultaneously by the imaginary and the portrayal of the human condition. In the late nineteenth century, film pioneers experimented with cinema technology to present this experience to a wider audience. Two of these innovators, Max Skladanowsky (1863-1939) and his brother Emil Skladanowsky (1866-1945), constructed the Bioscop dual projector, leading to the "perfected dissolving views of magic-lantern projection and the imperfect stuttering of 'silent' cinema," and eventually to "the first projection of moving pictures in Europe to a paying audience" on November 1, 1895, at the Wintergarten in Berlin.<sup>1</sup> Thus, by the early twentieth century, the world had been introduced to cinema. Ever since then, the film industry has aspired to combine entertainment with technology to create art. It is impressive when films are "simultaneously empirical and creative," representing both reality and the imaginary on screen.<sup>2</sup> Filmmakers seek to offer visually captivating portrayals of the human condition. How they go about doing this depends on the individual filmmaker and film movement. Each such movement features its own unique cinematography, and German Expressionist film was no different in this respect. One pioneer of German Expressionist film, Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau (1888-1931), certainly captivated audiences with his human portrayal and images.

German Expressionist film emerged toward the end of World War I, just as Expressionism in other spheres of art was waning. It was facilitated by the 1916 ban on most foreign films in Germany, which led to an increase in domestic film production. At the same time, there was a dramatic increase in the number of movie theaters from around one thousand operating cinemas at the beginning of the twentieth century to five thousand by the end of the 1920s. As prominent German filmmakers increased the number of German films, they often gravitated

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Dobryden, "23 May 1920: *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* Brings Aesthetic Modernism to the Fairground," in *A New History of German Cinema*, ed. Jennifer M. Kapczynski and Michael D. Richardson (Rochester: Camden House, 2014; Ebook; first published 2012), 122-129.

<sup>2</sup> Katharina Loew, "The Spirit of Technology: Early German Thinking about Film," *New German Critique* 41, no. 2 (2014): 125-144, here 142.

toward Expressionism.<sup>3</sup> On May 23, 1920, at Berlin's Luna Park, crowds participated in an Expressionist-themed event. Designers Hermann Warm, Walter Reimann, and Walter Röhrig curated distorted, uncanny sets to introduce audiences to the newest movement. The German film movement rejected previous forms of art, such as Impressionism, and adopted its own characteristics, such as *chiaroscuro*,<sup>4</sup> extreme camera tilting for different perspectives, distorted figures, and artificial sets. Themes of Expressionist cinema varied but they mostly dealt with human emotions. Not unlike his counterparts in the 1920s German film industry, F. W. Murnau implemented Expressionist themes and characteristics to tell fictional stories that reflected different forms of human behavior.

Before delving into Murnau's works, let us consider some biographical details, captured by German-French film critic Lotte H. Eisner (1896-1983) from Murnau family interviews.<sup>5</sup> F. W. Murnau was born in Bielefeld on December 28, 1888. His brother, Robert Plumpe, described him as a child with an overflowing imagination and his nose stuck in a book as soon as he learned to read. As Murnau entered adolescence, he took an interest in theatre, particularly stagings of the Grimm Brothers' fairytales. When he grew older, he sought a larger stage and pursued theatre-acting. However, his father disapproved. According to his brother Robert, their father said, "No, not another penny. I paid for him to become a professor, not a starving actor." Thus, Murnau studied philosophy in Berlin and art history in Heidelberg, all the while still acting under the famous film and theatre director Max Reinhardt (1873-1943). In 1917, the army drafted Murnau into the "First Regiment of the Foot Guards" at Potsdam. Murnau entered World War I together with his close friend, the writer Hans Ehrenbaum-Degele, and the two corresponded until the latter's untimely death in 1915. After the war, Murnau dedicated himself to acting, closing himself off from his family and friends to focus on his art. In 1919, Murnau co-founded the Murnau Veidt Filmgesellschaft. According to his mother, "[his first films] were well received for their artistic quality and the humanity of their subjects." In 1926, America took an interest in his work and invited him to Hollywood. In America, he produced *Sunrise* (1927) and *Four Devils* (1928).<sup>6</sup> After the success of these two films, Murnau set out for

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<sup>3</sup> Frances Guerin, *A Culture of Light: Cinema and Technology in 1920s Germany* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2005), 8.

<sup>4</sup> From the Italian *chiaro* (meaning "light" or "clear") and *scuro* or *oscuro* (meaning "dark"), *chiaroscuro* is a technique that employed strong contrasts between light and dark. Filmmakers use this technique for a variety of reasons to darken the backgrounds while lighting the subjects of their films.

<sup>5</sup> Lotte H. Eisner, *Murnau* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1973).

<sup>6</sup> *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans*, directed by Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau (New York: William Fox Studio, 1927); *The Four Devils*, directed by Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau (New York: William Fox Studio, 1928), is now considered lost but was once one of Murnau's most sought-after films.

the island of Tahiti where he created *Tabu* (1931), his last film.<sup>7</sup> The film's location was a completely abandoned site, but it was considered the sacred soil of the temples of Puna'auia by the people of the island. According to his brother Robert, the Indigenous of the island "warned that he would [be met] with misfortune, and the vengeance of the gods must have pursued him and struck him down," because—on this sacred land—Murnau had built a plantation in the ancient Polynesian style and a colonial house with exquisite decor.<sup>8</sup> On March 11, 1931, Murnau died in a hospital in Santa Barbara, California, succumbing to injuries he had sustained in a car accident on the previous day. His filmography consists of twenty-two films, many of them lost. To revisit the actor-director is to revisit an artist and pioneer of Expressionism, whose films continue to have impact.

This article focuses on F. W. Murnau's key (surviving) films, namely, *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror* (1921), *Phantom* (1922), and *Faust* (1926).<sup>9</sup> To explain the appeal of 1920s German film, it references essays from contemporary film theorists such as Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Béla Balázs, and Hanns Heinz Ewers. In addition, it uses film reviews for *Nosferatu* and newspaper and magazine promotions for *Phantom* and *Faust* to examine the attraction of Murnau's films.<sup>10</sup>

German Expressionist films and the works of F. W. Murnau have attracted considerable scholarly attention. Lotte H. Eisner has authored *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt* as well as *Murnau*, analyzing German Expressionist films and—the latter in particular—focusing on Murnau's life and films.<sup>11</sup> Frances Guerin in *A Culture of Light*, Richard

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<sup>7</sup> *Tabu: A Story of the South Seas*, directed by Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau (New York: Paramount Pictures, 1931).

<sup>8</sup> Eisner, *Murnau*, 164.

<sup>9</sup> *Nosferatu: Eine Symphonie des Grauens*, directed by Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau (Berlin: Prana Film, 1922); *Phantom*, directed by Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau (Berlin: UFA, 1922); *Faust*, directed by Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau (Berlin: UFA, 1926). There are two other Murnau films that are considered Expressionist, namely, *The Last Laugh*, directed by Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau (Berlin: UFA, 1924), and *Tartuffe*, directed by Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau (Berlin: UFA, 1926).

<sup>10</sup> Hugo von Hofmannsthal, "The Substitute for Dreams," trans. Lance W. Garmer, in *German Essays on Film*, ed. Richard McCormick and Alison Guenther-Pal (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), 52-56; Béla Balázs, "From *The Visible Human* (1924)," trans. Lance W. Garmer, in *German Essays on Film*, ed. Richard McCormick and Alison Guenther-Pal (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), 69-98; Hanns Heinz Ewers, "Film and I," in *German Essays on Film*, ed. Richard McCormick and Alison Guenther-Pal (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), 22-23; Alfred Rosenthal, "Symphonie des Grauens," *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger*, Monday special edition, no. 10, March 6, 1922; EJ [unidentified author initials], "Nosferatu," *Vossische Zeitung (Berlin)* no. 111, March 7, 1922; "German Film Profits: Interesting Balance Sheets: Real and Nominal Values: Some New Films," *Kinematograph Weekly*, January 25, 1923, *The British Newspaper Archive* (database), [online](#), accessed June 14, 2022; *Popular Film: Frente a la pantalla* (Barcelona: Redacción y administración, 1923).

<sup>11</sup> Lotte H. Eisner, *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt*, trans. Roger Greaves (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008; first published in French 1952); Eisner, *Murnau*.

Burdick Byrne in *German Cinematic Expressionism*, and Ian Roberts in *German Expressionist Cinema* discuss the characteristics of Expressionist film, especially lighting.<sup>12</sup> Anton Kaes in *Shell Shock Cinema*, Siegfried Kracauer in *From Caligari to Hitler*, Steve Choe in *Afterlives*, and Thomas Elsaesser in *Weimar Cinema and After* analyze the content of the films and apply film theory to their analyses.<sup>13</sup> All these scholars, film theorists, and art historians highlight the unique themes, visual imagery, and psychological narratives of German Expressionist films.

This article argues that the appeal of F.W. Murnau's 1920s German Expressionist films stems from his particular blend of fantasy and humanity. Its first part examines the importance of lighting in Murnau's films; its second part considers how lighting and other Expressionist characteristics enabled Murnau to portray horror, separate reality and dreams, and represent good and evil; and its final part assesses the attraction of 1920s German films, particularly Murnau's.

### *I. The Importance of Lighting*

A significant feature of Expressionist cinema is lighting, which Murnau used to create a horror-inducing effect in *Nosferatu*, a dream-like effect in *Phantom*, and a separation of morals in *Faust*. Murnau employed *chiaroscuro* to cast deep shadows, suggesting terror or suspense, for example in *Nosferatu*. Dark backgrounds draw attention to the actors, allowing the lighting to showcase their facial expressions, emotions, and actions, and helping viewers understand the plot, for example in *Phantom*. Lastly, Murnau used *chiaroscuro* to contrast characters; thus, in *Faust*, bright lighting is placed on the "good" and dimmed lighting on the "bad."

*Nosferatu* (1922) is iconic for its horror-inducing *chiaroscuro* scenes. Although it was not Murnau's first film, it is his earliest surviving film, and it is considered his breakthrough in German cinema. *Nosferatu*, adapted from Bram Stoker's 1897 novel *Dracula*,<sup>14</sup> follows Thomas Hutter. Hutter sells a home to Count Orlok who is, in fact, the vampire Nosferatu. When Hutter discovers that Orlok is a vampire, he is unable to do anything because the latter has already begun the journey to his

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<sup>12</sup> Guerin, *Culture of Light*; Richard Burdick Byrne, "German Cinematic Expressionism: 1919-1924" (PhD diss., State University of Iowa, 1962); Ian Roberts, *German Expressionist Cinema: The World of Light and Shadow* (London: Wallflower Press, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Anton Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema: Weimar Culture and the Wounds of War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947); Steve Choe, *Afterlives: Allegories of Film and Mortality in Early Weimar Germany* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2014); Steve Choe, "Life and Death in the Cinema of Weimar Germany, 1919-1924" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2008); Thomas Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imaginary* (London: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2000). See also David Sterritt, "Faust: A German Folktale," *Cineaste* 41, no. 2 (Spring 2016): 62-64; Katherine Blakeney, "F. W. Murnau, His Films, and Their Influence on German Expressionism," *Inquiries Journal/Student Pulse* 3, no. 1 (2011), [online](#), accessed June 14, 2022; and Paul Coates, *The Gorgon's Gaze: German Cinema, Expressionism, and the Image of Horror* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>14</sup> Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable & Co., 1897).

new house, aboard a ship, in a coffin, killing the ship's crew, one by one. Eventually, the vampire arrives at his new home which is directly across from the Hutter's residence. Hutter's wife Ellen soon realizes that Nosferatu is a vampire.<sup>15</sup>

In an iconic scene that is often discussed in the scholarship, Nosferatu's shadow gradually ascends the stairs to reach Ellen, followed by the shadow of his fingers reaching out to her, evoking both suspense and terror. Throughout the scene, only the shadow is projected, showcasing the effect of *chiaroscuro*. Ellen cowers in her bed as she watches the shadow.<sup>16</sup> Neither Ellen nor the viewer see Nosferatu directly, which, as Richard Burdick Byrne asserts, "holds more terror for man than does the body."<sup>17</sup> The shadow creates an uncertainty of what the figure that is casting it actually looks like or how it moves. While the entire film features much suspense and terror, it is this scene that draws in the audience, waiting for the vampire to walk through the house, climb the stairs, and reach his defenseless victim – and not knowing (but fearing) what might happen next.

Murnau's film *Phantom* (1922) was released not long after *Nosferatu*. In *Phantom*, Murnau uses lighting to separate the real from the imaginary. *Phantom* revolves around recurring flashbacks experienced by one Lorenz Lubota as he is writing about his life and mental downfall. The recollections begin with Lorenz in the company of his poverty-stricken family. On the way to work, Lorenz is hit by the carriage of a woman named Veronika. The accident triggers an obsession over Veronika, resulting in him missing work and stalking Veronika. Once he has been rejected by Veronika, Lorenz starts dating a prostitute who strongly resembles her. Though he lacks money, he finds ways to purchase expensive things for the look-alike, for example by stealing from and lying to his well-off aunt. As Lorenz is gradually descending into madness, he enters a hallucination state – the imaginary.<sup>18</sup> His fantasies of Veronika and his time spent with the prostitute continually become delusional. His mind, "blending trauma and desire," divorce him from reality, making it difficult for him to understand his surroundings.<sup>19</sup> In his delusions, he has won over the woman and lives extravagantly.

While scholarship on German Expressionist cinema rarely mentions *Phantom*, the film's dream sequences are not to be ignored as they strongly align with Expressionist characteristics. They start appearing after his accident, as he reimagines it in his mind. In these dream sequences, the townscape is distorted. Murnau manipulates the scene by focusing the light on the distorted buildings and shadowing the tunnel underneath. Lorenz appears in the shadow, clumsily chasing Veronika in her carriage.<sup>20</sup> Murnau captures Lorenz's delusional mind

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<sup>15</sup> *Nosferatu*, directed by Murnau, 00:35:15-01:10:30.

<sup>16</sup> *Nosferatu*, directed by Murnau, 01:16:47-01:18:00.

<sup>17</sup> Byrne, "German Cinematic Expressionism," 294.

<sup>18</sup> *Phantom*, directed by Murnau.

<sup>19</sup> Choe, *Afterlives*, 87.

<sup>20</sup> *Phantom*, directed by Murnau, 00:23:52-00:24:15.

through his use of lighting, creating a dream-like scene which enables the viewer to understand where Lorenz's mental state is going.

In 1926, Murnau's last year in Germany, he released *Faust*. It is considered his most Expressionist film due to its extensive use of lighting.<sup>21</sup> *Faust* begins with the interaction between the Archangel, who is backed by explosions of lighting, and the Devil, who is surrounded by darkness.<sup>22</sup> According to Frances Guerin, this separation of characters through contrasted lighting may have derived from the "Baroque triumph of the light of God over the shadow that has eclipsed the world in the form of illness."<sup>23</sup> Throughout the film, the Devil tries to prove to the Archangel, that Faust, an unsuspecting alchemist, will eventually succumb to evil due to temptation. The kind-hearted Faust lives in a village that is experiencing a plague and finds himself desperate to help in any way he can, leading him to make a pact with the Devil. When it is discovered that Faust has made a deal with the Devil, the village shuns him, and the bright light once projected on Faust disappears.<sup>24</sup> Lotte H. Eisner notes in her Murnau biography that *Faust* uses lighting and other modes of experimentation to full effect from the prologue to the end.<sup>25</sup> Eisner points out how Murnau covers the town "by the vast folds of a demon's cloak as the demoniac forces of darkness prepare to devour the powers of light."<sup>26</sup> The darkness covering the town creates suspense and alerts the audience that something horrific has struck the people. However, the lighting in *Faust* may also serve another purpose. Paul Coates asserts that "the film [*Faust*] draws on the *chiaroscuro* iconography of the late Rembrandt" (1606-1669) and "identifies the 'Jewish' Faust as the moral one."<sup>27</sup> While Rembrandt's painting style was far from Expressionist, it influenced the movement. By referencing Rembrandt's *chiaroscuro* and using lighting to show the Jewish Faust as morally good, Murnau displayed his pro-Jewish thinking. With a larger budget, more time, and a studio to work with, Murnau was finally able to experiment with lighting and other technologies to full effect. *Faust's* lighting captivates the viewer with its clear representation of good and evil.

## II. Fear, Instability, and Morality

Murnau's films delve into the human psyche, which makes them relatable to audiences, and each of his films seems to address a different psychological dimension. A film focusing on death plays on human fears; thus, it evokes terror

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<sup>21</sup> *The Haunted Screen: German Film after World War One: A Film Essay*, directed by Peter Buchka (Princeton: Films for the Humanities & Sciences, 2004; originally produced 1998), DVD.

<sup>22</sup> *Faust*, directed by Murnau.

<sup>23</sup> Guerin, *Culture of Light*, 78.

<sup>24</sup> *Faust*, directed by Murnau.

<sup>25</sup> Eisner, *Murnau*, 164.

<sup>26</sup> Eisner, *Haunted Screen*, 185.

<sup>27</sup> Coates, *Gorgon's Gaze*, 35.

and suspense. A film focusing on mental instability or the mental downfall of a character causes audiences to consider their own mental state. And a film focusing on morality reminds audiences of the conundrum all humans have to face in their lifetime, namely, to choose between what is good and what is bad. In an essay on technology and the cinema, the German actor and writer Hanns Heinz Ewers (1871-1943) remarked, "In the cinema [...] I can dream. I live in the world of wonder, and yet this world comes alive only through my dreams."<sup>28</sup> According to Katharina Loew, an expert on German cinema, early German thinkers "imagined cinema as an external manifestation of the soul, existing in space between psyche and mechanized exterior reality."<sup>29</sup> German artists of the early twentieth century viewed film as a way of releasing and recreating one's thoughts and dreams.

Murnau's most popular film, *Nosferatu*, is more than a vampire film adapted from literature. The film evokes terror by making *Nosferatu* the embodiment of death. It has maintained its popularity well into the twenty-first century, despite its outdated graphics and technology, due its timeless horror. *Nosferatu* terrorizes the inhabitants of the town, with each victim's death blamed on the ongoing plague. According to film scholar Steve Choe, the film "seems to flirt with death with each passing moment," causing a "grim misery [that] cannot be avoided."<sup>30</sup> Death is mentioned as soon as the film begins. Its first frame reads, "A Chronicle of the Great Death in Wisborg, anno domini, 1838, by †††," and continues in the second frame, "Nosferatu – Does not this word sound like the call of the death bird at midnight?"<sup>31</sup> Thus, *Nosferatu* is immediately associated with death. We then see Hutter and Ellen in the town of Wisborg, where Hutter is tasked with traveling to Transylvania to sell Count Orlok (a.k.a *Nosferatu* or death) a house in Wisborg.

As the film unfolds, mentions of death and words associated with death abound. Blood, ghosts, the Black Death—mere mentions of these prepare the audience for what is to come, namely, *Nosferatu* boarding the ship, killing the captain, the shipmates, and eventually the people of Wisborg. Some have interpreted *Nosferatu* as a response to World War I and the large numbers of lives lost, perhaps even Murnau's own experience as a soldier in the war and the loss of his best friend and life-partner Hans Ehrenbaum-Degele.<sup>32</sup> Others consider the fear of a tyrant figure, such as *Nosferatu*, who would infiltrate a place not his own. According to Rona Unrau, Germans in the 1920s feared that the "tyrants responsible for World War I" were "still active agents in Germany" just like the Un-dead.<sup>33</sup> Murnau may well have produced *Nosferatu* and placed death at its

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<sup>28</sup> Ewers, "Film and I," 22-23.

<sup>29</sup> Loew, "Spirit of Technology," 137.

<sup>30</sup> Choe, "Life and Death," 37.

<sup>31</sup> *Nosferatu*, directed by Murnau, 00:01:17-00:01:38.

<sup>32</sup> Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema*.

<sup>33</sup> Rona Unrau, "Eine Symphonie des Grauens or the Terror of Music: Murnau's *Nosferatu*," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (1996): 234-240, here 235.

every corner because he felt surrounded by death. Whether or not this invocation of death was caused by World War I or Murnau's own personal experiences, audiences reacted to the horror on the screen, recalling their own fear of death.

Like *Nosferatu*, *Phantom* was adapted from literature, in this case Gerhart Hauptmann's contemporary novel of the same name. In this film, after encountering Veronika, Lorenz becomes more than fascinated: he becomes obsessed. With only Veronika on his mind, Lorenz numbly moves through the film, too distracted to face reality and longing to become a successful poet. He steals money from his aunt to spoil his Veronika-look-alike, all the while pretending to have riches and the woman he wants. In his analysis of *Phantom*, Steve Choe describes the film as a manifest of inner emotional life with complex characters and a plot that highlights the phantom allegory.<sup>34</sup> Veronika, as the phantom, is not Lorenz's reality; rather, she only appears in his flashbacks.

*Phantom* appeals to people's fear of facing their failures – their lack of success, riches, or mental stability. The second of these "lacks" is especially common in times of economic crisis, and when the film was made, the people of the Weimar Republic were experiencing such a crisis.<sup>35</sup> In fact, it almost affected the film's production, and according to Erich Pommer, financial adjustments had to be made for both this and future films.<sup>36</sup> Murnau portrays a detachment from reality and engagement with those phantoms that people hold inside. It is not until Lorenz lets go of his phantom that he reconnects with life – a solution that seems simple enough but is difficult to accomplish. Steve Choe argues that the trope of phantoms and haunting must have been nourished by the Weimar Republic's experience of loss.<sup>37</sup> Lorenz's downfall and exploration of his inner turmoil would have caught the interest of audience members as many people living during the Weimar Republic were experiencing their own financial and mental struggles.

*Faust*, adapted from sixteenth-century German folklore and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's play (1808), explores human morality. In the prologue, the Archangel proclaims that the greatest wonder is "man's freedom to choose between good and evil." He then looks toward Faust who has chosen to be good. However, the Devil (a.k.a. Mephisto) states that all knaves preach good but do evil, and that Faust "seeks to turn base metal into gold."<sup>38</sup> To prove the Archangel wrong, the Devil tempts Faust by striking the town with a deadly plague. Faust is soon exhausted from the calls of the villagers and the deaths he cannot prevent. In an apparent loss of faith, he burns his books. The audience then sees the Devil tempting Faust

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<sup>34</sup> Choe, *Afterlives*. The "Phantom allegory" is defined as an imaginary vision that exists both in the past and present. According to Choe, journalists and intellectuals of the Weimar Republic described the undead by referring to moving images on screen.

<sup>35</sup> Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema*, 108.

<sup>36</sup> Cited in Choe, *Afterlives*, 84.

<sup>37</sup> Choe, *Afterlives*, 62.

<sup>38</sup> *Faust*, directed by Murnau, 00:03:00-00:04:50.

with a passage from a book, stating that aiding the Lord of Darkness would result in all the might and glory of the world. Faust, in a desperate attempt to help his village, does as the passage says, goes to the crossroads, and calls for Mephisto to appear. Faust and Mephisto strike a bargain: Faust will have almighty power for a day to help the village. But when Faust is called upon to help a dying villager, it turns out that he cannot be near a cross, which communicates to the villagers that he has been corrupted. Despite his desire to help others, he is shunned by the villagers. Faust succumbs to greed and asks Mephisto for youth and more. In the end, Faust realizes he no longer wishes to continue his debauchery, and he throws himself onto the fire with his beloved Gretchen, where they gaze into each other's eyes and rise to the heavens. The Archangel then proclaims that love has triumphed over all and that the Devil has lost.<sup>39</sup>

Murnau created *Faust* to show the complexity of human behavior. Just like the character Faust, man cannot be entirely evil or good. The character is relatable as all humans tend to struggle with their morals, especially during hard times like the Weimar Republic. According to Paul Coates, the Faustian man "haunted both the Germans' imagination and the world's imagination of the German" that persisted in the 1920s,<sup>40</sup> when hyperinflation resulted in economic collapse and food shortages. It was not uncommon for Germans to find themselves forced to compromise their morals and steal food for their own benefit. Thus, the struggle of morality was relatable and would have resonated with audiences of *Faust*.

### III. Reactions to Murnau's Films

1920s writers critiqued the appeal and artistic value of Expressionist cinema. Just like other art movements, Expressionist cinema featured shared elements that drew audiences in, however, Expressionist films also differed from each other in their narratives and cinematography. For Murnau in particular, films differed primarily with regard to their composition, for example, their use of *chiaroscuro* as a means to portray characters. It was then up to audiences and film critics to decide for themselves whether they took an interest in his films.

Before analyzing some contemporary reviews of Murnau's films, it is worthwhile to consider 1920s cinema in general. The Austrian writer and poet Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1874-1929) explains the appeal of 1920s cinema in his essay "A Substitute for Dreams."<sup>41</sup> According to von Hofmannsthal, a movie theater is where people go to "fill their imagination with pictures – strong images in which the essence of life is summarized." Von Hofmannsthal argues that common workingmen (i.e., those in industrialized areas) lack an imagination of their own due to the lives they are forced to lead. Though once children with dreams, adults may forget their dreams due to their daily routines and common

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<sup>39</sup> *Faust*, directed by Murnau.

<sup>40</sup> Coates, *Gorgon's Gaze*, 35.

<sup>41</sup> See von Hofmannsthal, "Substitute for Dreams," 52-56, for the above quote and paraphrase.

housing, and by becoming mere tools in the economy. The cinema provides them with the images they lack, and while there may be a lecture hall next to the cinema, moving pictures have more to offer than mere spoken language.<sup>42</sup> Working-class people in the 1920s, von Hofmannsthal suggests, were especially tired of their mundane realities, and films offered an opportunity to temporarily escape from these realities. Films also affected audiences psychologically. As early as 1913, Walter Hasenclever had claimed that movies “hypnotize the audiences,” and sometime thereafter, Hugo Münsterberg had added that “cinema was superior to theatre because its effect on the audience was comparable to that of the ‘hypnotizer,’ their language evoked aspects of psychoanalytic praxis.”<sup>43</sup> Thus, von Hofmannsthal, Hasenclever, and Münsterberg agreed that people needed films to escape and access their own imagination. Murnau’s films offered such an escape.

Yet, while films can be used to escape reality, their characters, plots, and emotions still need to be relatable. According to German writer Siegfried Kracauer, Murnau’s films, which could be described as reality “surrounded by a halo of dreams,” attracted audiences for their blend of real-life depictions and fantasy.<sup>44</sup> The interest in films extends beyond their potential as a substitute for dreams. Béla Balázs, a Hungarian film director and film theorist, provides several reasons for films’ attraction, among them facial expressions and how “the actual drama and the essential content of the film play out on [the] face.” In Balázs’s example, he attended the screening of a French film and, “for an hour and a half, watched the play of a face in which hope, fear, joy, compassion, sorrow, courage white-hot faith, and black despair flicker[ed],” and neither he nor the other audience members grew tired of watching these expressions.<sup>45</sup> Remembering his own theatre background, Murnau ensured that his actors took the importance of facial expressions to heart.<sup>46</sup> In *Nosferatu*, Count Orlok is immediately frightening – not just because of his appearance, but because of his acting. Max Schreck, as Count Orlok, played the part by looking menacing for the majority of the film, especially at the dinner table when his face is finally shown. His stare is not an average stare, but one that evokes fear.<sup>47</sup> The importance of facial expressions can also be observed in *Phantom* when Lorenz dances with the Veronika-look-alike: she may not notice it, but viewers see – in his blank stare – that his mind is drifting off into nothingness, and he then begins to look uncomfortable and paranoid.<sup>48</sup> Just as

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<sup>42</sup> Von Hofmannsthal, “Substitute for Dreams,” 53.

<sup>43</sup> Cited in Tan Waelchli, “22 September 1907: Sigmund Freud Is Attracted to the Movies but Feels Lonely in the Crowd,” in *A New History of German Cinema*, ed. Jennifer M. Kapczynski and Michael D. Richardson (Rochester: Camden House, 2014; Ebook; first published 2012), 56-62.

<sup>44</sup> Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, 78.

<sup>45</sup> Balázs, “From *The Visible Human* (1924),” 98.

<sup>46</sup> Eisner, *Murnau*, 10.

<sup>47</sup> *Nosferatu*, directed by Murnau, 00:22:00.

<sup>48</sup> *Phantom*, directed by Murnau, 01:35:23-01:35:47.

Balázs had recognized, facial expressions draw viewers in and facilitate their understanding of contents and characters. As these films are silent, facial expressions tell much of the story. Thus, moviegoers of the 1920s used cinema as a way to escape into fantasy, all the while looking for relatable human-life elements, and they were drawn in by the actors' facial expressions.

*Nosferatu* did well with German audiences due to its horror, its actors, and its blend of reality and fantasy. The film premiered on March 4, 1922, in the Marble Hall of the Berlin Zoo, hosted by Prana Film as "The Festival of *Nosferatu*." Film critics praised the performances by Max Schreck as Count Orlok (*Nosferatu*), Gustav von Wangenheim as Thomas Hutter, and Greta Schröder as Ellen Hutter, the music by Hans Erdmann, and F. W. Murnau's directing. Aros, a pseudonym for Alfred Rosenthal (1888-1942), a German film journalist and lobbyist, echoed this praise, and he complimented that the mood of the script was so "perfectly reflected in the landscape."<sup>49</sup> The actors of *Nosferatu* were rightfully praised for their dramatic, Expressionist acting, especially Max Schreck who gave life to a horrendous, unsympathetic creature. Indeed, critics were much impressed with the horror of *Nosferatu*, with its "ghostly carriages," "nightmares [chasing] people, plague [breaking out]," and "a ghost-human being crawl[ing], climbing across the screen."<sup>50</sup> *Nosferatu* fascinated audiences at the premiere with its fantasy story, but part of its appeal may have been that it reminded Germans of the horrors of the recent war. Fortunately, the legal battles between Prana Film and Bram Stoker's estate did not lead to *Nosferatu*'s total disappearance as pirated copies circulated throughout Europe and even made their way to America.

In January 1923, a few months after *Phantom*'s release, the film was discussed by an unknown author in *Kinematograph Weekly*. The article describes *Phantom* as "typically German," points to its "bold and interesting construction [containing] some valuable novelties," and notes that it is "permeated by a morbid Romanticism, just now widespread in Germany."<sup>51</sup> *Phantom* certainly emphasizes emotions and how they are expressed by the various characters. According to Lotte H. Eisner, the turmoil of post-World-War-I Germany revived "the ghosts which had haunted the German Romantics."<sup>52</sup> Eisner argues that, due to the 1920s' constant insecurity, enduring poverty, and nostalgia for the past, German Expressionist film embraced certain characteristics of Romanticism. As Paul Coates has pointed out, the two movements were similar in how they "may bring into the light the repressed and oppressed of society."<sup>53</sup> Thus, one might argue that *Phantom* resonated with post-World-War-I German audience members due to

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<sup>49</sup> Rosenthal, "Symphonie des Grauens:" "Ich sah selten ein Werk, bei dem die Stimmung des Manuskripts sich so vollendet in der Landschaft widerspiegelt."

<sup>50</sup> EJ, "Nosferatu."

<sup>51</sup> "German Film Profits," January 25, 1923.

<sup>52</sup> Eisner, *Haunted Screen*, 9-15.

<sup>53</sup> Coates, *Gorgon's Gaze*, 34.

its Romantic elements. While the focus is on Lorenz, other characters – his mother, his sister, and his friend, for example – also express their emotions. Viewers can witness a woman experiencing depression, a man struggling with his mental health, and several characters grappling with financial hardships. But there is also a resolution at the end, and hope is restored, which would have appealed to audience members seeking to escape from the harsh realities of their lives.

Reactions to German Expressionist films were not confined to their country of origin. Soon after *Faust's* release in 1926, a Spanish film magazine, *Popular Film*, promoted it. Its advertisement page, “Frente a la Pantalla,”<sup>54</sup> praised Murnau’s film for its interesting graphics and extraordinary film interpretation, as well as superb directing.<sup>55</sup> To popularize German film around the world, Erich Pommer, the film’s German producer, had assembled an international cast for *Faust*, featuring German actors Emil Jannings (as Mephisto), Camilla Horn (as Gretchen), and Wilhelm Dieterle (as Gretchen’s brother), the Swedish actor Gösta Ekman in the title role as Faust, and the French actress Yvette Guilbert (as Gretchen’s aunt).<sup>56</sup> According to Pommer’s rationale, casting actors from other countries would mean that audiences in those countries might watch the film to see “their” respective actors. Whether Pommer’s calculation added up or whether it was mere coincidence, *Faust* enjoyed considerable success abroad. However, there was some debate about *Faust* after its release in Germany<sup>57</sup> due to its ending: in Murnau’s film, Faust is saved by love, which is rather different from Goethe’s famous play, and many Germans resented the idea of their poets’ classical works being altered in any way. This, so Paul Coates, may explain, though, why the film did so well abroad: “it is at least attempting to fill a logical gap in Goethe’s work, which leaves it unclear why Faust should be saved.”<sup>58</sup> Due to the popularity of Goethe’s *Faust*, German audiences would have been attracted to Murnau’s film – at least initially. Yet, with an international audience in mind, it was just as sensible for Murnau to provide a relatable reason why Faust should be saved. Murnau’s *Faust* may not have received the attraction it deserved in Germany, but it did well in other countries, thereby making a way for its director’s success elsewhere.

### Conclusion

Since the beginning of film production in the late nineteenth century, audiences have flocked to movie theaters for entertainment. Thus, when Germany banned most foreign films in World War I – despite an increasing demand for new films – German Expressionist cinema was born. German filmmakers set out to create their own content and, in the process, rejected earlier film styles in favor of

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<sup>54</sup> Spanish for “in front of the screen.”

<sup>55</sup> *Popular Film: Frente a la pantalla* (Barcelona: Redacción y administración, 1926), 10.

<sup>56</sup> Sterritt, “Faust: A German Folktale,” 63.

<sup>57</sup> Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, 148-149.

<sup>58</sup> Coates, *Gorgon’s Gaze*, 34.

Expressionist experimentation. F. W. Murnau, the director of *Nosferatu* (1922), *Phantom* (1922), and *Faust* (1926), is considered a pioneer of Expressionist cinema. Each of these three films is unique in its theme and plot, yet each of these three films appealed to audiences. Murnau successfully employed *chiaroscuro* for horror, the separation of reality and dreams, and the distinction between good and evil. Indeed, Murnau's use of lighting made fear, mental struggles, and moral dilemmas come to life. Audiences were mesmerized by Murnau's combination of lighting and narrative development. They praised his actors for their performances and Murnau himself for his vision. And his films did not stay in Germany; rather, they found their way abroad where they received additional acclaim and prepared the way for Murnau's career in America – a career that was cut short by a tragic accident in 1931.

One can only imagine how Murnau's genius would have impacted sound film. Throughout his career, he worked with what he had and did exceptionally well. What is even more of a mystery are Murnau's many lost films, for we would love to know how they compare to his surviving ones. We are fortunate enough, though, that the once lost film *Nosferatu* was brought back to life due to the persistence of Luciano Berriatúa.<sup>59</sup> I suspect that Murnau's lost films share his particular blend of fantasy and humanity. As Murnau once said, "I like the reality of things, but not without fantasy; they must dovetail."<sup>60</sup> This blend, to me, explains why his films remain timeless. Even though they are silent, each one them speaks volumes in its own way.

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<sup>59</sup> Luciano Berriatúa, *F. W. Murnau* (Bilbao: Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao, 2002), [online](#), accessed June 14, 2022.

<sup>60</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, "The Ideal Picture Needs No Titles: By Its Very Nature the Art of the Screen Should Tell a Complete Story Pictorially," trans. *Theatre magazine*, in *German Essays on Film*, ed. Richard McCormick and Alison Guenther-Pal (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), 66-68, here 67.