

Today I will discuss German Expressionist movies with regard to their content of occult ideography. Let me be clear: this content is not a matter of mere interpretation. The ideography contained in these films was *intentionally* imbued by their filmmakers. My presentation today – and my forthcoming dissertation – goes to special lengths to show that, for Robert Wiene, F.W. Murnau, and Fritz Lang – as well as for Paul Wegener, Henrik Galeen, and other vanguard directors – a mastery of the celluloid drama was inextricably bound up with occult ideography and that, as pioneers in mass cinema, they adapted film quite faithfully from images and themes then prevalent in astrological, alchemical, and cabbalistic hermeneutics within Europe’s esoteric milieu.

What I seek to say about these movies, then, is a direct response to the scholarship on the so-called German Expressionist movement in cinema. For over sixty years, Siegfried Kracauer, Lotte Eisner, and almost three generations of scholars in cultural history, film, and literary studies have investigated the significance of German Expressionist cinema in terms of its aesthetics and its visual appeal – in part with regard to its ties to occult themes and subjects. This they do by analyzing Expressionistic movies based on their narratives, special effects, and general *mise-en-scènes*.

To be sure, movies by Wiene, Murnau, Lang, and others about hypnotists, unhinged scientists, somnambulists, automatons, mass hysteria, arcane conspiracies, and fantastic breakthroughs in fields from biochemistry to astrophysics reveal, even on the narrative level, that peculiar interests in the limits of mundane reality and human nature – to say nothing of the existence of the grotesque, the psychedelic, and the supernatural – were alive and well in German-speaking Europe during the aftermath of the Great War, with all its widespread

disillusionment in bourgeois science and religion. But scholars always end up short in their analyses of such movies. They point to pentagrams. They notice puffs of smoke. They call attention to strange-looking costumes. Then they say that such things comprise the occult. In onesense, they are certainly correct – yet only on the surface level, only in a *nominal* sense. But what, really, signifies the "occult"? What about the *seminal* – that is, the truly hermeneutical – presence of the occult in German Expressionist cinema? On this question there has arisen a resolute silence. It is this topic which today I address.

Where is occultism in German Expressionist cinema? The answer lies in the very structure of the movies themselves. Although this assertion may (and should) strike seasoned scholars as bold, biographical fragments, the scrutiny of original scripts, and, especially, the extensive visual analysis of these films can corroborate my argument that the directors, screenwriters, and set designers of movies now called "German Expressionist" maintained among themselves a common blueprint based on the sidereal zodiac of Western astrology, and, within its twelve houses, 62 cards from the standard tarot deck by Arthur Edward Waite (published originally in 1910), while basing their characters on archetypes represented by the sipherot of the Hermetic cabbala. Today I will discuss facets of this blueprint and attempt to corroborate its utilization by a small selection of filmmakers.

I present this material in order to set forth the argument that the subtlety, the shrewdness, and the subliminality of occult ideography in German Expressionism has been ignored, neglected, and downright unnoticed in the whole of film and historical scholarship. But it is a field that demands to be taken more seriously by professionals and requires the

attention of those familiar with the occult publications, arcane practices, and esoteric schools of and around Weimar Germany.

In the simplest terms, German Expressionists organized their movies based on a central axis – the twelve houses of the sidereal zodiac from Western astrology. This informed the entire layout of their movies, thematically as well as visually. Their fundamental structure was modeled similarly to a horoscope. Some directors like F.W. Murnau and Fritz Lang would begin their movies with Aries at the vernal equinox and then end with Pisces. Others, like Robert Wiene, would begin with Capricorn at the winter solstice and then end with Sagittarius. In either case, from the initial point of the drama the movies pass through the twelve houses of the zodiac – ending at Pisces or, alternatively, Sagittarius – in roughly twelve dramatic sequences. Each sequence corresponds with Aries, Taurus, Gemini, Cancer, Leo, Virgo, Libra, Scorpio, Sagittarius, Capricorn, Aquarius, and Pisces, respectively.

In addition to astrological themes, the German Expressionists included ideographic representations based on cartomancy in their movies. If one scrutinizes the imagery of the Arthur Waite tarot deck – the 22 cards of the major arcana, as well as the 4 suits of the minor arcana – their ideography becomes readily discernible in these movies.

When understood within the layout of German Expressionist movies, the suits of tarot cards may be divided into groups of three or four and set sequentially within each zodiacal house according to the occult blueprint. Inside the houses from Capricorn to Gemini – those in the winter and spring quadrants of the zodiac – the minor arcana cards appear from higher to lower numerical value. Inside the houses from Cancer to Sagittarius – those in the summer and autumnal quadrants of the zodiac – the minor arcana cards in each suit range from lower to

higher numerical value. Meanwhile, sets of ten major arcana cards were ordered within each house.

As one example of this occult blueprint, today we shall discuss what is typically the third sequence of the movies, the one which the filmmakers based on the themes of Gemini. This sign in the zodiac entails communication, being indecisive, dealing with sibling relationships, and two-ness, such as treachery, couples, or the act of trading. The minor arcana that structure the Gemini sequence include the Six, the Five, and the Four of Wands, whose traditional interpretations I elaborate in this section in order to show how precisely the directors often aligned their work with the esoteric meanings of tarot cards.

Here we shall take *Metropolis* as an example.

It is in this scene that Freder, resolved in his opposition to his father Joh Fredersen, descends willfully into the machine halls. At the end of the Taurus cycle, he tells the secretary who was just discharged by his father: "Go home, Josaphat, and wait for me.... I still have a long way to go tonight.../ Into the depths, – to my brothers...."¹ When Freder descends again into the machine halls, the shadowy henchman Slim awaits his return to the ground level of the city at a newsstand. These motifs – twoness, journeys, and sibling relationships – are indicative of Gemini and set up the mood for the Gemini cycle of Lang's film.

Entering from an inconspicuous door at the bottom of an industrial stairwell, Freder strains to see through the squalid, smoke-choked labyrinth of machinery. In its center stands a machine whose metal frame is explicitly modeled after the glyph of Gemini. When Freder

¹Original: "Gehen Sie heim, Josaphat und warten Sie auf mich... Ich habe heute Nacht noch einen weiten Weg zu gehen...." / "In die Tiefe, – zu meinen Brüdern...."

approaches its black-clad operator with the curious address, "Brother....,"² the machinist collapses in Freder's white-silken arms and protests, "There *must* be someone at the machine!"³ Freder assures him, "There *will be* someone at the machine... I."⁴ Taking the hand-dials, he says: "Listen to me.... I want to switch my life with yours...."⁵ Soon known as "No. 11811," or "Georgy," as indicated on his linen cap, this young man and Freder appear very much alike with their light complexions and blonde hair. They are the sign of Gemini, the Twins.

Here is Freder entering the machine halls. At this point in his mission, he is still hoping to triumph by freeing his brothers, to receive acclaim for his reconciliation of both halves of the city, and, of course, he is holding his head up high in the task.

Outside the machine halls waits Slim, Joh Fredersen's henchman, who is tracking Freder. The peculiar, even absurd display of newspapers is no coincidence as their pages blink at the swarming passersby. Appropriately for Weimar, the disagreement, competition, and hassles of the arcanum may have been a subliminal critique by Lang about the nature of the divisive German press. In any case, it certainly evokes the Five of Wands.

And what about Georgy? As soon as he and Freder trade places, he frolics out of the machine hall in the white suit of his newfound "brother." He has good reason to celebrate. He is breaking free of bonds, cutting loose, opening to new possibilities, and escaping unhappy circumstances. He is thrilled, jubilant, and relishing the moment as he dashes to Freder's car while nearby two chauffeurs discuss a periodical.

² Original: "Bruder...."

³ Original: "....**Die Maschine!.... Es muss ein Mensch an der Maschine sein!**"

⁴ Original: "**Es wird ein Mensch an der Maschine sein....**" / "Ich"

⁵ Original: "**Höre mich an... Ich will mein Leben Dir tauschen....**"

Though initially successful in concealing his identity from the chauffeur and (unwittingly) Slim, who trails behind him, Georgy becomes tempted by the cosmopolitan crowds, exotic women, and glimmer of the nocturnal city. Upon finding money in Freder’s clothes, Georgy vacillates about obeying Freder’s orders to have himself driven to Josaphat’s and instead has himself driven to Yoshiwara, the red-light district, where he succumbs to nightly pleasures. His vacillation, treachery, and the couples he meets at Yoshiwara are entirely indicative of Gemini.

Reflecting on this singular example – one of hundreds that could be drawn from the exact same ordering principle in movies from *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, *Genuine*, *Nosferatu*, and *Faust*, to others such as Paul Wegener’s *Der Golem* and Henrik Galeen’s *Der Student von Prag* – we have a glimpse into the dynamism of German Expressionist cinema’s occult blueprint.

In conclusion, one of the distinguishing characteristics that has won such memorable movies the label “German Expressionist” relies much on what has hitherto been given the broad-brush descriptor of the occult. But what today’s scholarship requires is a more profound appreciation of what the occult constitutes. That is because what one finds underlying this category of cinema is, in fact, an occult blueprint – a literal ordering principle based on astrological, alchemical, and cabbalistic hermeneutics – that enabled such an aesthetic legacy in the history of cinematic entertainment.

Thank you.