

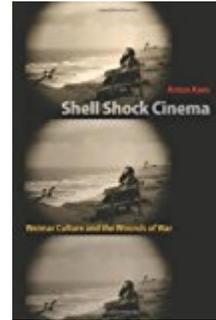
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Anton Kaes. *Shell Shock Cinema: Weimar Culture and the Wounds of War*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2009. 326 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-03136-1.

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## Reading between the Frames

In May 1930, G. W. Pabst's film *Westfront 1918* premiered in Berlin. More than a decade after the conclusion of the First World War, it was the first postwar German film to deal explicitly with the conflict. Nonetheless, Anton Kaes's latest work on Weimar cinema demonstrates that long before the appearance of films "about" the war, its traumatic legacy was ever-present in the classic cinema of the Weimar era. While challenging Siegfried Kraucauer's contention that the films of the Weimar Republic reflected the inevitability of Nazism, Kaes offers readers an expert analysis of how the traumatic experience of war shaped Weimar cinema.

For Kaes, Weimar Germany was a "shell-shocked" society struggling to deal with the consequences of the First World War. As he points out, unprecedented numbers of otherwise healthy soldiers found it impossible to cope with the psychological strains of industrial warfare. Mental breakdowns and their physical symptoms became alarmingly common during the war, and military authorities feared that soldiers might attempt to mimic the symptoms of shell shock as a means of escaping the trenches. As a result, war neurosis was stigmatized and the military charged psychiatrists with detecting shirkers and "curing" afflicted combat veterans. Kaes places Weimar cinema in a broader context by drawing upon a vast literature on war neurosis to articulate the extent to which postwar Germans were traumatized by the war. However, Kaes's treatment of war neurosis

fails to acknowledge that, as recent research suggests, an overwhelming majority of soldiers coped effectively with the mental tensions of battle and even remained "unrealistically optimistic" about their chances for survival.[1] Thus, accounts of nervous breakdowns in the trenches have to be balanced against the reality that most soldiers managed to maintain their wits in the face of enemy fire.

Still, shell shock certainly affected an exceptional number of soldiers during the First World War, and the disturbing scars of war plagued millions of Germans in the postwar years. Kaes focuses on how four classic Weimar films, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (dir. Robert Wiene, 1920), *Nosferatu, a Symphony of Horror* (dir. F. W. Murnau, 1922), *Die Nibelungen* (dir. Fritz Lang, 1924), and *Metropolis* (dir. Fritz Lang, 1927) addressed the trauma of the war experience, as well as Germany's military defeat, without attempting to reconstruct battle scenes from the trenches or deal directly with the war. Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, Kaes argues, represented an attempt to confront "those forces that had participated in and prolonged the madness of war" (p. 48). Set in an asylum, *Caligari* utilizes flashbacks to interweave multiple stories into a complex narrative that exposes the insanity of the war, mistrust of the psychiatric establishment, and the prevalence of xenophobia in postwar Germany. Even before the war's end, it was clearly almost impossible to produce authentic representations of modern warfare. Kaes convincingly argues that it was *Caligari's* total

lack of realism and its use of “decomposed and shattered forms” (p. 82) that made the film’s unspoken critique of the war so powerful. In short, *Caligari*’s shell shock style allowed it to capture the experience of the trenches more effectively than any effort at recreating the battlefields of the First World War.

Kaes likewise sees Murnau’s *Nosferatu, a Symphony of Horror* as a cinematic record of the suffering associated with the First World War. Just as soldiers marched toward the front to confront death and participate in a timeless rite of passage, Murnau’s lead character, Hutter, leaves his wife behind. He then embarks on a lengthy eastern journey that promises financial success. In the process, he encounters mass death in the form of a plague, as well as the embodiment of horror—*Nosferatu* the vampire. Kaes depicts *Nosferatu* as a tale of loss and sacrifice. The plague deaths allude to the casualties of the First World War and the vampire represents “an ultimate otherness that must be eliminated” (p. 101). Hutter displays classic symptoms of shell shock throughout the film, and his inability to protect his wife from the vampire speaks to the profound sense of emasculation in postwar German society. Ultimately, the constant death that accompanies the vampire’s westward journey comes to an end when Ellen, Hutter’s wife, gives herself to the vampire in the interest of the community. Kaes sees this development as a reference to the sacrifices made by too many members of the “lost generation.”

Fritz Lang was one of Weimar cinema’s most influential personalities, and Kaes considers two of the director’s most important works to be primary examples of shell shock cinema. Lang’s *Die Nibelungen*, Kaes contends, was intended to remind the German people of a “heroic past” that had been forgotten in the wake of defeat (p. 133). Conceived and developed in an environment of economic and political turmoil, the two-part *Die Nibelungen* forced viewers to reflect on concepts of loyalty and betrayal while presenting the war as the “ultimate national myth” (p. 147). German audiences embraced Lang’s portrayal of the Germans in the saga’s first part, *Siegfried*, as an idealistic people who remained loyal and honorable even when the observance of such codes led to their demise. After experiencing national defeat, however, viewers could even more easily identify with the character of Hagen as depicted in the second part of the series, *Kriemhild’s Revenge*. Hagen represented a rejection of simplistic idealism and an under-

standing of crude political realities. Kaes sees this shift as an indicator of an evolution in German national self-consciousness. Kriemhild’s quest for revenge only generates further destruction, leaving postwar viewers to ponder the ultimate cost of vengeance, a subject of considerable importance in Weimar Germany.

Kaes presents Lang’s *Metropolis* as another sort of reckoning with the First World War—an analysis of the industrial establishment that guided the world into conflict. According to Kaes, *Metropolis* provided a vision of technological modernity as the creator of class conflict and the machinery of mass destruction. Machines, most notably represented by the robot Maria, were soulless and therefore able to destroy with ease. *Metropolis* thus called for the return of “humanistic values” (p. 187). Although the film concludes with scenes of devastation, it suggests that a new society will emerge from the ruins of the destroyed industrial city: *Metropolis* offers a vision of hope and the possibility of renewal. Once again, with *Metropolis*, Lang made a statement that held particular significance for Weimar Germans.

Along with Kaes’s original insights into the relationship between the First World War and Weimar cinema, readers will appreciate his exhaustive listing of Weimar films available on DVD, complete with information on region codes and subtitles. As Kaes’s listing demonstrates, there was an abundance of German films produced from 1919 to 1933. This situation prompts one to question his focus on some of the most commonly analyzed films of the era. Even so, Kaes discusses numerous lesser-known films that demonstrate effectively the complexity of Weimar cinema.

One of Kaes’s greatest strengths is his ability to speak to multiple audiences. His expert analysis is sure to appeal to students of film studies, but his interpretations are also accessible to readers with a limited knowledge of Weimar cinema. Accordingly, this book will interest scholars and students in the fields of German studies, film studies, and cultural history. Anton Kaes has long been recognized as a leading scholar of Weimar cinema and German culture, and *Shell Shock Cinema* represents another important contribution to these fields.

#### Note

[1]. See Alex Watson, “Self-Deception and Survival: Mental Coping Strategies on the Western Front, 1914-18,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 41, 2 (2006): 247-268.

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