

Introduction

Very bad form to mention the war.

—Osbert Sitwell, *Out of the Flame*, 1923

“May 9th, 1919. A Friday. Paul Simon returned from the World War.” This laconic notation opens Edgar Reitz’s 1984 television series *Heimat*, an eleven-part chronicle of German history in the twentieth century.¹ On that Friday in May 1919, Paul, a common soldier, is released from a prisoner-of-war camp and marches home. With the war over, a new life begins for him and for the nation. Or does it?

Striding through the village, Paul pauses a few times: how strange everything looks to the returning soldier! When he finally arrives at his parents’ house, relatives and neighbors gather and bombard him with questions, but Paul is unable to respond. “Wasn’t it noticeable at the end of the war,” remarked Walter Benjamin famously in 1936, “that men who returned from the battlefield had grown silent—not richer, but poorer in communicable experience?”²

Paul seems to be caught in another world; his catatonic stare suggests that he is a victim of shell shock. For a brief moment we catch a glimpse of his private hell: a dead comrade comes out of nowhere and stands in front of him, addressing him from beyond the battlefield. Have the dead risen to torment the living? *Heimat* suggests that the ghosts of the fallen

soldiers, even though they cannot be seen, coexist with the living. The film juxtaposes two realities: it observes Paul sitting forlorn and delirious in the midst of his family, and it reveals through radical point-of-view shots a subjective, phantasmatic realm that is normally submerged and hidden. The uncanny return of the dead soldier is a function of Paul's traumatic memory and literalizes the power of the past over the present. When the apparition finally vanishes, Paul falls over and faints. He has come home, but the war has come with him. Shell shock has long-term repercussions, not just for the soldier, but also for his family, the community, the state, and the nation.

How do societies cope with the lingering effects of war? How does the shock of humiliating defeat affect a nation's identity? And what part do movies play in making trauma visible? In this book I will argue that the classical cinema of Weimar Germany is haunted by the memory of a war whose traumatic outcome was never officially acknowledged, let alone accepted. Though the Great War was more thoroughly documented in photographs, newsreels, and autobiographies than any previous armed conflict,³ the painful reality of defeat remained taboo for everyone except left-wing intellectuals and pacifists—the very parties held liable for this devastating outcome. The shocking conclusion to the war and the silence in its wake had disastrous consequences for the first German democracy and its culture.⁴ Unspoken and concealed, implied and latent, repressed and disavowed, the experience of trauma became Weimar's historical unconscious. The double wound of war and defeat festered beneath the glittering surface of its anxious modernity. The Nazis exploited that shameful memory and mobilized the nation for another war to avenge the first.

It is fitting that Reitz uses the end of World War I as a point of departure for his account of twentieth-century Germany. Although historians disagree as to whether the Great War was the primal shock (*Urkatastrophe*) of the modern age or the culmination of unbridled industrialization,⁵ no one would deny the unprecedented ferocity and destructiveness of the world's first technological war. This eager resolve to engage in unthinking violence is still astonishing today. Machine guns, tactical bombers, submarines, tanks, explosive shells, and poison gas grenades were invented and perfected to systematize mass killing. These weapons inflicted injury and death on millions of combatants and noncombatants alike. Germany ended the war only when its soldiers began to desert and the Kaiser determined

that the economic “balance sheet” no longer permitted a continuation of the fighting.⁶

In four years, seventy million people were called to arms, and close to nine million died on the battlefield. Two million German men never returned home. In the Battle of the Somme alone, more than three hundred thousand soldiers killed each other within a few months. These young men were not just soldiers; to those they left behind they were sons, fathers, husbands, fiancés, brothers, relatives, and friends. Many received no proper burial but simply disappeared into the bloody muck of the battlefields. How does the home front deal with carnage on such a scale?⁷ Twelve million soldiers came back physically disabled, and untold numbers endured long-term psychological damage.

This book is not about the Great War but rather its tragic aftermath. The term “shell shock,” which doctors used to diagnose frontline soldiers suffering nervous breakdowns, provides a metaphor for the invisible though lasting psychological wounds of World War I.⁸ Some of the most seminal German movies made in the 1920s found artistic expression for this elusive yet widespread syndrome. Just as shell shock signified a broad array of symptoms, the movies of this shell shock cinema took on a variety of forms. But despite their manifest differences, all of these films found a way to re-stage the shock of war and defeat without ever showing military combat. They were post-traumatic films, reenacting the trauma in their very narratives and images.

Robert Wiene’s *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau’s *Nosferatu, a Symphony of Horror*, and Fritz Lang’s *Die Nibelungen* and *Metropolis*, all of which are hallmarks of Weimar film culture, represent the most prominent examples of this shell shock cinema.⁹ Articulating an indirect, but more poignant understanding of trauma than many traditional war movies, these films translate military aggression and defeat into domestic tableaux of crime and horror. They transform vague feelings of betrayal, sacrifice, and wounded pride into melodrama, myth, or science fiction. They evoke fear of invasion and injury, and exude a sense of paranoia and panic. These films feature pathological serial killers, mad scientists, and naïve young men traumatized by encounters with violence and death. They show protagonists recovering from unspeakable events both real and imagined, and they document distressed communities in a state of shock.

A traumatic event inscribes itself and becomes stored in the body without the mind having any overt awareness of its presence. The trauma returns involuntarily by way of flashbacks, repetition compulsions, and psychosomatic illnesses. Precisely because a traumatic shock eludes conscious understanding, it is not directly accessible to memory or speech; it constitutes a “failure of symbolization.”¹⁰ Traumatic experience manifests itself only through its symptoms, and therefore requires that its meaning be constructed retroactively. Three of the four films discussed in this book have narrators who are struggling to reconstruct a traumatic event in the past. These films provide the opportunity to work through that repressed shock from the perspective of the present.

Forced to find a language for extreme psychological states, shell shock films developed aesthetic strategies that pushed the limits of visual representation. In their fragmented story lines and distorted perspectives, their abrupt editing and harsh lighting effects, they mimic shock and violence on the formal level. Shell shock cinema thus contributed to the emergence of a modernist film language that shaped the look of film noir at the end of World War II, and that continues to inspire Hollywood’s horror and science fiction movies today.

Unlike the classical war film that uses documentary or staged footage of soldiers in combat, shell shock cinema focuses instead on experiences of loss and grief—experiences that resonate against a background of shared wartime memories. In the early 1920s, the war was a reality so profoundly immediate and pervasive that it did not need to be mentioned by name. The war could remain invisible, but it was present all the same.

Not all films produced between 1918 and 1933 are shell shock films, nor would I claim that the classical Weimar movies considered here are only to be understood as such. These films do gain new and different meanings, however, when read against the backdrop of the war experience and not as precursors to the Third Reich. My project thus seeks to reverse the perspective of Siegfried Kracauer’s influential book *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*, published by Princeton University Press in 1947.¹¹ Traumatized by his forced emigration from Germany in 1933, Kracauer tried to explain to himself and his American readers how the rise of Hitler was possible, even predictable. He hoped to expose, as he put it in the preface to his book, “the deep psychological dispositions predominant in Germany from 1918 to 1933,” because they “will have to be reckoned with in the post-

Hitler era.”¹² Kracauer also believed that the kind of study he had undertaken could help in the “planning of films . . . which will effectively implement the cultural aims of the United Nations.”¹³ His book, then, is first and foremost the intervention of a public intellectual in American debates about how to avoid another Hitler. Elucidating Weimar’s attraction to fascism was thought to be crucial for the reeducation of the German populace.

Kracauer’s use of film as an instrument of sociopolitical analysis was pathbreaking and fully warranted given its immediate postwar context. His method comes at a cost, however, because his persistent “back-shadowing” views history from its catastrophic endpoint, and thus diminishes the contradictory fullness of the discrete historical moment.¹⁴ According to his overarching teleology, all Weimar cinema points forward to fascism. Even a cursory look at the cultural richness of the period after 1918 suggests, however, that Hitler’s rise to power was far from inevitable. Considering, in retrospect, the fate of approximately two thousand Jewish and Leftist members of the film industry who had to flee Germany in 1933, one might just as well argue that Weimar films foreshadowed exile and emigration, not Nazism.¹⁵ In order to sustain the master narrative from Caligari to Hitler, Kracauer must downplay not only the diversity of Weimar production but also the aesthetic complexity of individual works. Films are never organic, unified wholes carrying a single message. Rather, they are fractured entities that must be read, like products of the unconscious, by means of their omissions and silences. I am no less interested than Kracauer in explaining why Weimar’s modernity ended in the grip of a fascist system; my emphasis, though, is on the ways in which films after 1918 allude to, displace, and relive the experience of war and defeat. For me, Weimar culture is as much post-traumatic as it is pre-fascistic for Kracauer. The Weimar Republic could have ended differently, and films give us glimpses of this alternative history.

┌ The gravity of World War I helped the new medium of film gain respectability and wider acceptance even among the educated class. Newsreels brought moving pictures from the battleground to the home front, making war as well as the nation visible and giving both a narrative dimension. The military defeat in fact spurred German filmmakers to prove that Germany’s true identity was to be found in the arts, not on the battlefield. Judging from the polemical pronouncements by Lang and others about Hollywood’s lack of *Kultur*, it seems as if the movies continued to wage the war that the military had lost. These filmmakers were eager to transform a denigrated vehicle of

mass entertainment into an art form in dialogue with the avant-garde in painting, architecture, and literature of the day, and in open competition with theater and opera. Their artistic ambitions won them respect abroad and, for a brief moment in the early 1920s, even posed a threat to Hollywood's domination.¹⁶

Still, we must not forget that almost all of Weimar's film output consisted of formulaic genre movies; between 1920 and 1927, an average of five hundred features appeared annually, close to 80 percent of which are no longer available. German studios supported only a small number of artistic endeavors, often at great financial risk. These ambitious films were designed for export as masterworks from Germany and hence were especially motivated to tell stories that were specific to national history.¹⁷ All of the shell shock films under discussion here belong to this group of aesthetically innovative works that have come to form the canon of Weimar cinema. These postwar films of doom and despair became synonymous with expressionist cinema and even with Weimar cinema in general.¹⁸

┌ A silent film's historical moment—the political, social, and cultural force field within which it was produced, distributed, seen, reviewed, and discussed—is anything but obvious. Many references that were readily understood by contemporary audiences are lost on us today. Although no archive, no matter how immense, will ever allow us to unearth and reconstruct a historical moment in its totality, situating films from the 1920s in their original “habitat” can go a long way toward unlocking and reactivating their symbolic power. This means repositioning films within the cultural production of a time and a place, but also appreciating them as complex appropriations of the world and unique interpretations (not reflections) of historical experience.

The manifest appearance of a film cannot be taken for granted; it is an *event* that needs to be explained—not solely as the expression of an artist's creative sensibility, but also as a social product that reacted to specific concerns and constraints in specific ways.¹⁹ Why, for instance, did a vampire film like *Nosferatu* appear in 1922? What were the questions to which this film was the answer? *Shell Shock Cinema* attempts to study films as entities that arise from and exist in concrete historical moments; that supply aesthetic responses to economic, social, political, ideological, and institutional determinants; and that still resonate with us today. By examining what films implied but did not articulate, by “reading what was never written,” we may be able to apprehend the forces that generated a cinema of shell shock.²⁰