

'Carl Mayer gives his film Sylvester the sub-title of "ein Lichtspiel", "a light-play". This is certainly not a mere allusion to the technique which makes use of the transformations and movements of light. What he meant was the chiaroscuro in man, in his soul, the eternal ebb and flow of shadow and light which affect psychological relations. This is how I understood this sub-title.'

Lupu Pick: Preface to the scenario *Sylvester* by Carl Mayer, 1924.

Histories of the cinema tell us that the suppression of titles is one of the main characteristics of the *Kammerspielfilm*. But what of its origins and significance?

Once again we need to turn to the teachings of Max Reinhardt for an answer. One day, while rehearsing a very subtle play in which the characters' psychological relationships had to be brought out discreetly, Reinhardt sighed: 'Of course, I saw your gesture and understood your look. But I'm on the stage. Will the spectators in the back rows and, above all, those in the gods be able to do the same?'

This was why he finally created an intimate theatre, the *Kammerspiele*, with dim lights and warm-toned wood panelling, in which an élite (not more than 300 spectators) could feel all the significance of a smile, a hesitation, or an eloquent silence. Heinz Herald, one of his collaborators, to whom we are indebted for this anecdote, says: 'If an actor needs to lift his whole arm at the *Grosses Schauspielhaus*, he need only move his hand at the *Deutsches Theater*; and at the *Kammerspiele* it's enough if he moves a finger.'

Hintertreppe (Backstairs, 1921)

Hintertreppe, a film by the stage-director Leopold Jessner, is a *Kammerspielfilm* before its time. Paul Leni worked on the art-direction with him, and Leni's talent went into creating a mood which, with the help of the sets, is spell-binding. The famous yard in *The Last Laugh* seems tame compared with this one by the backstairs, which

serves as a framework for the pitiful drama of the maid whose letters from her lover are intercepted by the postman, himself in love with her, and who concludes she has been abandoned.

This intimist drama moves at a very slow and heavy pace, in a very German, over-insistent style, and this despite the use of certain ellipses drawn from the theatre. For instance, we are not shown the murder scene; all we see when the bolted door has finally given way is a sort of tableau: against the wall the murderer is caught in an oblique attitude – the Expressionist attitude *par excellence* – still brandishing his axe over his victim.

What shocks us today in this film is the violent break in tone between the styles used. Already the main staircase, heavily overladen with ornaments in a lower-middle-class style, jars with the Expressionistic rendering of the shabby, equivocal back-stairs. Similarly the postman's sordid basement contrasts with the drawing-room furnished with plush emporium armchairs and artificial palms.

The acting reflects this contrast. Henny Porten, brimming with sentimentality and far too fat, plays naturalistically, as if this were a film by Carl Froelich. On the other hand, Wilhelm Dieterle, vastly different from the young over-fed baker he played in *Waxworks*, is here enigmatic, rather restrained, in every way Expressionistic. He follows the rules to the letter and his movements are mechanical and jerky. As for Fritz Kortner, a better actor than Dieterle, he manages to adapt the rules to his role. Everything is motivated: the slow reactions of a poor indecisive man scared of love, the hesitations of an outcast of fortune who, having won his happiness by dint of guile, stops wanting to believe in it. Clutching his wine-jug tenaciously, he succeeds in making his stiff attitude plausible. This instinctively Expressionistic actor blends into the setting.

Middle-class characters with coarse make-up loom up to witness the drama with mechanical, robot-like gestures.

Another ellipse: we first see the maid on the roof in despair, then the neighbours, in a very 'naturalistic' gesture of pity, suddenly lean out over the pavement, and we guess at the dislocated form of the suicide below.

Probably it is on account of a fundamental opposition between the *Kammerspiele* – intimist, psychological – and the techniques of Expressionism that this work, overrated by the cinema-histories (in which everybody copies everybody else's opinions), today appears rather disappointing.

Paul Leni is in no way to blame. We only need to see his other films to realize how little he had to do with this one, made as it was by the man of the theatre, Jessner.

Scherben (Shattered, 1921)

The *Kammerspiel*film, as it was conceived in *Scherben* (1921) by Lupu Pick, is the psychological film *par excellence*; it was to comprise a limited number of characters living in an everyday ambience. Thus Pick deliberately went counter to all the Expressionist principles; and he persisted in this anti-Expressionist attitude long after Expressionism had died out. During the sound era, reminiscing about a film by the rather commercial director Carl Boese, *Die letzte Droschke von Berlin*, in which he played a sentimental cabman in arms against progress in the shape of the motor-car, Pick said that this film was 'a naturalist slap in the face for the Expressionist snobs'.

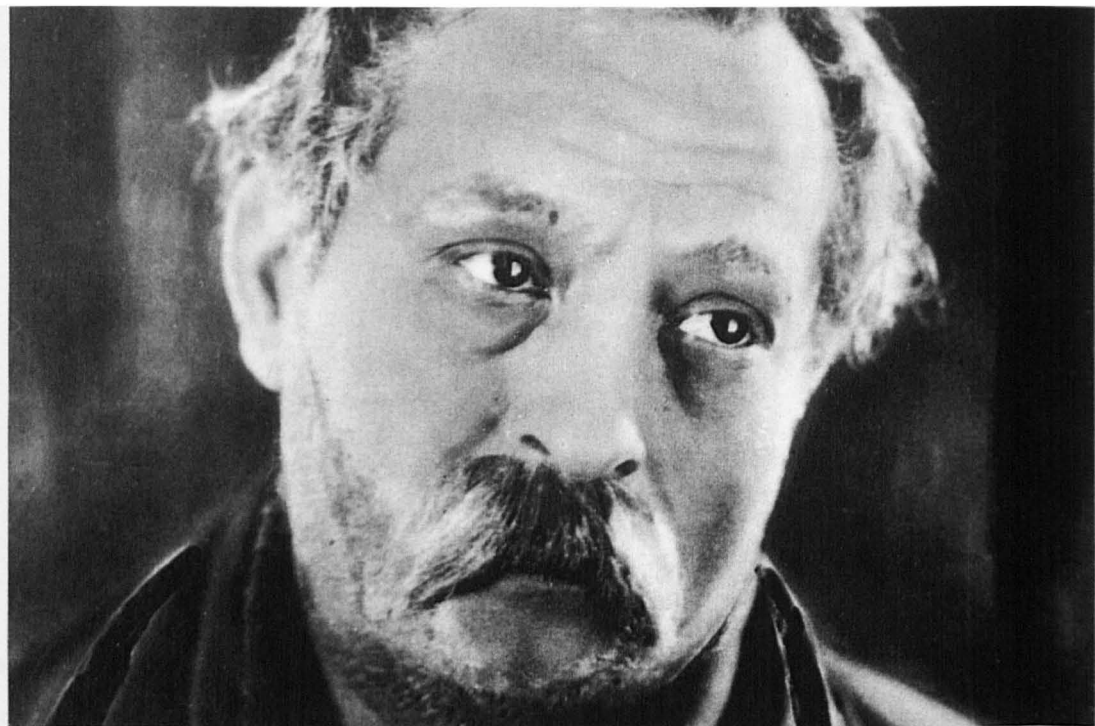
The scenarist of *Scherben*, Carl Mayer, who wrote the scenario of *Caligari* with Janowitz, brought something new to it: wishing to have an élite of spectators capable of guessing what was happening in the characters' minds, he suppressed the titles.*

Lupu Pick's interview with a journalist from *Ciné monde* in 1930 was significant: he pointed out that he had always been prone to go against the fashion of his day, first of all in *Scherben*, 'unloosing the avalanche of psychological films', and then in *Sylvester*, trying to 'go beyond psychology and reach metaphysics'.

Scherben is the simpler film. Pick, extremely sensitive to atmosphere, contrives to give some relief to this melodrama of a railwayman's daughter seduced by an inspector. The father avenges the outrage by killing his superior. For the naturally hierarchically-minded German that he is, this is more than daring, it is real heroism.

Compared with the more complicated and complex *Sylvester*, *Scherben* is stark and contains few symbols. It

* At any rate, this is what Lupu Pick always claimed, but *Backstairs*, also written by Mayer, is likewise without titles, and seems a little earlier than Pick's film. Only a few film-makers realized all that the pace, optical fluidity and dramatic tension of a narrative had to gain from his technique. Robison, for example, used no titles in *Warning Shadows*; those seen in today's prints were added by a zealous distributor. For other films, of course, titles constitute essential rhythmical pauses, but this is not the case with films whose psychological tensions and peripetias occur on the intimate scale of the *Kammerspiele*.



Lupu Pick as the sentimental cabman in *Der letzte Droschke von Berlin*; Scherben

is life as it is lived, simple, dull, in a harsh and bitter countryside: railway tracks at night, scattered drifts of snow, dark pine-trees; the signal-levers, words tapping out on the telegraph; the trudge across the rails for the round of inspection with the heavy lamp casting a few inches of light in the darkness; no sun, nothing but long winter evenings and nights when the wind blusters and meals are taken in silence.

And for the women: solitude, washing that will not dry, the eternal round of meals to prepare. Perennial chiaroscuro, heavy, dense, stifling: the pale glow through the window from the snow outside; the lamp, when lighted, shutting in one end of the room behind a wall of gloom.

Then the storm, howling, buffeting the door, smashing a window-pane. The only concession to symbol so far: the fragments of glass, the *Scherben*, which the girl picks up indifferently and throws into a bucket.

Nothing but railway lines in a melancholy grisaille landscape. The express, which usually thunders through at full speed, stops – but only to bring a stiff and indifferent inspector. Not too indifferent, however, to notice the girl scrubbing the stairs. During a decisive moment we see nothing but a pair of polished jackboots pausing on the stairs. The seduction sequence can have no place at all in this drudgery; it is passed over in a matter of seconds. We see no tenderness, just the discovery of guilt. The mother wakes up and smashes down the bolted door with an axe; the inspector appears on the doorstep, stiff and haughty, the girl huddles in the bed trembling with shame.

And then immediately the mother is running desperately away across the snowy paths and collapsing at the foot of the wayside cross.

Though neither film has titles, the skilful ellipses Mayer and Pick managed in *Scherben* contrast with the prolixity of *Sylvester*. The mother's death from exposure is passed over, in the same way as the seduction scene. That she has not come home is revealed by the world of objects: the enormous back of the alarm-clock in close-up as it rings insistently next to an empty bed. In this silent film, in which the image has to interpret sound, the point is made by returning to the vibrating hammer several

times over. A similar close-up of the back of a hammering alarm-clock interpreting sound in visual terms is found at the beginning of *Backstairs*; but there the sense is humorous – Henny Porten is unwilling to get up – and does not have the same tragic insistence. Here the object becomes the poignant symbol of death, of a desolate emptiness, and the symbol is both meaningful and motivated, like the scrawny branches of a shrub beating against a window or the useless wind-beaten scarecrow in front of the house before the mother discovers the inspector with her daughter.

Then we see the railwayman bringing home the stiff body of his wife and laying it on her bed. There are no exteriorized signs of sorrow. Later, in a heavy stupor, he transports the meagre coffin on a wheelbarrow across the sad grey countryside to the cemetery.

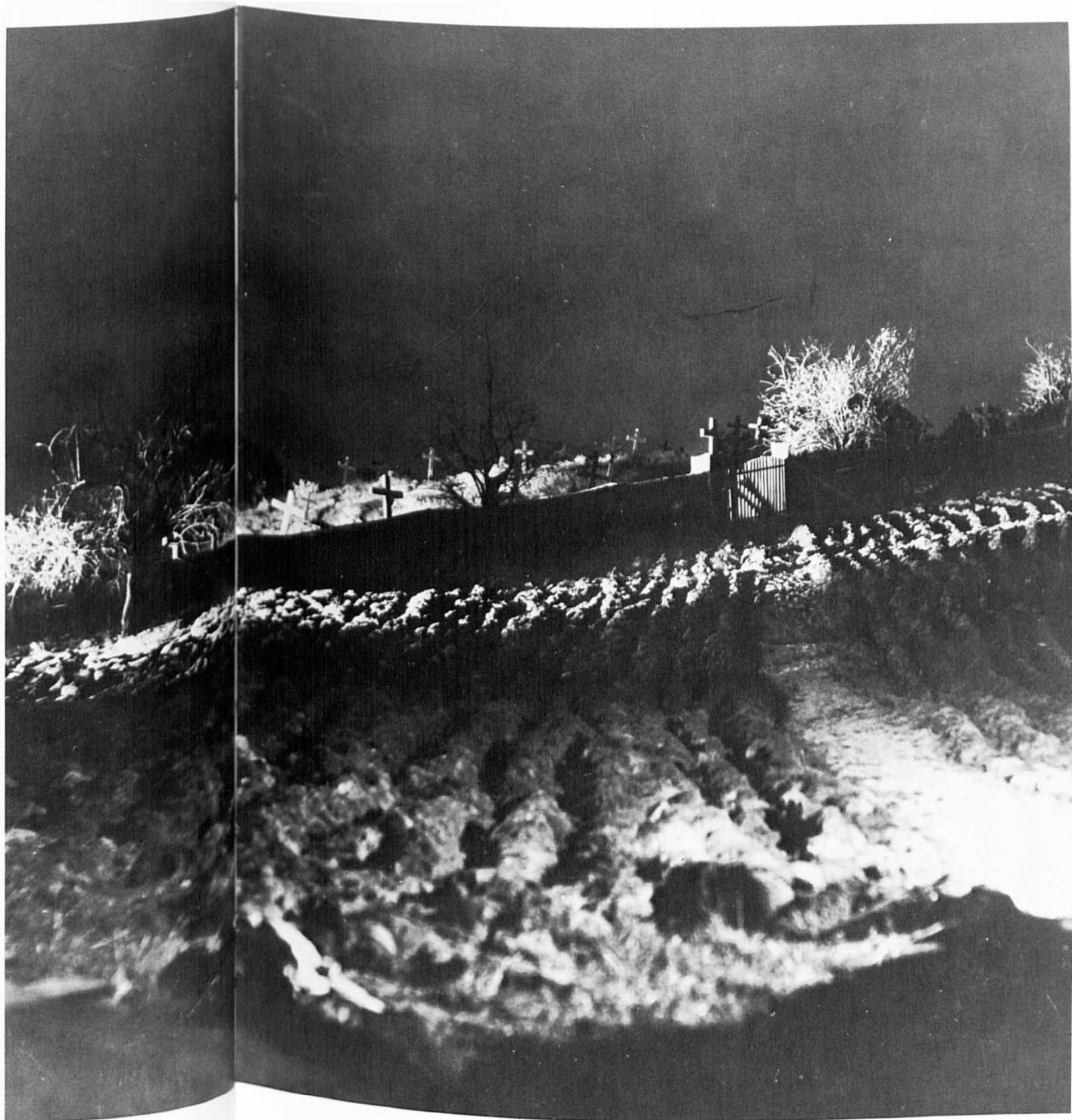
What interests the two authors of this intransigently absolute *Kammerspielfilm* are the slow, heavy reactions. Many moments pass while the old man stares at the empty bed; many moments also while the girl spies on him in the narrow corridor. Every emotional reaction becomes significantly ponderous, as if these characters were not accustomed to expressing themselves.

The acting is curious, half Expressionist, half naturalist. Only Werner Krauss, as the old father, succeeds in giving depth to his clumsy stupefaction at the tragic events which transform his routine world. The two women (the daughter is played by Edith Posca, Lupu Pick's wife) have sudden convulsive movements of mind and body, and writhe in their despair.

Nevertheless Mayer and Pick succeed in creating a *Stimmung* vibrant with wild poetry, the intensity of which appears to vary proportionately with the ill-fortune falling upon the characters.

The daughter, after vainly begging the passing lover to take her away with him and after being rejected, incites her father to act: it is a murder without grandiloquence. Then the old man trudges off to wave down the express with his lamp and give himself up. We know that this image was tinted red in contemporary prints, and the title – the only one in the film – wording the confession makes the screen almost burst.

Here Mayer and Pick give a free rein to their liking



Sylvester: the Umwelt

for symbols: the anonymous, unfeeling passengers in the restaurant-car are seen dining gaily and with appetite. This intentional contrast between the idle class and the very poor is presented insistently and at length, as it was to be for the shabby suicide and the indifferent crowd of revellers in *Sylvester*.

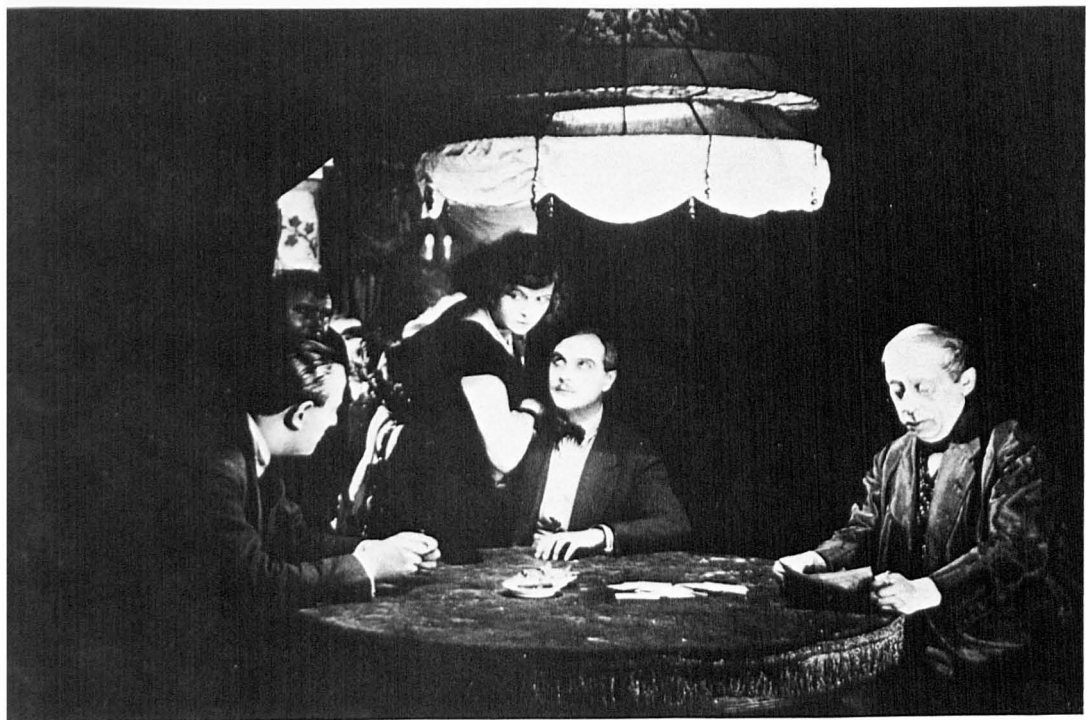
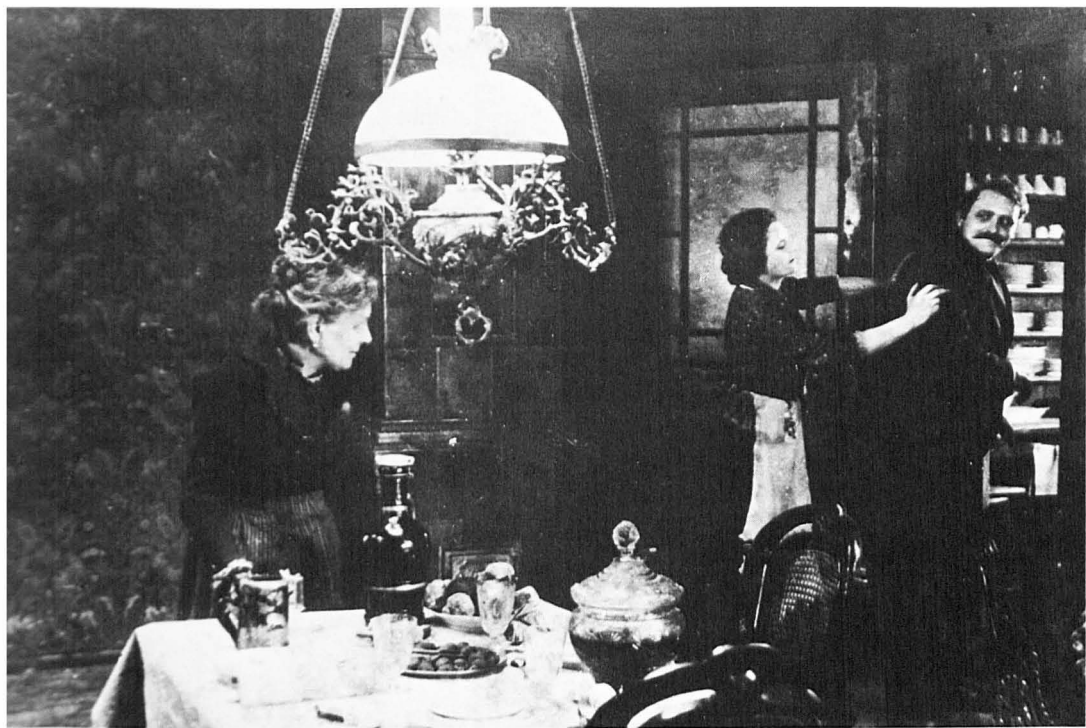
Then, another emphatic symbol: the camera slowly focuses on to the fragments of glass in the bucket – the debris of three destinies.

Sylvester (1923)

Although he professed indifference to fashion, the Rumanian Lupu Pick whole-heartedly embraced the spirit of the German *Weltanschauung*. 'When I read the scenario of *Sylvester*', he said in his preface to the published version of 1924, 'I was struck by the motif's eternal aspect. And I intended to transmit to the spectator the feelings I experienced while reading it. But in the course of filming, new perspectives opened up. I realized that I had to do with a subject as vast and eternal as the world, masterfully condensed into the events of an hour (the last hour of the year, as it happened) which, instead of being used for reflection, for withdrawal into oneself, is merely the occasion for festivities and noisy joy.'

Mayer's aim in choosing this time-setting was purely symbolic, and this was what stirred Pick's enthusiasm. New Year's Eve and the ambiguity of the hour between eleven and midnight, when the old year gives way to the new and the *Sein* (being) collides with the *Werden* (becoming), had already attracted the Romantics. 'For New Year's Eve', writes Hoffmann, 'the Devil always keeps some particular windfall in reserve for me. He is skilled in plunging his steely claw into my breast at the right moment, and with frightful irony, in order to feast his eyes on the blood spouting from my heart.' It was this irony of an absurd destiny that Mayer and Pick set out to underline.

One may ask what the aim of these artistic German directors was. 'This book', says Pick, 'fulfils the conditions of a scenario because, when we read it, it suggests feelings which move us and is not composed of merely



hanging lamps: *Sylvester* and *Die Strasse*

visual elements. *Seeing* the three characters confined within a narrow framework and tearing each other apart, we *experience* with each of them the particular sorrow which results from the fact that they want to show kindness to each other and cannot. *Seeing* this drinking, this explosion of joy, this celebration of the *Umwelt* (the world around them), we *feel* all these creatures so remote from each other rush forward, fail to make the human contact they seek, then lose their way in life. In short, we *feel* the curse which weighs upon humanity: to be subject to the condition of the beast and yet to be capable of thought. We become conscious of this if we wish to *feel* and not merely to *see*.'

Carl Mayer adds in his foreword that, apart from the kitchen, the dining-room and the tavern, all the other scenes and places are merely *Umwelt*. This *Umwelt*, imbued with a kind of magic, takes on a particular meaning. Pick says: 'The composition of this "lightplay" seems to me to be novel because it encloses the action within a limited framework, giving a major role to the *Umwelt* without involving it in the action proper, which would be banal. The *Umwelt* must constitute the base and symphonic background of a particular destiny, and thus become the emblem of a principal idea.'

A number of shots of this *Umwelt* have disappeared from modern prints: the eternal, infinite sea, the limitless sky, a cemetery in which skeletal branches and harshly lit crosses stand out against a black sky, a vast deserted heath stretching as far as the eye can see, a forest in which the bole of every tree looms up as a black shadow in the stifling gloom; and all this seems to become still more limitless when the camera tracks back to reveal the whole landscape.

This *Umwelt* participates 'symphonically' in the action: a storm breaks, the sea crashes against the cliffs in gigantic waves, the trees bend. And at the end, after the banal suicide of a human being whom nature does not even deign to notice, everything returns to normal, everything quiets down, everything comes back to the equilibrium of the eternal elements.

'The *Umwelt*, varied by a simple incident,' says the editor of the scenario, Ernst Angel, 'is interpolated not



Hanging lamps: *Destiny* and *Torgus*

as accessory action or reaction, but as accessory rhythm, in or out of tempo, as a symbol reinforcing and amplifying the given facts of the drama: it is introduced in such a manner that in places, at certain decisive moments, the action is apparently halted and can only continue passively, almost secretly, by means of an intensification of the *Umwelt*, which is not really independent but disinterested, so to speak, and which withdraws as the action is taken up again.'

Carl Mayer's scenario is worth analysing in depth because it contains an abundance of other elements which help us to understand the classical German film. In the fifty-four 'images' which comprise the scenario there is virtually none in which Mayer does not define very precisely the lighting intended to create mood. From the beginning, with the fade-in of the tavern, we find the instruction: 'The tavern. Small, low-ceilinged. Full of *thick smoke*. And! In *the wavering light*: tables!' Then at the end of this 'image' in which a guest teases the young woman: 'She laughs more and more. And everybody starts laughing again with her. In *the smoke, the light and the hazy glow*.' Describing the movements of his characters, Mayer frequently interjects such short phrases as: 'While all this *Betrieb* (coming and going) takes place in a *smoky atmosphere*' or 'The man. He is busy. In the wavering *Betrieb of a hazy lamp*.'

Every presentation of the tavern has the same indications: '*Tavern. Gloom. Smoke. Dim lighting*', while the elegant night-club opposite, its counterpoint, has: '*Smoke. Dancing. Music. Lights*' and opens '*in Glanz und Licht*', shimmering with splendour and light. The presentation of the smoky tavern is much better done than that of the elegant night-club. Mme de Staël had already noted: 'Stoves, beer and tobacco-smoke form around the German common people a kind of warm heavy atmosphere which they are reluctant to leave.'

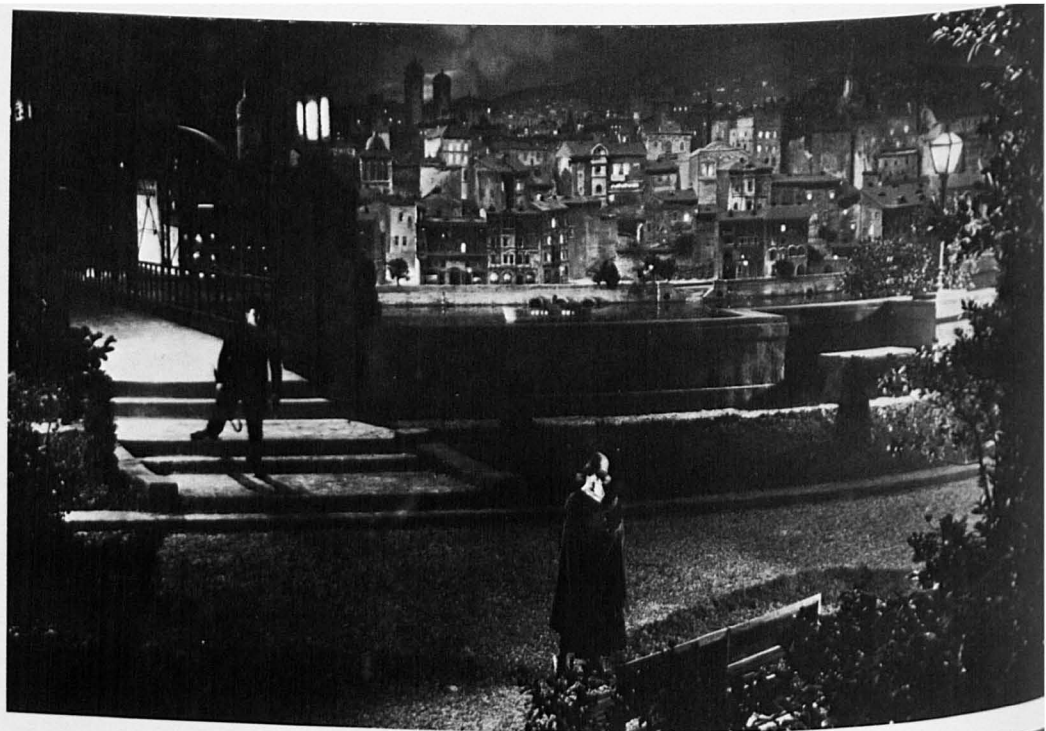
The kitchen in which they prepare the traditional New Year's Eve punch is described as 'full of harsh gaslight'. The dining-room is gloomy because the gas has been turned down, or on another occasion the hanging lamp is dim because the young woman has masked it with a sheet of paper to stop it disturbing the child sleeping in its pram. This room is to have a door with a

frosted-glass panel, through which the light can be diffused into the kitchen. When the two women start fighting, we wonder as Mayer does, 'Has the light in there gone out? It seems so . . .' The glass door also enables him to show the silhouettes of the two figures crushed against its diaphanous surface, which they then smash in their fury. The man's first gesture when he comes in to intervene is to go up to the lamp 'so that light is cast once more'.

We have the same play of light for the façades. The tavern frontage is 'nocturnal and black', while 'a warm dim light' can be perceived swirling behind the frosty window-panes. The night-club's frontage is shown in a panning shot: the tall windows are brilliantly lit and the revolving door 'keeps turning in the light'. The camera follows the movement of the revolving door, through which we can perceive a 'lighted' hall. The tall mirrors of the cloakroom reflect the elegant clients '*in Glanz*' (brilliant light), and another glazed door suggests a room 'full of chandeliers and lights'.

We find the same kind of appearance in the street, which assumes the 'metaphysical function' also assumed by Grune's street in *Die Strasse* (*The Street*, 1923). Mayer's instructions on this subject hold good for all those films in which the street plays an active – and often tragic – part. 'A square looms up. Like a shadow! In the glow of many lights. And traffic! Motor-cars! Trams! Carriages! Men! Electric signs! Motor-cars! A single entangled mass. Whose elements are barely distinguishable.' On this square glows the illuminated dial of a huge clock which, beneath the camera which moves forward, is finally to become, a few minutes before midnight, 'as large as Fate' and almost burst the limits of the screen. (The same 'dramatic function' is given to a clock in the hanged man's bedroom, beating with an uncanny artificial life-rhythm, its pendulum swinging and its hammer striking the twelve definitive strokes.)

Crescendo of light-effects as midnight approaches. The crowd thickens in the square, fireworks explode, all the windows suddenly fill with light and we see silhouettes clinking glasses. In a symmetry which is itself symbolic the lighting diminishes after midnight, after the suicide. The heath again, with a solitary flickering



Die Strasse; The Hands of Orlac

lantern; another image shows the storm at sea slowly dying down. On the street and the now gloomy square the traffic thins, then disappears; a few lights go out one after the other. In the shadows, the revolving door has stopped turning. A faint light filters from the tall windows of the night-club, showing the tables and chairs piled up inside. In the tavern one dim flame is still left burning behind the façade.

Then, in the square, the last lights go out. The street and square are in darkness, the only light comes from the dial of the clock: the camera tracks back and the clock-face dwindles to a mere point of light in the darkness.

Modern prints of this film have been shorn of so many shots of the *Umwelt* that we can now only get a clear idea of the function of the moving camera by turning to the scenario. It is full of such directions as: 'Tracking slowly back curving to the left, then panning back' or 'Tracking forward at an angle'. These directions are usually kept for the *Umwelt*, more conventional shots being used for the main action. For Mayer, this mobility of the camera-unit ought to heighten the impression the spectator gets of the *Umwelt*, for it tells him that he is being shown a particular world. Mayer adds that the movements of the camera, by a continual shift in depth and height around the events taking place, should convey the vertigo human beings experience when trying to come to terms with their environment.

Mayer's notes and the illustration of a dual camera dolly made specially for this film argue that Pick was the first to use the *entfesselte Kamera*, the 'unchained' (mobile) camera, in a German studio. (But Boese affirms that Wegener had already used a mobile camera for the ghosts in *Der Golem*; see page 70.)

In *The Last Laugh*, Murnau was to use Carl Mayer's directions more skilfully than Lupu Pick. They were to be the very basis of his optical prowess and his penetrating explorations in the visual field. For Murnau the camera moving on a dolly was no longer enough: he tied it to his cameraman's chest and made him follow Jannings step by step, bending, leaning, and twisting in order to shoot from the most complicated of angles.

Yet Pick had grasped the implications of his author's

technical notes perfectly well. He says: 'The new camera movements are rich in significance and inseparable from the scenario. Film being essentially image in movement, the author's suggestions are such that the action appears to be bathed in the *Umwelt* like an island in the middle of the sea.' It was Pick's attachment to symbol rather than to image which prevented him from equalling Murnau in the handling of the mobile camera.

Carl Mayer's short, unfinished, often choppy phrases are constructed Expressionistically with inverted verbs and punctuated with unexpected caesuras. Words such as 'And!', 'Now!', 'Thus!', scattered between the phrases and sometimes isolated on a line, repeated to quicken or slow down the action, reveal Mayer's acute sense of rhythm.

In his *Expressionismus und Film* Kurtz called attention to the divergence of two stylistic aims: an Expressionist poet cannot agree with a director seeking (even stylized) psychological developments in a middle-class atmosphere without accepting certain modifications to his personal style.

Kurtz added that Mayer attempts to minimize the everyday attitudes of his heroes and turn them into Expressionistic 'elements of composition'. Pick only goes half-way in this direction.

It is not merely Mayer's language which makes this film much less remote from the Expressionist ideology than Lupu Pick thought. When Expressionism tries to avoid the snares and pitfalls of naturalistic 'detail' it falls under the ascendancy of the object. The meticulous-minded Germans have always been fond of stressing details. We need only remember in this connection the verbose digressions of their authors, from Jean Paul via Theodor Fontane to Thomas Mann: detail for its own sake, not the authenticity-increasing detail of a Stendhal. The immediate predecessors of Max Reinhardt pinpointed the realistic detail in the plays of Gerhart Hauptmann or Sudermann, lavish exponents of 'local colour' like the Duke of Meiningen, in his historical dramas, before them. Thus we frequently find in Mayer and Pick the exaggeration of the fateful object: in *Sylvester*, for example, emphasis is placed on the table laid with

its narrow cloth and only two places. When Lang cuts rapidly, in *M*, to the unoccupied chair and empty plate of the murdered little girl, the shock hits the spectator immediately. In Pick's film the technique requires much greater watchfulness on the part of the spectator: he is supposed, like the young woman (warned of her mother-in-law's imminent intrusion by the shadow profiled on the frosted window), to stare at the table where two people's intimacy is going to be ruined. Then the young woman unwillingly sets a third place at the other side of the table where there is no cloth. Mayer and Pick take their time, the young woman comes and goes. Finally, after inserts of detailed shots of the *Umwelt*, including the tavern, we are shown the two women's temporary reconciliation, as they exaggerate their brisk pleasure in laying the table, this time for three.

Along with Mayer, Pick explores the byways of the soul. While her daughter-in-law is asleep, the little old woman, with nothing to do, starts fidgeting between the pram which she does not dare touch, and the stove, which she pokes timidly. Pick goes through whole lengths of film before revealing the climax of this lower-middle-class tragedy: two family portraits - one the photo of the unmarried son beside his proud mother, the other showing the son and his bride, who has contrived to snatch him from his mother's devotion - prompt a scene of jealousy between the two women. Finally, torn between them, besotted with punch, the man is pushed to suicide.

Throughout this film objects are all-important. The stove to which the old mother clings when the son sees himself obliged to send her away becomes the very emblem of the familial hearth. Her mechanical wheeling of the orphan's pram round the dining-room, where the gap left by the dead man can already be felt, becomes unbearably 'significant'. The streamers which are trampled underfoot and swept up in the streets in the early hours of morning, or which hang intertwined and torn on the tables and chairs of the empty tavern, the last leaf of a calendar which, before the customers leave, a drunk stares at over his big cardboard nose and which he finally decides to tear off and crumple (a scene not in Mayer's

scenario) – all this belongs to Lupu Pick's scheme of the symbolism of 'psychical relationships'.

The gay street scenes, the lush night-club with its elegant guests, the noisy carousing at the tavern, the drunken revellers in fancy dress invading the hanged man's bedroom, the belated night prowler vainly knocking at the locked door of the gloomy tavern – all these passages, dominated by the trivial event of a shabby suicide, are juxtaposed, and reveal an Expressionistic taste for violent contrast. The extremely pared-down treatment of the main characters, around whom the extras in the brief, hour-long tragedy shade into the background, conforms to the Expressionist ruling which lays down that characters must only embody 'principles'.

For Mayer talks about *Gestalten*, shapes, and gives the direction 'The man, *his* wife, *his* mother', depriving the two women of all individual existence by means of this possessive pronoun. Then again, he directs that only these principal figures are to appear in medium shots, 'since the general atmosphere of celebration merely constitutes the background against which the action is set'. The rooms and kitchen are to be small and low-ceilinged so that, even taken in their totality, the figures fill space 'intensely'.

It is worth pointing out that the Expressionism in this film serves to conceal a curious return to Naturalism. The acting of Klöpfer as the man is most revealing. He has a way of throwing back the upper part of his body into a slanting posture. When he is struggling to decide between the two women he loves, his crazy laugh, his tall figure, at once flabby and stiff, foreshadow his later appearance after the hanging, when his rigid, bloated expression in death resembles that of a drowned man.

The insinuating manner of the *Kammerspiele* intensifies the weight of the action and increases its ponderous slowness. It is plausible when the wife sees her mother-in-law at the window and hesitates before informing her husband; but when the latter, sluggish though he may be, lets so many interminable minutes pass before letting his mother in from the cold, it is not very convincing.

One lesson Pick learnt from the *Kammerspiele* was to prove useful to other film-makers. His characters, whose intensity of expression comes close to pantomime, stop



Nju: subtlety of mood

moving their lips; those silent dialogues, whose purport had been conveyed, however inadequately, by the titles, were now quite pointless. On those rare occasions at which, in their despair, the characters in the *Kammerspiel-film* appear to moan and let incoherent sounds escape from their lips, the spectator's emotion is at its height.

Lupu Pick with his everyday tragedies did not give realism to the German cinema. Though he complicates the action by elaborating his own brand of depth-psychology, his characters still have at least some of the nebulous abstraction found in figures stemming from the Expressionist ideology. And the genuine beggars he outlines here and there, after duly making them up to resemble Peachum's fakes in *Der Dreigroschenoper*, lose, in a cloud of crudely sentimental symbols, all social significance they might have had. Was it on account of what Pick calls 'the *eternal* aspect of the motifs', with added elements of *Weltanschauung* and *pittoresque*, that German realism has always been bound to undergo the



Nju: Elisabeth Bergner

artistic adulteration of a more or less extreme stylization?

There is one passage in *Sylvester* – that of the revolving door in the night-club – which, though rather insignificant in itself, is worthy of note because it anticipates some scenes in *The Last Laugh*. Carl Mayer, the scenarist of both films, had no doubt foreseen what could be gained from this revolving door, but the less subtle and inventive Lupu Pick had not. If the visual effects of this passage are compared with Murnau's shots through the revolving door or the doors of the restaurant and hall, it is impossible to believe that Pick, the first choice as director of *The Last Laugh*, could have achieved as much. Pick was undoubtedly sincere, but he was no genius.

Paul Czinner

Paul Czinner is a much better exponent of the ambiguity of the *Kammerspiele*, to which his wife Elisabeth Bergner, an astonishingly gifted actress, was so well adapted. In *Nju* (1924) he depicted two characters facing each other, in silence, and the very air was full of this silence. Czinner's subtlety was to develop still further in his last silent films, when in a novel, though now to us familiar, fashion he interpreted latent mood with close-ups of faces in which the passage of an emotion was reflected like a cloud crossing a limpid sky.

Or again, as in *Der Geiger von Florenz*, he uses slow motion, and here Bergner, holding her violin, glides across the drawing-room as in a dream, a chord about to fade away.

Elisabeth Bergner

Vibrant, sensitive, an actress of great nervous intellectuality, Elisabeth Bergner had as it were taken up the mantle of Asta Nielsen in the second half of the twenties. Up to the advent of Hitler, she embodied the spirit of an age which was ardent, anguished, intensely spiritual and still very close to the expansive ecstasy of the immediate post-war years.

Elisabeth Bergner came to the fore with Reinhardt when, as a child-woman full of fragile charm, she played the young heroines of Shakespeare; her slim ephebic



Stimmung: The Student of Prague (1926)

figure was dressed in Reinhardt's favourite Quattrocento costume; her shoulders were hunched slightly. Like Asta Nielsen, she could wear a youth's clothing without the disguise ever becoming vulgar; she played Rosalind without betraying her femininity.

No one was her equal, a few years later in O'Neill's *Strange Interlude*, for expressing asides, thoughts from the unconscious, with her slightly hoarse yet supple voice distinguishing them from the dialogue of reality.

In her, Paul Czinner found the ideal executant for his *Kammerspielfilme*. Her bearing and appearance already seemed to contain all the quintessence of the *Kammerspiele*. In *Nju* she appears even more frail, confronted by Emil Jannings as a robust and uncomprehending husband. Thanks to her, Czinner succeeded in expressing all the subtle nuances of mood, above all when next to her he placed the perennially demoniac Conrad Veidt. The pauses evoke tension, and the silence of the silent film becomes eloquent. When at the end she throws herself over a cliff, dragged down by the folds of her wide skirt, it is the climax of *Kammerspiele*.

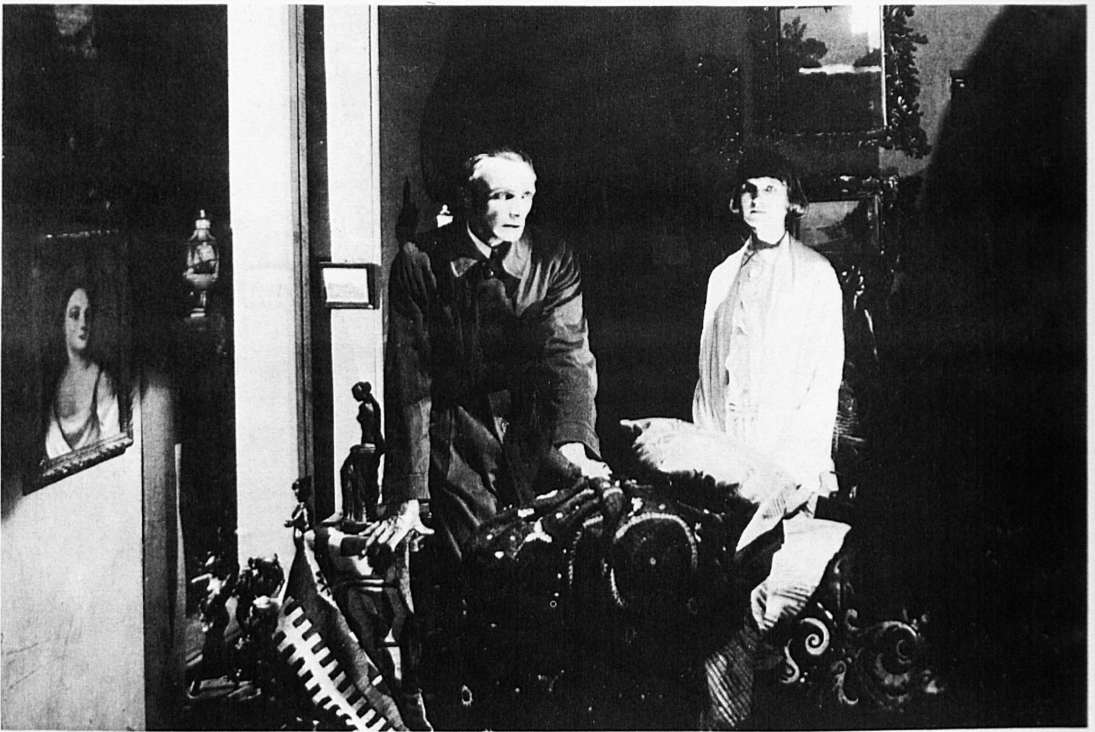
Yet one has reservations about Czinner's and Bergner's talent. In *Liebe* (1927), for example, Bergner, very nervous and often tense, becomes embarrassing, particularly when she tries to convey gaiety; she has no sense of playfulness.* And as for Czinner, as soon as he emerged from the spell of the *Kammerspiele*, he turned out to be rather mediocre.

Stimmung

In any German film the preoccupation with rendering *Stimmung* ('mood') by suggesting the 'vibrations of the soul' is linked to the use of light. In fact this *Stimmung* hovers around objects as well as people: it is a 'metaphysical' accord, a mystical and singular harmony amid the chaos of things, a kind of sorrowful nostalgia which, for the German, is mixed with well-being, an imprecise nuance of nostalgia, languor coloured with desire, lust of body and soul.

This *Stimmung* is most often diffused by a 'veiled', melancholy landscape, or by an interior in which the etiolated glow of a hanging lamp, an oil lamp, a chandelier,

* *Liebe* showed that it was not necessary for a *Kammerspiel*film to have a limited number of characters, nor for the characters to belong to a simple everyday milieu. Here the silence and reserve characteristic of Balzac's two farouche lovers (the film was based on *La Duchesse de Langeais*) are worthy of note.



Stimmung: Conrad Veidt's Wahnsinn

or even a sunbeam shining through a window, creates penumbra. This is how Lang seeks to suggest the uncertain chiaroscuro atmosphere in the old people's home in *Destiny*; in *M* he uses cigarette smoke floating in the glow of a hanging lamp. In *The Last Laugh* Murnau creates the stifling atmosphere by accumulating the reflections of objects shining in the steam in the lavatory mirrors: the electric lights, the dark shimmering battens of a kind of pergola in the neighbouring street. Arthur von Gerlach, in *Die Chronik von Grieshuus*, intensifies the atmosphere with the use of veiled lights, the reflections playing on the pleats of a velvet garment, and the suggestion of a superimposed spectral apparition.

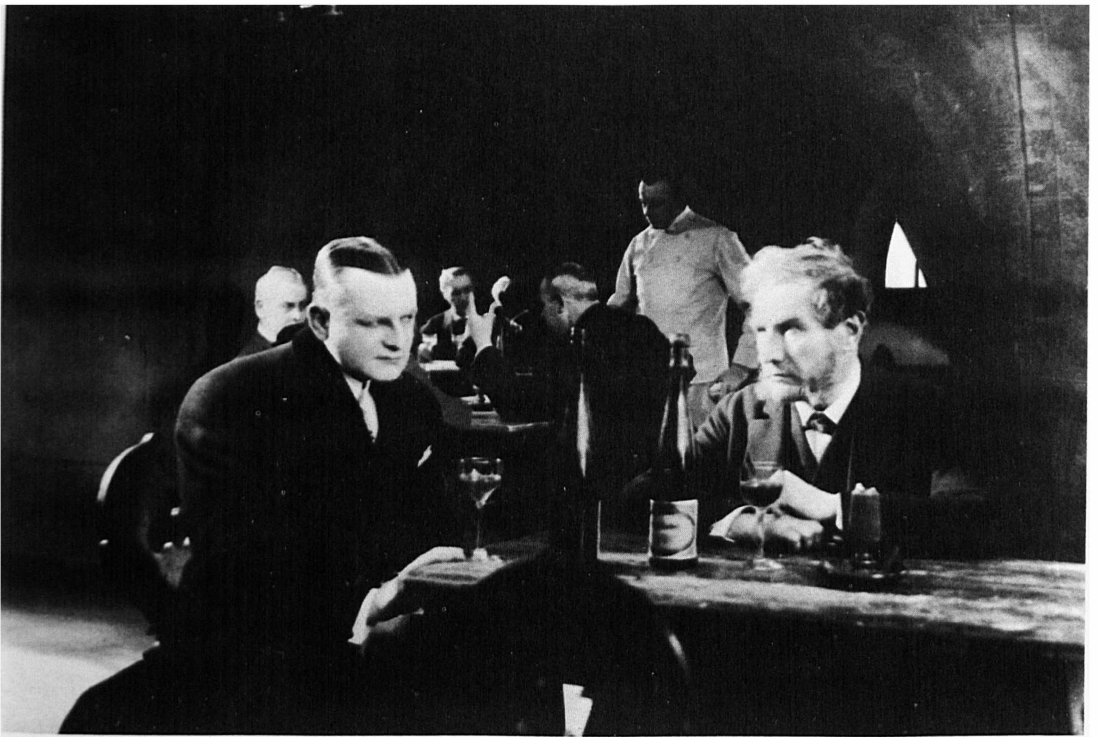
Thoughts whose presence is almost tangible seem to lurk everywhere like dead souls deprived of rest; they are the 'distant memories' we find in Novalis, 'youthful desires, childhood dreams, all the brief joys and vain hopes of a lifetime, approaching robed in grey like the evening mist'. (The poet also remarks that the notion of



Stimmung: Alraune (1928); The Hands of Orlac



Stimmung: Variety



Stimmung: Buddenbrooks

Stimmung alludes to ‘musical conditions of the soul’ and that it is bound up with ‘psychical acoustics and a harmony of vibrations’.)

There may still be a few people who remember a fine passage in Murnau’s lost film *Der Brennende Acker* (*The Burning Earth*). Coming from the back right, two long streams of daylight penetrate into a gloomy room and stop short of two human forms, a man and a woman, also on the right, dressed in black and almost merging into the half-light: one of the streams of light passes quite close to the man’s foot, uncannily increasing the dramatic, mysterious silence.

Or again, a wavering trellis-work of hazy light is diffused through the slits of a venetian blind on to the parquet floor where the Student of Prague, in a moment of bliss, kneels at the feet of the woman he loves; the shimmer of the mullioned window is reflected in the tall mirror which, a few moments later, will betray his dark secret.



True *Stimmung*: *Das Alte Gesetz*

The final touch of *Stimmung*: after firing at his double, the Student of Prague lies on the floor in front of his smashed mirror. In the half-light is suspended an aura of peace regained.

To explore by such means the levels of the soul, to evoke mood by playing on the references to feelings, is very Germanic. Lang had already adopted this style for the famous scene in *Die Nibelungen* in which Kriemhild and Siegfried walk towards each other very slowly in a typical moment of solemnity, of the intensified acting which the Germans find so rapturous. Kriemhild bears the cup of welcome, which she offers to Siegfried as if it were the Holy Grail. Neither Kriemhild nor Siegfried bend from their hieratic rigidity. This is *Kammerspiele* transformed into Wagnerian opera. The heraldic group formed by Gunther and Siegfried drinking the cup of blood brotherhood is presented with less religiosity than this first meeting of the two lovers.

The *Stimmung* sometimes inclines, without the least



False *Stimmung*: *Heimkehr*

transition, towards terror. When the storm breaks in *The Student of Prague*, the clouds lacerate the sky, the trees shake and the branches bend in an extremely violent accompaniment orchestrating the hero's interior struggle. The despair of Faust as he summons up the demon is associated with flashes of lightning. And the fragile form of Nju, straying off towards a lonely suicide, a small pathetic figure swept along by the wind buffeting the folds of her dress, is accentuated by a shower spattering on the gaunt white branches of bare trees outlined in the darkness.

The Germanic soul can go blithely from the sublime to the ridiculous. If certain passages in German films make us smile today, if their rhythm sometimes seems intolerably slow to non-German spectators, the reason is that German film-makers generally apply themselves to exhausting all the *Stimmung* in a situation, and to searching the furthest recesses of the soul.

'The Germans', Mme de Staël says in connection with

the German theatre, 'ask nothing better than to settle down in the auditorium and give the author all the time he wants to prepare the action and develop his characters: French impatience will not tolerate this slowness.'

It is the weight of these silent dialogues of the soul, this claustal atmosphere of the *Kammerspiele*, which today we find so stifling.