

## 8. MUTE CHAOS

THE third group of films emanating from CALIGARI emphasizes the surge of disorderly lusts and impulses in a chaotic world. They may be called instinct films, in contrast to the tyrant films. The most significant achievements among them are based upon the scripts of Carl Mayer—scripts written with a view to specifically cinematic means. Except for THE LAST LAUGH, the concluding film of the series, Mayer's screen poems have met with little response outside the circle of the intellectuals. However, the insistence with which they all center round one and the same theme is sufficient proof of their symptomatic value.

Immediately after CALIGARI, Robert Wiene, meaning to strike while the iron was hot, engaged Carl Mayer and the painter Césaire Klein for the production of another expressionist film: GENUINE (1920). This fantasy, in which an exuberant décor competes with a far-fetched, bizarre story, is of importance only in that it marks a turning-point thematically. Genuine, a sanguinary priestess for sale in an Oriental slave-market, is bought by a queer old man, who jealously confines her in a sort of glass cage inaccessible to visitors. But Genuine manages to lure a young barber into cutting the old tyrant's throat, and then carries on as a supervamp, ruining all the men available.<sup>1</sup> The narrative shows Mayer's interest shifting from the tyrant to the instinct theme.

All instinct films Mayer made after GENUINE have one feature in common: they are laid in a lower middle-class world which is the meaningless remnant of a disintegrated society. The lower middle class appears in Mayer's films as a breeding ground for stunned, oppressed creatures who, reminiscent of Büchner's Wozzek figure, are unable to sublimate their instincts. This was undoubtedly the plight of the German petty bourgeoisie during those years. It is true

<sup>1</sup> Kurtz, *Expressionismus*, pp. 70-78; Vincent, *Histoire de l'Art Cinématographique*, p. 145.

that in an era of anarchy the preponderance of instinctive life does not confine itself to one single stratum of the population. But this kind of life is nowhere as conspicuous and aggressive as in the lower middle class where greed and jealousy are supplemented by deep social resentments and inherited moral impulses that have lost any vital function. Mayer conceives his lower middle-class characters as instinct-possessed denizens of a shattered universe, and he seizes upon them to reveal the destruction and self-destruction they necessarily bring about. Their doom is laid to the workings of Fate. In *NIBELUNGEN*, Fate is symbolized by a strictly decorative style; in Mayer's films, by extreme simplicity in psychological construction. A few persons, each incarnating some particular instinct, are involved in a rigidly composed action. While foreign observers criticized this simplicity as artificial and poor, German connoisseurs, tired of the screen pageants they had to endure, praised these films as "chamber plays," exhibiting the very depths of the soul.<sup>2</sup> As late as 1924, when expressionism was definitely fading away, Professor Paul Hildebrandt agreed with Carl Hauptmann in contending: "In the sphere of the fantastic, the film . . . must represent what can be represented only within this medium . . . : the primitive passions."<sup>3</sup>

In 1921, Carl Mayer began his series with two films, one of which was *HINTERTREPPPE (BACKSTAIRS)*. Staged by Leopold Jessner, this film is a veritable excess of simplicity. It sets three characters in motion: a hired girl absorbed in housekeeping activities; her lover, promising to send the girl letters from afar; a partly paralyzed, sub-normal postman who out of morbid love for the girl intercepts these letters. Believing herself abandoned, she is stirred by a sort of maternal pity to call on the postman in his nearby basement. Her visit there is interrupted by the returning lover. In the ensuing quarrel between the two men the frantic postman slays his rival with an ax; whereupon the girl, in a state of complete bewilderment, walks up to the roof and throws herself down to the cobblestones. The public was rather annoyed by such an accumulation of violence and misery.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Tannenbaum, "Der Grossfilm," *Der Film von Morgen*, pp. 71-72; Möllhausen, "Der Aufstieg des Films," *Ufa-Blätter*.

<sup>3</sup> Hildebrandt, "Literatur und Film," *Das Kulturfilmbuch*, p. 85.

<sup>4</sup> Weinberg, *Scrapbooks, 1925-27*; Vincent, *Histoire de l'Art Cinématographique*, p. 158; Kalbus, *Deutsche Filmkunst*, I, 73.

The other film released in 1921 was *SCHERBEN* (*SHATTERED*). Lupu Pick directed it with an innate affinity for Mayer's intentions. At the beginning, a railroad trackwalker (Werner Krauss), his wife and his daughter are living in the solitude of snow-covered, wooded hills—a solitude accented by the man's ever-repeated walks along the track, and the occasional passing of a train. The arrival of a railway inspector controlling this section changes stagnant monotony to ferment. It all starts with a love affair between the inspector and the quickly yielding daughter. After surprising the two in tender intimacy, the pious mother goes out into the cold night to pray before a votive tablet, and there freezes to death. The daughter implores the inspector to take her with him to town, meets with a plain rebuff, and, humiliated, avenges herself on him by informing her father of what has happened. Deep-rooted awe of the authorities causes the trackwalker to knock at the inspector's door; moral convention, having become instinct, makes him strangle the seducer of his daughter. Then he patrols the track, swinging his signal lantern to stop the express. (Here an ingenious color effect is used: the lantern radiates a bright red, rendering the man's emotional turmoil to perfection.) Although the travelers in the dining-car wonder at the unexpected stop, they are not at all interested in a humble trackwalker's affairs. By emphasizing their indifference, the film marks the dissolution of society into incompatible social spheres. "I am a murderer," the trackwalker says to the engine driver; it is the sole caption in the entire film. From a rock above the track the daughter, gone mad, watches the express with her father in it rush by.<sup>5</sup>

After *VANINA*, his last tyrant film, Carl Mayer resumed his felicitous collaboration with Lupu Pick in the domain of the instinct films; the result was *SYLVESTER* (*NEW YEAR'S EVE*, 1923). A quotation from the Tower-of-Babel story heads the script, which has since been published as a book: "Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech." This motto clearly indicates Mayer's design to continue in *NEW YEAR'S EVE* what he had begun in *SHATTERED*: the representation of social chaos by two social spheres separated by an abysmal gulf. One sphere materializes in a cheap café, the meeting-place of lower

<sup>5</sup> Kalbus, *ibid.*, p. 78; Weinberg, *Scrapbooks*, 1925-27; "Shattered," *Exceptional Photoplays*, Jan.-Feb. 1922, pp. 4-5; Vincent, *Histoire de l'Art Cinématographique*, p. 149.

middle-class people; the other in the street, in a nearby elegant restaurant and on the adjacent town square—places populated with merry crowds celebrating New Year's Eve. To these two spheres a third one is added: nature. Pictures of a cemetery, the heath and the sea emerge every now and then in the manner of a leitmotiv—great and silent landscapes which make human agitation seem still more extreme. The story proper shows the café-owner suffering from the discord between his wife and his mother. In her despotic love of the son, the mother hates the wife with whom she has to share what she considers her exclusive property; in the interest of peace at home, the wife in turn wants the son to send his mother away.

As the conflict reaches its climax, something almost inconceivable occurs: unable to make a decision, the man breaks down, and while his mother caresses him as if he were a child, he rests his head helplessly on her bosom. This gesture, followed (and corroborated) by the suicide of the man [Illus. 13], betrays his intense desire to return to the maternal womb. He has never attained maturity. It is noteworthy that, far from being repudiated, his singular gesture of capitulation reappeared, almost unchanged, in various German films,<sup>6</sup> indicating that his instinctive reluctance to attempt emancipation might be considered a typical German attitude. It is an attitude which results from the prolonged dependence of the Germans upon a feudal or half-feudal military regime—not to mention the current social and economic motives enforcing the perpetuation of this attitude within the middle class. When the café-owner capitulates, he overflows with a self-pity entirely to the point. Self-pity is the given emotional outlet for undeveloped or repressed characters.

The film ends with a few scenes confronting part of the merry crowd with the corpse of the ill-fated café-owner; but the two social spheres are made to overlap for the sole purpose of stressing their utter estrangement. Indifferent to human affairs, the moon shines over the sea.<sup>7</sup>

The series culminates in *DER LETZTE MANN* (*THE LAST LAUGH*; released at the end of 1924). This powerful film—the outcome of teamwork by Carl Mayer, F. W. Murnau and the cameraman Karl

<sup>6</sup> Cf. pp. 112, 114, 122, 157 f., 171.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Pick, "Vorwort des Regisseurs," *Sylvester*, pp. 9–11; Mayer, "Sylvester," *ibid.*, pp. 17–96; Faure, "Cinéma," *Le Rôle intellectuel du Cinéma*, p. 209; Balázs, *Der Geist des Films*, p. 53; Rotha, *Film Till Now*, p. 204; Vincent, *Histoire de l'Art Cinématographique*, p. 149.

Freund—resumes the basic motif of its forerunners by contrasting two buildings: a gloomy tenement house crowded with lower middle-class people, and a palace hotel for the rich, who keep the revolving door and the elevators in permanent motion. Yet *THE LAST LAUGH* differs from the previous films in that it shows the two social spheres united by strong ties. Wearing his sparkling uniform with an inimitable dignity, Emil Jannings as the old hotel porter not only ushers the guests through the revolving door, but also offers candies to the children in the yard of the tenement house where he lives with some relatives. All the tenants, in particular the female ones, are awed by his uniform which, through its mere presence, seems to confer a mystic glamour upon their modest existence. They revere it as a symbol of supreme authority and are happy to be allowed to revere it. Thus the film advances, however ironically, the authoritarian credo that the magic spell of authority protects society from decomposition.

In the case of the porter, however, this spell is suddenly destroyed. The hotel manager, watching him stagger under the burden of a heavy trunk, orders the old man to exchange his uniform for the white blouse of a—lavatory attendant. This rather humane administrative measure entails a catastrophe. Since the film implies that authority, and authority alone, fuses the disparate social spheres into a whole, the fall of the uniform representing authority is bound to provoke anarchy. No sooner do the tenants learn about the ignominious white blouse than they feel alienated from that upper world with which they communed through the uniform. They resent being socially abandoned and thrown back into the gloominess of their flats and of their souls. All evil lower middle-class instincts are unleashed against the porter. The gossiping housewives maliciously ridicule him; his own relatives turn him out onto the street. The porter's reactions resemble those of the café-owner in *NEW YEAR'S EVE*. He believes himself humiliated by the loss of his uniform, and instead of maturely putting up with his plight, he falls into a self-pity tantamount to complete self-renunciation [Illus. 14]. At the end he is seen in the hotel's dark lavatory, with the night-watchman tenderly wrapping him in a cover. It is a moving gesture of solidarity between two human wrecks—a gesture, though, that does not alter anything.

Here everyone would expect the film to come to a close. But Mayer grafts upon this natural conclusion an ingenious second one,

prefaced by a few sentences which form the film's sole caption. They tell the audience that the author, out of pity for the poor porter's fate in real life, wants to guide him towards a better, if unreal, future. What follows is a nice farce jeering at the happy ending typical of the American film. One should not forget that in 1924 Hollywood had begun to exert its influence on the German screen. The farce opens with the richly dressed porter dining in the grill room of the hotel. While he tries to cope with intricate dishes, the amused guests show each other a newspaper notice to the effect that an American millionaire bequeathed his fortune to the last person present at his death, and that this person happened to be the lavatory attendant. The rest of the fairy tale exhibits the naïve kindness with which the old porter showers money on the worthy and unworthy alike. After having enjoyed their triumph in the hotel, he and his crony, the night-watchman, leave in a carriage drawn by four horses: two bragging profiteers, in reality sweet angels.<sup>8</sup>

The farcical character of this concluding sequence corroborates its introductory caption in that it expresses the author's disbelief in a happy ending involving such categories as chance and good luck. If there should exist a way out for hotel porters degraded to lavatory attendants, it is certainly not identical with any solution rooted in the superficial concepts of Western civilization. Through its second ending the film underscores the significance of its first one, and moreover rejects the idea that the "decline of the West" could be remedied by the blessings of the West.

Mayer's films reveal their remoteness from realism by the insistent use made in them of a specifically expressionist device. No character bears a name: the mother is "the Mother," the trackwalker just "the Trackwalker." Instead of portraying individuals, all these characters incarnate impulses and passions—allegoric figures required for the externalization of inner visions. This requirement determines the whole staging. The décor of *BACKSTAIRS* would have been impossible without *CALIGARI*; the snow-covered sceneries in *SHATTERED*—their insertion may have been due to the influence of the Swedish film—look exactly as if they were studio-built struc-

<sup>8</sup> Rotha, "It's in the Script," *World Film News*, Sept. 1988, p. 205; Potamkin, "The Rise and Fall of the German Film," *Cinéma*, April 1980, p. 25, and "Kino and Lichtspiel," *Close Up*, Nov. 1929, p. 887-88. For the rupture between Mayer and Pick on the occasion of *THE LAST LAUGH*, see Vincent, *Histoire de l'Art Cinématographique*, p. 149.

tures; the bizarre lower middle-class scenes in *THE LAST LAUGH* counterbalance the film's concessions to the realistic current gaining momentum in 1924.<sup>9</sup>

Because of its world success *THE LAST LAUGH* has usually been considered the source of cinematic innovations which, in fact, are peculiar to the whole series of instinct films. Among these innovations—they can all be traced to Carl Mayer's suggestions—one struck the public immediately: the lack of any captions. Except for the two mentioned above, the stories are told exclusively through pictures.<sup>10</sup> Here again the interrelationship between the method of representation and the content to be represented is striking. It is not so much the technical ingenuity as the subject-matter of the instinct films that causes the film-makers to introduce titleless narration. Instincts and passions flourish beneath the dimension of discursive reasoning, and therefore lend themselves to being pictured without verbal explanations. This holds particularly true for Mayer's films, with their purposefully simplified plot. They are displays of essentially mute events. Captions in them would not only be superfluous, but would interfere with pictorial continuity. That contemporaries were aware of this structural necessity is shown by a review of *NEW YEAR'S EVE* published in the German film magazine *Licht Bild Bühne* after the film's première: "What counts is not so much the actual omission of titles . . . as the fact that, owing to its whole structure, *NEW YEAR'S EVE* can and even must do without them."<sup>11</sup>

Mayer's films are also the first to seize upon the world of objects—until then explored only by slapstick comedy—in the interest of dramatic action. When *BACKSTAIRS* was released in New York, one of the reviewers pointed to the important role of the hired girl's alarm clock. She "is shown being awakened by her alarm clock at six in the morning. She sets it back five minutes, and then the idea that it is ringing again is depicted by the key in the back of the timepiece slowly turning. . . ." <sup>12</sup> The alarm clock reappears in *SHATTERED*

<sup>9</sup> Kurtz, *Expressionismus*, pp. 83-84. For the influence of the Swedish film, see Möllhausen, "Der Aufstieg des Films," *Ufa-Blätter*; Balthasar, "Die Dekoration," *Der Film von Morgen*, pp. 78-79.—That Murnau himself inclined towards realism is proved by his film comedy *DIE FINANZEN DES GROSSHERZOGS* (*THE GRAND DUKE'S FINANCES*, winter 1923-4). The magazine *Licht Bild Bühne* (Jan. 8, 1924) acknowledged this comedy with a sigh of relief: "At last a film without deeper significance?" Quoted from Zaddach, *Der literarische Film*, p. 56.

<sup>10</sup> Rotha, *Film Till Now*, p. 298.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted from Zaddach, *Der literarische Film*, p. 54.

<sup>12</sup> See Weinberg, *Scrapbooks*, 1925-27.

along with such significant objects as the miserable scarecrow trembling in the wind before the trackwalker's house, and the shining boots of the inspector. While the daughter goes on her knees to clean the staircase, these boots leisurely descend the steps, and almost touch her—the first view she has of her future lover. In addition, SHATTERED offers details of locomotives, wheels, telegraph wires, signal bells and other pertinent items destined to degenerate into the standardized adornments of innumerable railway scenes to come.

In NEW YEAR'S EVE, the motif of the clock acquires its full meaning. Even more important than the clock on the town square is a pendulum clock in the café-owner's room. As with twelve strokes it marks the beginning of the new year, the camera turns from it to the corpse of the café-owner, thus forcing upon us our simultaneous existence in the outer and the inner world, the *temps espace* and the *temps durée*. It is as if the objects watched attentively the spectacle of raging human passions or even participated in it. The perambulator in the room where the café-owner's mother and wife fight each other assumes a restless life of its own, and the revolving door of the elegant restaurant is both entrance-way and background for the merry crowds on the street.

In THE LAST LAUGH this revolving door becomes an obsession.<sup>13</sup> The film opens with a magnificent traveling shot showing the hotel guests streaming through the ever-turning door, a device employed time and again until the very end—something between a merry-go-round and a roulette wheel [Illus. 15]. A *pièce de résistance* like the door, the porter's ubiquitous uniform seems endowed with the power of luring scores of other objects out of their seclusion. The trunks intervene energetically; the walls in the nocturnal hotel seem to breathe. Even fragments of human bodies are dragged into the realm of objects: owing to big close-ups, no one can tell the open mouths of gossips from fuming craters. This irresistible tendency to involve inanimate objects in the action springs from the intrinsic nature of Mayer's instinct-possessed characters. Incapable of sublimating their impulses, they inhabit a region determined by physical sensations and material stimulants—a region in which objects loom high, taking on the function of stumbling-blocks or signal-posts, enemies or partners. These films are bound to call upon alarm clocks and revolving doors: the clock obsesses

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Lejeune, *Cinema*, pp. 122-28.



the mind of the hired girl, and in swinging the door, the porter, one with his uniform, sways his scepter.

It is true that many an object seems to be exhibited merely for the sake of cheap symbolism. The repeated close-ups of broken glass in SHATTERED have no purpose other than to denote the fragility of human design in the face of Fate; they mean nothing by themselves. But these obvious failures arise from the same source as the solid attainments—from Mayer's passion for objects. By conquering the domain of objects for the screen, he enriched its pictorial vocabulary lastingly; it was a conquest which, in harmony with his effort to cancel all captions, paved the way for truly cinematic narration.

In his preface to the publication of NEW YEAR'S EVE, Lupu Pick makes an elucidating remark about its subtitle, "*Ein Lichtspiel*" ("A Play of Light"). Carl Mayer, he states, "may well have intended to disclose brightness and darkness . . . within the soul itself, that eternal alternation of light and shadow characterizing the psychological relations between human beings."<sup>14</sup> Pick's statement reveals that in Mayer's series, no less than in the expressionist film proper, the light is an unreal light, one that illuminates interior landscapes. "The illumination seemed to emanate from the objects themselves," the Belgian film writer Carl Vincent comments on BACKSTAIRS.<sup>15</sup> Creating not so much sharply contoured forms as fluctuating complexes, this light helps emphasize the irrational events of instinctive life. Such events draw near or dissolve like any elemental phenomenon, and the light illustrates that agitation. In THE LAST LAUGH impenetrable shadows transform the lavatory entrance into a dark abyss, and the appearance of the night-watchman is forecast by the circle of light his lantern projects on the walls.

All these achievements are topped by the mobilization of the camera in Mayer's films. Owing to complete camera mobility, THE LAST LAUGH strongly influenced Hollywood's motion-picture technique.<sup>16</sup> Yet this film only brought to perfection what had already announced itself in SHATTERED—at a time when no one else thought of moving a camera firmly fastened to its fixed tripod. In SHATTERED, so-called pan shots—shots ranging from one point of the scene to another, so as to make the spectator survey a whole panorama—deliberately advance the narrative. For instance, the camera pans

<sup>14</sup> Pick, "Vorwort des Regisseurs," *Sylvester*, p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> Vincent, *Histoire de l'Art Cinématographique*, p. 153.

<sup>16</sup> Rotha, *Film Till Now*, p. 177; Jacobs, *American Film*, p. 307; Potamkin, "Kino and Lichtspiel," *Close Up*, Nov. 1929, pp. 390-91.

from the trembling scarecrow to a corner window, with the silhouettes of the inspector and the daughter behind it, in a slow and steady movement designed not only to divulge the starting love affair, but also to relate its meaning to that of the desolate effigy in the wind. By connecting successive visual elements in such a way that they are forced to illuminate each other, the freed camera develops an activity entirely consistent with the omission of titles and the promotion of objects: it intensifies that pictorial continuity through which instinctive life manifests itself. In the case of Mayer's films, camera movements are the more needed as the instincts unfold in a chaotic world. These movements serve to familiarize the spectator with spheres and events irretrievably separated from each other. Guided by the camera, he is in a position to survey the frantic whole without going astray in the labyrinth.

Carl Mayer himself was quite conscious of what he achieved in unchaining the camera. In his preface to *NEW YEAR'S EVE*, he first defines the spheres of the merry crowds and the natural scenery as the "surroundings" of the café-owner's rooms, and then states that certain movements of the camera are calculated to express the idea of a world including the "surroundings" as well as the scene of action proper. "As the events progress, these movements are . . . to encompass depths and heights, so as to picture the frenzy shaking the whole human world amidst nature."<sup>17</sup> To realize Mayer's directives for *NEW YEAR'S EVE*, Lupu Pick's cameraman, Guido Seeber, introduced a tripod moving on rails.<sup>18</sup>

When, a little later, Murnau staged *THE LAST LAUGH*, he had a fully automatic camera at his disposal, an instrument capable of all sorts of movements. Throughout this film it pans, travels and tilts up and down with a perseverance which not only results in a pictorial narrative of complete fluidity, but also enables the spectator to follow the course of events from various viewpoints.<sup>19</sup> The roving camera makes him experience the glory of the uniform as well as the misery of the tenement house, metamorphoses him into the hotel porter, and imbues him with the author's own feelings. He is psychologically ubiquitous. However, despite its eagerness for ever-changing aspects, the camera, at home in the dimension of instincts, refrains from penetrating that of consciousness. Conscious acting is not allowed to

<sup>17</sup> Mayer, "Technische Vorbemerkungen des Autors," *Sylvestor*, pp. 15-16.

<sup>18</sup> Kalbus, *Deutsche Filmkunst*, I, 111-12.

<sup>19</sup> Potamkin, "The Rise and Fall of the German Film," *Cinema*, April 1930, p. 25; "Die Entfesselte Kamera," *Ufa-Magazin*, March 25-31, 1927.

prevail. The player is the passive subject of the camera. In a retrospective article on F. W. Murnau, Kenneth White elaborates this point by referring to a scene in which the porter gets drunk: "The pantomime everyone had thought to be the derived art of the movies was not discoverable in *THE LAST LAUGH*. The doorman got drunk, but not in the way a pantomimic actor with subordinate properties got drunk; the camera did it for him."<sup>20</sup>

During the whole postwar period the theme of Mayer's instinct films proved so attractive that any literary work showing some affinity for it was immediately transferred to the screen—from Strindberg's *Lady Julia* (*FRÄULEIN JULIE*, 1922) to Tolstoy's *Power of Darkness* (*DIE MACHT DER FINSTERNIS*, 1924), from Gerhart Hauptmann's peasant drama *Rose Bernd* (*ROSE BERND*, 1919) to that of his brother Carl, *Driven from Home* (*AUSTREIBUNG*, 1923).<sup>21</sup> When *ROSE BERND* appeared in New York, the *National Board of Review Magazine* commented on it in terms which somehow cover the whole trend of kindred films, regardless of their different aesthetic qualities. "It is a picture . . . with no moral other than that which . . . is implied by the fate of its characters, and by the forces leading to that fate. It is also a picture . . . in which one may feel blind impulses welling from their springs of animal need and instinct."<sup>22</sup> The bulk of these adaptations was followed by a brilliant straggler, *CHRONIK VON GRIESHUUS* (*CHRONICLES OF THE GRAY HOUSE*, 1925); made after Theodor Storm's story of the same title, it breathed the atmosphere of a sinister medieval saga.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> White, "Film Chronicle: F. W. Murnau," *Hound & Horn*, July-Sept. 1931, p. 581.

<sup>21</sup> For these films, see Zaddach, *Der literarische Film*, pp. 42-48, 58; Kalbus, *Deutsche Filmkunst*, I, 72-78; *Decla-Bioscop Verleih-Programme*, 1928, pp. 64-67.

<sup>22</sup> "Rose Bernd," *National Board of Review Magazine*, Feb. 1927, p. 16.

<sup>23</sup> Barrett, "Grey Magic," *National Board of Review Magazine*, Dec. 1926, pp. 4-6. Films in a similar vein were *SAPPHO* (*MAD LOVE*, 1921)—see *Ufa Verleih-Programme*, 1928, p. 17—and Lupu Pick's *WILDENTE* (*THE WILD DUCK*, 1925). For the latter film, see *Film Society Programme*, Nov. 18, 1928.