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978-0-521-06336-4 - *The Gorgon's Gaze: German Cinema, Expressionism, and the Image of Horror*

Paul Coates

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The Gorgon's Gaze: German Cinema, Expressionism, and the Image of Horror is an interdisciplinary study of recurrent themes in German cinema as it has developed since the early twentieth century. Focusing on pertinent films of the pre- and post-World War II eras, Paul Coates explores the nature of expressionism, which is generally agreed to have ended with the advent of sound cinema, and its persistence in the styles of such modern masters of film as Orson Welles and Ingmar Bergman. In considering the possibility of homologies between the necessary silence of presound cinema and the widespread modernist aspiration to an aesthetic of silence, Coates relates theories of the sublime, the uncanny, and the monstrous to his subject. He also reflects upon problems of representability and the morality of representation of events that took place during the Nazi era.

In *The Gorgon's Gaze*, Coates purposefully draws on a variety of methodologies in order to offer a model for the writing of cultural history. Arguing that the implicit complexity of cinema defies unilateral analysis, he builds a deliberately shifting, open-ended argument intended to accommodate elements from philosophy, sociology, film studies, comparative literature, psychoanalysis, and anthropology.

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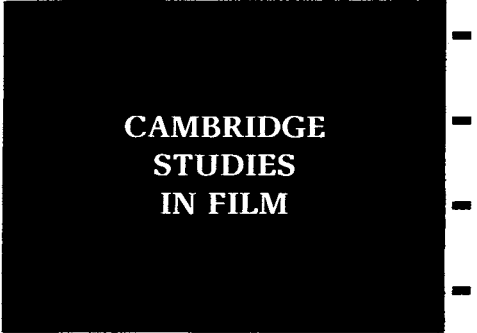
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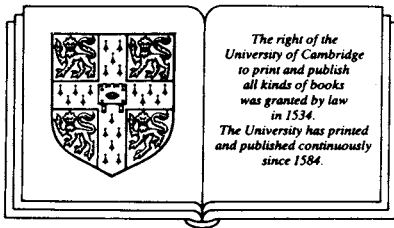
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German Cinema, Expressionism, and the
Image of Horror

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KENT: Is this the promised end?
EDGAR: Or image of that horror?
 – *King Lear*, Act V, sc. iii, lines 264–5

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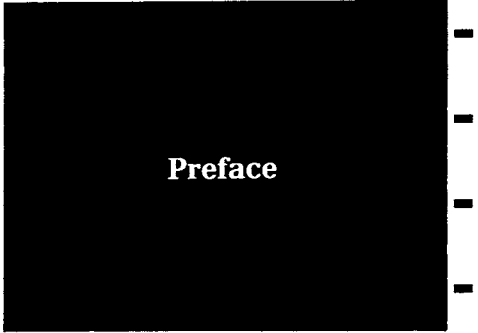
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This book situates itself on the border of comparative literature and film studies. In recent years film studies has devolved into a somewhat insular possession, jealously guarded by its first colonists – if one can conceive of it as a country, it is a France whose capital is Metz – the generation that set up university film programs in the late sixties. Having once been compelled to fight clear of literature departments to secure their own existence, film programs are often averse now to recognition of the links between filmic and literary texts. Given film's status as the executor of the *Gesamtkunstwerk's* testament, film studies once promised to become an open forum for reflection upon the separate arts and cultural domains. Instead, once-exciting theories have been deprived of their speculative status and frozen into an orthodoxy that needs to be challenged in the name of the very theorists it takes as canonic: A Barthes or a Benjamin would surely have been appalled by his work's cooptation by the academy. All too often complacent orthodoxy speaks of difference and excludes anything that differs. If the study of film is to escape the confines of a terminology whose rigor is now a straitjacket perversely worn to indicate membership of an elite, it must recognize that to speak of Theory rather than theories is to pursue the *fata morgana* of an impossible totalization; whereas in fact the project of totalization would be better served by a multiplicity of perspectives, which alone would do justice to the overdetermined event and fulfill the goal of subverting arbitrary (because monologic) authority. Thus *The Gorgon's Gaze* drifts quite deliberately between separate domains: philosophy, sociology, psychoanalysis, literary theory, German studies, Polish studies, and, of course, film theory itself. If it has loose ends (in imitation perhaps of the Medusa's head that lends it its title?), this is quite intentional.

The book does not have a single subject, but rather several, which overlap and separate themselves in a shifting montage. Of the three terms listed in my subtitle – German cinema, expressionism, and

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horror – each has equal weight. This is not a book “about German cinema,” but one about the relationship between the three terms of the subtitle and the title, which refers to the freezing powers of the look. Since it is also a meditation on the nature and legacy of expressionism, which is generally agreed to have ended about the time of the advent of sound cinema, its themes include the exile and partial persistence of expressionist habits of mind in several of the great styles and modern masters of cinema, such as film noir, or Welles and Bergman. Consideration of the possibility of homologies between the necessary silence of presound cinema and the widespread modernist aspiration to an aesthetic of silence feeds, in turn, into the subsidiary question of the degree of compatibility of “high” and “low” cultural forms, of Adorno’s *Bilderverbot* and the problematic representation of the Other in the horror film. The book thus intersects with such areas as the theory of the sublime, the uncanny, and the monstrous, and construes “horror” both historically and anthropologically: the horrific as perennial (Evil; the undead) and as the horror that attaches to this century’s events in German history. For the Western culture of the late twentieth century the central image of horror is the concentration camp, which recurs in the iconography of both mass and high culture as an object of fascination (often fetishistic or kitsch-laden), a memory of the determining event of the current world order, and a fearsome image of the bankruptcy of our culture. If that culture is the home that is home no longer, it is, of course, the uncanny.

To consider the uncanny in the context of German cinema is inevitably to reflect upon the representability, and the morality of representation, of the events of the Nazi years, particularly within the German-speaking countries themselves. It is to ask whether or not anti-Semitism is present embryonically even in the 1913 *Student of Prague* (*Der Student von Prag*), the founding work of German film history; how calculated are the omissions of Edgar Reitz’s *Heimat*; how useful a term is *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (can and should this be translated as “coming to terms with the past”?); and what form of *Trauerarbeit* (the work of mourning) can best do justice to the dead? (This book will argue that the most adequate response is found in Margarethe von Trotta’s *Marianne and Juliane* [*Die bleierne Zeit*]). Is the refusal to engage in mimetic reconstruction of evil events a valid method of indicating the degree to which they defy the imagination (the proclaimed tactic of *Shoah*), or does Lanzmann’s own mode of interviewing unwittingly place him too in the ranks of the persecutors? How willing are cultures and individuals to concede that monsters lie within their borders? This book will suggest that if one defeats the Medusa by directing a mirror against her, one simultaneously becomes

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blind to one's own monstrous status as the murderer of an alterity – usually feminine – demonized by one's own projections.*

* It is clear that the Medusa is a demonized, pathological image of female otherness; a lesser form of demonization occurs however in much early writing on cinema spectatorship, which tends to cast the female in the role of ideal viewer (hence Kracauer terms his collection of sketches of the film industry's melodramatic schemata *The Little Shop-Girls Go to the Movies*). The meaning of this tendency varied from critic to critic, but included as two primary components a masculinist disdain for the putative feminine incapacity for sustained reasoning – for Bovaryisme – and a terror of the unmaning effects of the physical passivity film watching enforces, a passivity that may be experienced as a prelude to rape. The male's alienation from the anima, into whose darkness he fears to descend and which he identifies with art and with the womb, seems to have been part of the depth psychology of the tendency. It is of course still alive and well: *Heimat* shows us Maria and Pauline at a Zarah Leander film, and in Syberberg's *Karl May* the writer's wife and secretary watch a Méliès movie in a kinoscope while he is abroad. (Creating images of Paradise seems to be the prerogative of the male artist; Syberberg shows no interest in the possibility that the occultism of the women is a less lucrative form of May's own Utopian fabulism.)

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Acknowledgments

This book may be read (as a brief perusal of its notes and index will demonstrate) as an extended colloquy with three people in particular: T. W. Adorno, Siegfried Kracauer, and Thomas Elsaesser. The nature of my concurrence, disagreement with, and modification of their work will be apparent from my text; here I would simply like to acknowledge my indebtedness to them as partners in the dialogic process. Other partners were the students in the German cinema seminar I gave at McGill in 1989, so I would like to thank Antony, Caroline, Dave, Dominique, Jennifer, John, Kirsten, Renee, Richard, Scott, and Stephen for the stimulus of their presence and their heroic willingness to sit through films of exorbitant length. I must also thank Professor Edward Mozejko, whose kind invitation to speak at the University of Alberta prompted the formulation of early versions of two of these essays. Additional thanks are due to the McGill Comparative Literature Department, which provoked and endured two early versions of other essays.

"The Cold Heaven of the Blue Angel" first appeared in *Social Discourse*, and a version of the analysis of *A Short Film about Killing in Sight and Sound*. Part of "Three Faces of the Other in the Horror Film," parts of Appendixes I and V, and the analysis of *Welcome to Germany* first appeared in the October 1989, June 1989, June 1988, and October 1988 issues of *The World and I*, a publication of the Washington Times Corporation. Divergences from the published versions serve in the main to rescind unilateral editorial emendations.

My final chapter's excerpt from Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*, copyright © 1981 Columbia University Press, is used by permission. I am grateful to Jerzy Giedroyc and the Instytut Literacki for permission to quote in my own translation an excerpt from Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz's *Umschlagplatz*.

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