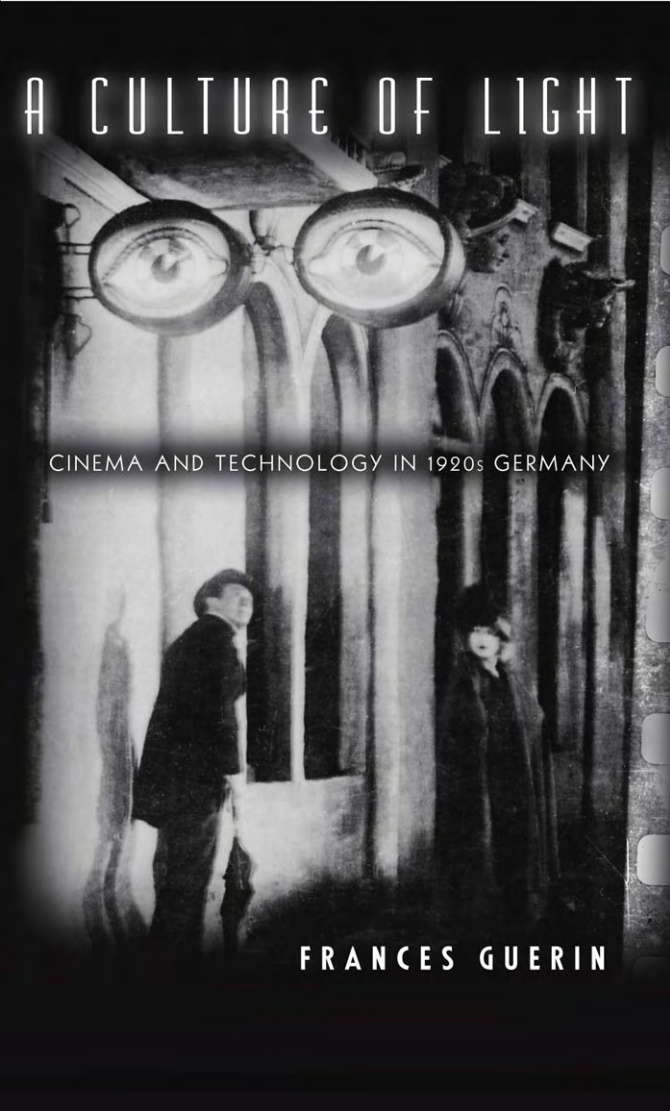


# A CULTURE OF LIGHT

CINEMA AND TECHNOLOGY IN 1920s GERMANY

FRANCES GUERIN



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## **A Culture of Light**

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Cinema and Technology in 1920s Germany

FRANCES GUERIN



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In memory of my father  
Robert Langley Guerin

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## Introduction

Light is so crucial to cinematography that, in fact,  
cinematography is unthinkable without it.

*Die Kinematographie ist mit dem Licht auf das engste verknüpft,  
ja ohne das Licht überhaupt nicht denkbar.*

Wolfgang Jaensch

The cinema is a medium of light. The cinema does not exist without the beam of electrical light that passes through the celluloid strip to throw an image onto a screen before a viewer. Even before this, the production of the moving photographic image is as much a construction in light as is its process of projection. As the camera shutter opens, light passes through the aperture, and leaves an impression in negative form of what lies before the camera on a filmstrip. Although the production of the cinematic image is not necessarily achieved through use of *electrical* light, it is necessarily a *technically* manipulated image in and of light. In both the production and projection of the image, the cinema is married to light. Despite the medium's dependence on light for its very existence, it is surprising that an entire generation of film historians has, with one or two exceptions, paid little attention to this striking and, at the same time, conspicuous aspect of the cinema's aesthetic and history.<sup>1</sup>

The critical neglect of the role of light and lighting in the cinema has continued in spite of the persistent experimentation in these areas by filmmakers throughout the twentieth century. From the early adventures

in light of Georges Méliès, through the narrative use of lighting in the films of Cecil B. DeMille, and the experiments of László Moholy-Nagy and Stan Brakhage, to the unmistakable high-key lighting effects of Robert Richardson, filmmakers have continued to find new ways of deploying and representing the centrality of light to the cinematic medium.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the hermeneutic and ideological significance of film lighting was a preoccupation for both early film theorists such as Rudolf Arnheim and Siegfried Kracauer, and more contemporary scholars such as the *Screen* theorists.<sup>3</sup> Early filmmakers and critics were keenly aware of the role played by light and lighting in films and the cultures produced in their midst. Yet, in the ever-expanding field of film history, few have continued to investigate the consequences of the relationship between film and light in its various forms. This book goes some way toward addressing this gap in film history.

The technological revolutions of the latter half of the nineteenth century ensured that light would no longer have to be figured through words, paint, or any other medium. Manufacturing processes meant that light became powerful enough to constitute its own medium, a medium that poured over and through the nighttime streets of the new, modern industrialized cities. Light was extended beyond its symbolic function in painting, literature, and philosophy. In its material form, light itself came to constitute the modern technological world and shape the lives led therein. The intensity and longevity of artificial light revolutionized existing art forms and laid the foundation for others newly invented. The theater, shadow play, architecture, and photography were duly modernized by the availability of electrical light. And the exciting new medium of cinema as we know it today was inaugurated with the mass production of electrical light. Without the beam of light that passes through the static images of the filmstrip, there would be no image projected on the screen before the eyes of an audience.<sup>4</sup>

The fundamental role of industrial light in the production and projection of the film image made the new medium a particularly appropriate forum for representations of a historical world increasingly defined by the role of electrical light; its technological identity ensured that the cinema could contribute to the depth of the modern world it often chose to represent. The development of the cinema witnessed the coming together of a series of technological advances—including electrical light, the film camera, and the manufacture of the filmstrip. In its intercourse with other elements of the medium, a sophisticated use of light technology has the potential to be the material, subject, and referent of filmic representation.

To put it another way: light as the medium of film also has the capacity to be deployed as the content of representational images. These images might represent developments in light technology that take place in the historical world. Such representations can then potentially analyze the sociological function of artificial light formations such as the cinema itself. This is the potentially tripartite role of light and lighting in film representation. Moreover, it is a threefold use of light and lighting that has the capacity to represent the historical transformations that result from technological advances such as electrical light and cinema. Thus, through a tripartite use of light, the technologies of cinema and electrical light have the potential to contribute simultaneously to the very transformation they represent.

German narrative films of the 1920s enthusiastically embraced the products of late industrialization when they deployed light and lighting in all their variant possibilities. This book is about those films and their multifaceted relationship to light and lighting. The films I discuss in the coming pages, some of which have been omitted from existing histories of German cinema, demonstrate the potential of the cinema to engage with a tripartite use of light. Films such as *Der Golem/The Golem* (1920), *Sylvester/New Year's Eve* (1923), and *Algol* (1920) use light for compositional purposes, as a structuring device of the temporally unfolding narrative, and to represent the transformation to a modern life fashioned by technological advance in 1920s Germany. All of the 1920s films analyzed in the book go still further when they manipulate light and cinema to contribute to the said transformation. The films use light and lighting to envision the transformation of space, conceptions of time and history, modes of representation, and the pivotal role played by industrial entertainment in their midst. These cultural transformations are the effects on the everyday that result from Germany's intense and belated advance to technological modernity. Breathtaking displays of cinematically manipulated light are used to represent the flattening out of space under the dazzling streetlights that define the metropolis at night. Time and history are represented in films such as *Der Golem* as foreshortened and ill-defined via images of simultaneity between the past, the present, and the future. The lighting throughout the narratives of films such as *Schatten/Warning Shadows* (1923) is repeatedly manipulated to create images of films within films. Lastly, light, lighting, and the camera come together in *Variété/Variety* (1925) and *Sylvester* to represent the instruments of Germany's burgeoning leisure industry in this period. The cinema was, of course, one of the most prevalent candidates within this industry. In all cases, the



films marry cinema and light technology to go beyond representing the cultural transformations to daily life. They extend these representations into visions of the consequences, or effects, of the transformations on the shape of everyday life in interwar Germany. Moreover, through their imaginative manipulations of cinema and light in its various forms, they contribute to these very transformations. Thus, the chosen selection of 1920s German films provides rich material for a study of the seminal relationship between the cinema and light, between films and their potential to use lighting creatively.

The cinema is only one of a number of media whose ontology can be lent to the representation of the world it both contributes to and analyzes. The magic lantern and other nineteenth-century devices also presented themselves as media with the capacity to exploit technical light for similar uses. Art forms such as architecture, theater, and photography also have this capacity both to manipulate a technically generated light to create buildings, environments, and images that are the material of the modern world and, simultaneously, to analyze that same world.<sup>5</sup> The innovation of these 1920s German films comes in their exploration of light and lighting that is not only commensurate to but places the cinema in a relationship of exchange and productivity with these other art forms. Thus works in these other art forms help to identify the specificity of the cinematic use of light and lighting. The works come together in and with the technologically modern world as both products and producers of a culture of light.

### **Why Light?**

My focus on light and lighting, a single aspect of the *mise-en-scène*, is motivated by a desire to understand the ever-elusive relationship between films and the world that produces them. In particular, the lighting in a number of 1920s German films offers insight into their unique representations of a new industrialized way of life. Although other aspects of the *mise-en-scène* are of integral importance to the films' structure and meaning, my focus on the lighting is informed by the innovations that the film medium brings to a technically manipulated light. Other aspects of the *mise-en-scène* can, of course, extend the film medium.<sup>6</sup> For example, as we see in the films of Lev Kuleshov, notably *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks* (1924), performance can function in concert with the camera and editing to produce a uniquely filmic vision. However, in the German film of the 1920s, the highly articulated,

gestural acting was no different from that performed on the Expressionist stage of the prewar period. Even if new acting techniques were developed by filmmakers in the 1920s, they were not specifically designed to interact with the film camera. The sets of films such as *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari/The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1921) might have been innovative for the cinema, but they are effectively static, two-dimensional images that mimic the Expressionist paintings of artists such as Erich Heckel or Lyonel Feininger. In the use of light and lighting, we consistently find new and uniquely filmic visions of the *mise-en-scène*.

The centrality of light and lighting also connects the film aesthetic to the historical culture of technologically generated light, a culture that made its presence felt on the landscape of day-to-day life in 1920s Germany. This thriving culture of light was realized in both daily life and other 1920s artworks. It was a culture of light that was nurtured in the pre-World War I years and, owing to a number of historical circumstances, flourished in the 1920s.<sup>7</sup> This culture of light gives both definition and critical depth to films such as *Der Golem, Die Straße/The Street* (1923), *Variété*, and *Schatten*. Of course, electrical light is only one of a number of technologies that came to define this period of intense industrial growth and social transformation. As others have noted, developments in sound, transport, and communications technologies, for example, all gathered force in the 1920s. The culture of light that gives a context to the films here discussed represented one among many emergent contexts for artistic and cultural activity. The cinema more generally and individual films also intersected with cultures of sound, speed, and telecommunications during this period. Thus, the films here examined and their elaboration through connections to the culture of light do not represent the only, or even a dominant, way of defining a silent German national cinema. They represent one important trend that emerges among a number of others during the period.

Like the cinema, contemporaneous artworks used light to represent the impact on daily life of the technological world to which they also contributed. In 1924 the architect Bruno Taut extended the visionary ideas of Paul Scheerbart to create glass constructions that interacted with both natural and electrical light.<sup>8</sup> Taut's was the architecture of a modern world marked by mobility, transience, flexibility, and expressivity. Taut's architecture was designed to define and analyze a modern world characterized by the availability of electrical light. In the theater, dramaturges such as Leopold Jessner, Reinhard Sorge, and Erwin Piscator took up the project begun by Max Reinhardt in the teens. They designed rapid scene changes by turning spotlights on and off as they beamed from above both

stage and audience. These dynamic and rhythmical *mise-en-scènes* created through light and lighting were designed both to incite and echo the frenetic pulse of the revolution that characterized everyday life. They formed a theater in which light was the language, content, and referent in representations of the turmoil of an accelerated and intense advance to industrial modernity.

The young Bauhaus artist Moholy-Nagy was one of a number of photographers working in Germany in the 1920s on the development of photographic images in light to expand the limits of human perception.<sup>9</sup> His photograms were compositions in light designed to invigorate a modern “technologized” way of seeing.<sup>10</sup> The 1920s German films discussed in this book use technical light as an invention of technological modernity to describe this same modernity in a manner similar to Taut’s architectural, Sorge’s or Jessner’s theatrical, and Moholy-Nagy’s photographic uses of light and lighting. At least, the principles of representation are the same: the material of representation is mobilized to describe and analyze the very social conditions it simultaneously represents and influences. However, films such as *Der Golem*, *Die Straße*, *Schatten*, and Hans Werkmeister’s *Algol* also use light differently. First, *Der Golem* and *Schatten* use lighting—in its interaction with editing and camera work—for self-reflexive representations of the cinema apparatus and its mode of production. Second, the lighting is deployed in films such as *Algol* and *Die Straße* to offer unique visions of the reconfigurations of space and time, the effect of power relations, the status of visual representation, and the thriving entertainment industry that resulted from the rapidity of industrialization.

Perhaps owing to its omnipresence and historical reach within the visible world, *light* carries with it a multiplicity of meanings. Whether we consider light to be composed of particles emitted by luminous bodies, a wave phenomenon, or a form of electromagnetic radiation, it can be imbued with physical, physiological, philosophical, and aesthetic meanings.<sup>11</sup> In the ensuing chapters I refer to light in a number of its manifestations. Ordinarily, when I refer to light and its manipulations, I refer to that which interacts with the space and time of the real world. I also distinguish between light, artificial light, and technically produced light. These distinctions are critical to the uniqueness of the cinema as a medium that goes hand in hand with other inventions of technological modernity. When I use the term *light*, I refer to any type of light, be it natural, artificial, or technological. *Artificial light* is, as it suggests, that genre of light that is produced through artificial as opposed to natural means. Artificial light

differs significantly from technological light because it is not always mass-produced or mass-disseminated. The obvious example of an artificial light that is not technological is gaslight. Even though gaslight has its source in natural gas, it is artificial because it is subject to a number of refinement and dissemination processes. And yet, these processes are not technologically determined. In the 1910s and even into the 1920s, there were instances of films such as *Und das Licht Erlosch/And the Light Went Out* (1913) that used a technologically generated light to represent gaslight. The distinction is important in a discussion of German film because gaslight often does not have the power as an on-screen light source to illuminate the action. And yet, because of its continued use as a form of everyday illumination at this time, it is still represented in films well into the 1920s.

*Technological light* or *electrical light* is mass-produced and has the capacity for an increased physical intensity, widespread dissemination, and uninterrupted output. I also take care to distinguish between electrical/technological light and a *technically manipulated light*. The distinction may sound pedantic; however, I have in mind here the common tendency for natural sunlight to be manipulated on the film set through a use of mirrors, filters, camera lenses, and adapters. Thus, technically manipulated light can have sunlight as its source, but along the way this light is manipulated and interfaces with technology of some description. To reiterate, this light is not mass-generated and -disseminated at its source, but it is manipulated by some technical form. Again, it is an important distinction when considering German silent film because glass-roofed studios provided natural illumination to the film set well into the 1920s. However, because of the interface of this light with, at the very least, the film camera, it is still, within the bounds of my argument, a technically manipulated light.

*Lighting*—whether in relation to film, theater, or any other of the arts—is found in representation. Most often representations manipulate light—before the camera, on the stage, or through the creation of architectural structures—and this aestheticization can be considered lighting. To put it another way, that which lies before the camera—in the case of film, the profilmic—is light. And once it is presented to us within aesthetic representation, this light becomes lighting. Although such clear-cut definitions and distinctions are always in some way unsatisfactory, I lay them out to limit slippage between different senses of light and lighting.

There are numerous instances when the powerful opportunities offered by electrical light in the first half of the twentieth century are manipulated

for spectacular displays that represent the wealth and progress of modern Germany. Similarly, the beam of light that enables the projected image on the film screen is a light merged with the representational dimensions of lighting. Thus, in these and other cases, the distinction I draw between light and lighting becomes untenable. In these instances, I use the term appropriate to the context of my discussion about light and its manipulation.

### Why German Film?

Works on silent cinema's metonymical relationship to modernity have, until now, primarily focused on the fin de siècle period.<sup>12</sup> At the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, everyday life became transformed by the effects of industrial development.<sup>13</sup> The cinema's emergence in 1895 coincided with the effects of these transformations. The birth of the masses, new ways of seeing the world, and redefinitions of the spatial and temporal coordinates of daily life, to name just a few of the effects of industrialization, were also fueled by the new medium of film. This convergence between cinema and modernity at the fin de siècle was as pronounced in other Western nations as it was in Germany.

However, in Germany, the relationship between cinema, technological development, and cultural modernity found an articulate embodiment in the 1920s. Usually for historical reasons, in other Western countries the metonymical relationship between the cinema and technological modernity was more intensely explored at the turn of the century, thus making the German displacement to the 1920s somewhat unique. The book's shift in focus to the productivity and experimentation of the interwar as opposed to the turn-of-the-century years is enabled by the specific confluence of German history and its silent film production.

Nevertheless, in the same way that the films here analyzed are informed by the historical, cultural, and artistic contours of 1920s Germany, they are also brought to life within the international arena of technological modernity. In particular, experiments with technological light in the films and other arts of France, Italy, Britain, and the United States are the silent context in the background of the film analysis in chapters 2 through 6. Films, photography, architecture, theater, and everyday life on the streets of these other modern nations often used light and lighting to represent and engage with technological modernity. Any number of examples could be cited here—Man Ray's photograms, films such as *La Roue/The Rail* (1922) by Abel Gance, the paintings of second-generation Futurists such as Ivo Pannaggi's *Speeding Train* (1922), and Frank Lloyd Wright's architectural

designs—all use light and lighting to discourse on the shape of modern life. Similarly, many of the representational issues—reconfiguration of space and temporality, self-conscious representations of cinema—are explored in these and other artworks from other countries. Thus, the films discussed in the book make sense within the larger landscape of an international preoccupation with and representation of technological modernity.

Despite the international enthusiasm for representing the contours of the technologically modern world through explorations in light and lighting, the German culture of light in the 1920s is also unique.<sup>14</sup> Although creatively informed by and in conversation with the products of industrial modernity in other countries, my argument regarding the group of 1920s German films comes to life at the intersection of the nation's delayed embrace of technological modernity. Thus the international arena of technological modernity and artistic modernism gives definition to the films here examined. Simultaneously, to place 1920s narrative German cinema within the international context enables identification of what makes them specifically German.

Germany's advance to industrial modernity was relatively late, and although many developments were under way by the end of the nineteenth century, it was only in the 1900s and 1910s that technological industry and concomitant social reforms began to take hold.<sup>15</sup> As they were gathering momentum, the Great War interrupted these processes, and their full effect was only experienced in the 1920s. This retardation founds the historical context that enables my interpretation of the uniqueness of the chosen 1920s films. The history of German cinema's metonymical interaction with technological modernity actually began at the turn of the century, twenty years prior to the films that are the focus of this book. Nevertheless, I argue that in Germany, the two phenomena—cinema and technological modernity—found an extremely articulate expression and intimate convergence in the 1920s. Thus, they came together in Germany at a moment when film was already developed as a narrative art form. This historical convergence of the checkered history of Germany's accelerated rise to technological modernity, the history of the development of electrical light, and the history of the development of cinema in Germany provides the context for German silent cinema's engagement with its historical world.

In keeping with the generative basis of the intersection of these historical phenomena, my focus on light and lighting in German films has as much to do with their historical and artistic contexts as it does with the films themselves. Again, the tripartite use of light and lighting is not specific to

these particular German films of the silent era. Neither is the discussion of the given thematic issues limited to the German context. However, the aesthetic configuration of light and lighting and the perspectives expressed towards modernity strongly reflect the German situation. Thus, justification for the films as comprising one form of German national cinema can be pinned to their particular thematization of and attitudes towards technological modernity as it was experienced in Germany. The characteristic ambivalence towards technological modernity of German artistic products has been remarked upon in a number of other contexts.<sup>16</sup> However, it is more than variant attitudes that mark the distinction of these 1920s German films. The transformations of technological modernity and their specific impact on the shape of everyday German life fuel the innovation of the films' use of light and lighting.

As was the case with the shift to modernization in other Western countries, the sociological and cultural effects of advanced modernization in Germany were immense. The population shifted from the country to the city, and there was an increase in white-collar workers, a decrease in blue-collar workers. More specifically to Germany, modernization brought uncertainty for the Jewish population, reorganization of foreign policy, and radical changes to, for example, attitudes toward sexuality. The effects of these crises in economy and governance on social and cultural formations are thematized by the films I discuss. Although it would be possible to analyze these issues through focus on other aspects of the films, I am specifically interested in how and where they are thematized through innovative uses of film lighting. Thus, a film such as *Variété* represents the relationship between entertainment and illicit sexuality in the technological age. In *Jenseits der Straße/Beyond the Street* (1929), experimentation of light and lighting delineates public and private spaces as becoming confused, interchangeable. *Der Golem* envisages a modern historical temporality that enables Jewish integration. In all cases, these historical phenomena are shown as the effects of technological advance. Although the films have wide-ranging approaches to and conclusions about these concerns, whatever the thematic issues raised, I explain them as resonant with the transformations resulting from Germany's contradictory embrace of technological modernity. Moreover, the films represent this intense coming into technological modernity as always ambiguous, contradictory, and at times unfocused. They represent a technology that cries out for change, recovery, and decisions to be made at this critical point in the progression of historical events.

While other Western countries expressed their power as industrial

capitalist states at the turn of the century, for complex historical and economic reasons it was only in the 1920s that Germany as a nation-state fully embraced the possibilities of technological modernity. In the 1920s, Germany simultaneously waged its claim as the leading European industrial nation. Germany expressed its power through a boom in the production and dissemination of electrical light in the public sphere. At this time, it was also a country working hard to forge its identity as a powerful nation in an increasingly globalized economy. And it opportunistically seized the novelty and vast possibilities of electrical light as a means for self-aggrandizement and publicity. At this time sophisticated technologies of film lighting became available in Germany. Studios, directors, and other film workers may not have been directly involved in representations of technological modernity through light and lighting, but they did create films that engaged with the culture of light. Thus, the intersection of the three histories is both the context and rationale for my analyses of the tripartite structure of these German silent films' use of light.

### Viewing the Films in Historical Context

My placement of the films within the historical trajectory of Germany's advance to technological modernity finds a history that departs from the politically determined periodization that has governed previous histories of German film. In turn, this separation of German film history from the political and economic instability of the Weimar Republic uncouples it from a dependence on the *Sonderweg* model of early-twentieth-century German history. This dependence has traditionally undergirded film histories of the period.<sup>17</sup> The revival of industrialization and the political turmoil of pre-World War II Germany are, of course, inseparable. The economic policies that steered Germany back to political power in the 1930s were underwritten by "big industry." Governmental policy was no less determinate as the driving force behind the growth and alacrity of Germany's revived industrialization. Moreover, as becomes salient during my film analyses, the consequences of these political and economic factors impacted both the development of the film industry and the film aesthetic. Nevertheless, the growth of the medium and its representations are not direct tools of political persuasion, and neither were they developed in direct correspondence to political events and ideological changes of the teens, twenties, or thirties. The separation of German film from the politically determinist history is crucial to the continued reassessment of German silent film.



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