

Public Abstract

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This thesis seeks to understand how, in the early twentieth century, esoteric schools in German-speaking Europe influenced the proto-science fiction genre, especially the cinema of Weimar Germany. It is inspired by the work of historians such as Suzanne Marchand and Corinna Treitel, but expands their focus to the period after the First World War and into new forms of mass media. It investigates how discoveries in archaeology and philology reshaped the modern European understanding of the technological prestige of ancient Eastern civilizations, as well as the longstanding presumptions about the originality behind Western religious texts and traditions. In the decade leading up to the Great War, the shock of these discoveries inspired a countercultural revival of the occult and Gnosticism, which in turn found an unexpectedly strong expression among writers of pulp fiction and sensationalist literature, especially those of the science fiction and fantasy genres. In particular, this thesis focuses on the screenwriters, directors, and other filmmakers behind Weimar science fiction films. Its conclusions are tentative, pending on further research.

Taken collectively, the science fiction films of Weimar Germany merit attention for various reasons. In part, the German film industry deserves special attention because it produced more science fiction features than any other nation in Europe during the 1920s, the decade that witnessed the globalized consumption of the movie industry. These films included Hans Werckmeister's *Algol: Eine Tragödie der Macht* (*Algol: a Tragedy of Power*, 1920), Hanns Walter Kornblum's *Wunder der Schöpfung* (*Miracles of Creation*, 1925), Henrik Galeen's *Alraune* (*Mandrake*, 1928), as well as Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) and *Frau im Mond* (*The Woman in the Moon*, 1929). Rather than focus on statistical information or contemporary critical reception of these cinematic attractions, this study seeks to trace the intellectual and cultural currents that inspired the qualitatively different mystique in Weimar science fiction. Only further investigation can elucidate the immediate implications this cinema spurred in German-speaking and international consumer culture on a broader scale. By and large, this study argues that the modern occult movement undeniably influenced the content of these films. Keeping in mind that these five films were created by different filmmakers from unaffiliated film studios, it is remarkable that their stories all center on a fascination with the supernatural and, similarly, the farthest reaches of space.

Literally and figuratively, the otherworldly imposes a constant influence on these five stories by representing trips into outer space, psychic experiences, the discovery of mysterious power sources, the generation of life forms, and human oppression by vengeful automatons. On the surface, these tropes and the stunning special effects behind them seem anything but unique to German cinema at the time. Before the advent of sound, filmmakers of all countries tried to utilize the fantastic and the futuristic in an exclusively visual way intended to transport moviegoers into an intensified realm of science fiction. However, in no country more than Germany did separate filmmakers write and create dramas whose content hinged so consistently on these otherworldly themes. These observations are all the more noteworthy since this was also the formative decade for a film genre that was still largely limited to pulp fiction and popular literature.

While this work has successfully proven that alternative spiritualities certainly influenced the filmmakers in their production of these films, much research is still required. This scholar plans to expand this research topic more broadly to focus on the cultural perceptions of the supernatural in these films, as well as to delve more deeply into the biographies, filmographies, and texts of the filmmakers in question. In order to understand how the science fiction and fantasy genres were created, further research must clarify to what

extent the directors, screenwriters, and other filmmakers behind Weimar science fiction drew their inspiration directly from other pervasive modes of the fantastic such as the occult and Gnosticism.