

## Book Reviews

Calhoon, Kenneth S. *The Long Century's Long Shadow: Weimar Cinema and the Romantic Modern*. U of Toronto P, 2021.

<https://utorontopress.com/9781487526955/the-long-century-and-x2019s-long-shadow/>

Kenneth S. Calhoon's *The Long Century's Long Shadow: Weimar Cinema and the Romantic Modern* is an ambitious study that explores connections among Weimar films (that is, films made in Germany between the wars, particularly Expressionist films), Romantic literature and painting, and modern art. As a scholar of nineteenth-century literature and culture, I appreciated the book's insistence on the relevance of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century works to twentieth-century film; however, I found several aspects of the book to be frustrating.

According to the introduction, the book's "broad thesis" is that "Expressionist film (and Expressionism generally) was troubled by the same neoclassical ideal that, more than a century prior, had—in a manner consistent with a modern diagnosis of hysteria—stigmatized the surge of motion/emotion characteristic of Romantic art and literature" (4). To observe similarities between Expressionist films and Romantic works is not new; as Calhoon readily acknowledges, Lotte Eisner's *The Haunted Screen* (1952), for example, does so at length. Calhoon's thesis announces a focus on Expressionism's and Romanticism's shared alienation from the neoclassical ideal of clean lines and measured emotions. But the book itself is much more nebulous than such a sentence suggests. It includes much discussion of the Romantic paintings of Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840) and of Weimar films including *Nosferatu* (1922), *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919), *The Hands of Orlac* (1924), *Metropolis* (1927), *The Blue Angel* (1930), and *The Street* (1923). There is less discussion than the introduction led me to expect of Romantic literature, but Novalis, Joseph

von Eichendorff, and Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder make appearances, as do Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Shelleys.

Perhaps because the argument for similarity between Romanticism and Expressionism has been made before, Calhoon does not really make it here. *The Long Century's Long Shadow* is very different from, say, Nora Gilbert's *Better Left Unsaid: Victorian Novels, Hayes Code Films, and the Benefits of Censorship* (2013), in which the argument for similarity between Victorian novels and Hayes Code films is built over four chapters, each of which presents one pairing (such as Charles Dickens with Frank Capra, or Charlotte Brontë with Elia Kazan). By contrast, I find myself struggling to write a chapter summary of *The Long Century's Long Shadow*. Indeed, Calhoon himself does not include any such summary in the introduction. Chapters are not organized around works. They have atmospheric titles such as "The Turmoil of Forces," "Under the Sign of Insomnia," and "Nightwatching." The chapters seem to be organized around images, positions, or stances that Calhoon observes in a very large number of works, including some outside the media and periods ostensibly under discussion in this study.

Calhoon does not provide "readings" of works but rather uses works as sources for examples of images and types of movement. For instance, in chapter five, Calhoon observes that in a painting of Christ in Mathias Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece (1512-16), in *Frankenstein* (1818), in some of Egon Schiele's paintings, and in the film *The Hands of Orlac*, people appear to have an alienated relationship to their own tortured-looking hands. For those of us with wide-ranging interests, it is exciting to see this kind of juxtaposition. And indeed, as Calhoon's introduction encourages us to observe, this image diverges from the neoclassical ideal. However, the dearth of metadiscourse in the book makes it difficult to discern exactly what, more specifically, Calhoon wants the reader to learn from such observations. He provides many

quotations and examples of similar images, but he rarely stops to make an argument for their importance to the works at hand or to explain why the prevalence of these images across periods and media might matter. For example, Calhoon observes of *Frankenstein* that “Acute photosensitivity is a quality the creature shares with Plato’s prisoner” in the cave (145). This is true enough, but Calhoon does not make any kind of broader argument about the importance of this comparison (which could just as easily be extended to plenty of other characters in literature, film, and art). I love comparisons across medium and period, but I found myself frustrated—not by the breadth of the comparisons but by the rapidity with which they were superseded by other ones. The lack of metadiscourse sometimes made it difficult for me to distinguish offhand comments from important points.

This book is steeped in art history and art theory, more than in the history and theory of literature or of film. As a scholar of the Victorian novel, I did not find his foray into literary realism in chapter six to be compelling. As a scholar of film, I was sometimes surprised by his claims, including two specific ones, unaccompanied by explicit criteria, about what is or is not “essentially cinematic” (60, 63). Still, Calhoon is undoubtedly on to something in observing an affinity between Caspar David Friedrich’s paintings and cinema more generally, as well as some of the specific films discussed in this book. He writes, “Friedrich’s paintings ... disclose a potential realized by the cinema, in which the shot acts like consciousness itself” (49). Happily for the nineteenth-centuryist, it is important to Calhoon’s argument that twentieth-century films do not simply “cite” Romantic paintings but rather manifest something that was already latent in these earlier works. This “something” involves both specific kinds of images and more philosophical matters of the viewer’s perspective on the work of art. I appreciate that, in contrast to many works of scholarship

today, Calhoun's book does not look down on artists and writers of the past for being aesthetically or ideologically backward.

That said, it is possible to go too far, and Calhoun's lack of emphasis on the social context for these works feels strange to me—not because it puts him outside the norm for scholarship, which is perfectly fine, but because the whole book is about the historical period that led to the Nazi regime. While reading Calhoun's discussions of Weimar films, I found myself wanting to learn more about how the Nazi takeover (and the Nazi film aesthetic, as represented by Leni Riefenstahl and others) could be understood as a response to these films and the art with which they were contemporaneous. Calhoun does not discuss these Expressionist filmmakers' lives and identities, but it is noteworthy to me how many of them were undesirable from a Nazi perspective: F. W. Murnau and James Whale were gay; Robert Wiene was Jewish; Karl Grune was Jewish and had contributed the story for *Aus Eines Mannes Mädchenjahren* (*From a Man's Girlhood*, 1919), about a person born without a clear gender and raised alternately as male and female. I do not believe that every work of scholarship needs to foreground identity-based critique, but surely these “undesirable” identities bear some significance in this context. Calhoun refers at the beginning and end of the book to neoclassical opposition to the perceived emotional excesses of Romanticism and Expressionism. Such opposition, surely, is congruent with the nascent Nazi view. For me, it is hard to think about perceived emotional excess in the early-twentieth-century context without thinking about Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (1892-3). The question of whether one responds to art with cool judgment or becomes emotionally involved is not unrelated to debates (begun in the late nineteenth century) about Decadence and the Aesthetic Movement—debates that were themselves constitutive of the public discourse about homosexuality. I would have appreciated some guidance from Calhoun as to how to understand the ways the early-twentieth-century films and paintings

under discussion here fit into the broader aesthetic and social debates that were about to come to a head with the rise of the Nazis.

Full disclosure: I am neither a historian nor a theoretician of art. Someone who is might have an easier time with this book than I did. Despite its frustrations, *The Long Century's Long Shadow* is full of interesting observations, and the concluding chapter on Disney's *Fantasia* (1940) inspired me to reserve a ticket for my local symphony's live accompaniment to the film next year. I encourage readers with an interest in art or in Weimar cinema to try the book for themselves.

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