A Symphony of Horror: How Weimar Germany Invented the Horror Film

In February 1920, in a cinema on the Kurfürstendamm called the Marmorhaus, Berliners sat down in the dark to watch a film about a fairground showman and a sleepwalker, and came out into the street having seen something that had never existed before. The houses on the screen leaned like drunks. The streets were painted, light and shadow alike, in jagged slashes on canvas. A man in a top hat and white gloves opened a cabinet, and inside stood a gaunt young man in black, eyes closed, who had been asleep, his master said, for twenty-three years, and who would now, at a word, wake.

The film was *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*. Within three years the same city had given the world a giant of clay brought to life by a rabbi's magic, and a vampire with rat's teeth and hands like a spider, creeping up a staircase as a shadow. Between 1920 and 1922, in a country that had just lost a war, a revolution, an emperor and very nearly its currency, German film-makers more or less invented the horror film. They had no tradition to work from and no budget to speak of, and nobody had told them it could not be done.

The Germans did not call it horror. The trade papers spoke of *Schauerfilme* and *Gruselfilme*, shudderfilms and creepfilms, and the critics, when they were speaking seriously, spoke of Expressionism. But whatever the name, the thing itself was new, and it was German, and it came out of a very particular moment. This is the story of how Germany invented the horror movie.

A country in the dark

The story begins with cinema itself, because Weimar Germany was the most cinema-mad country in Europe. During the war the government had banned most foreign films, and the German industry, protected from Hollywood and Paris, had grown at astonishing speed. In 1917 the state and the big banks brought together the leading studios into a single giant, the Universum Film AG, known by its initials as Ufa, partly as an instrument of wartime propaganda. When the war ended, the propaganda purpose went, but the studios, the money and the talent remained. By 1920 Berlin was turning out hundreds of films a year, over 500 in 1920 alone.

Then the inflation did something unexpected. As the mark collapsed, German films became absurdly cheap to make in real terms and absurdly profitable to sell abroad, because a print sold for dollars or pounds brought home a fortune in marks. German cinema became, for a few years, an export industry, and one of the few things a defeated Germany could sell to the countries that had defeated it. That meant ambition. Producers who could not afford real buildings could afford painters, and a

nation that could no longer afford to dream of empire could still afford to dream on canvas.

And the country they were filming was a strange and uncanny one. Germany in 1920 was full of the wreckage of the war in the most literal sense: men without faces, without limbs, with tremors that would not stop, selling matches on street corners, begging in doorways. The Spanish Flu had killed hundreds of thousands in 1918 and 1919, an invisible killer. The streets of Berlin and Munich had seen revolution and slaughter. Hunger was a living memory and, for many, a present one. I'm always cautious, as a historian, of the critics who look back at these films and find in every shadow a direct portrait of the national soul. A great deal of that reading was done afterwards, by people who knew how the story ended. But it would be equally foolish to pretend that a nation which had spent five years surrounded by death and uncertainty was not ready, in 1920, to sit in the dark and be frightened.

Something uncanny

There is one more thing to set beside the cinema, and its timing is almost perfect. In 1919, in Vienna, Sigmund Freud published an essay called *Das Unheimliche*, The Uncanny. It asks why certain things frighten us that are not dangerous: dolls that seem alive, doubles, automatons, the dead who are not quite dead, the familiar made strange. His great literary example was a German tale a century old: E.T.A. Hoffmann's *Der Sandmann*, with its sinister optician and its beautiful mechanical doll.

Freud did not invent the uncanny, and the film-makers did not read Freud. But they were drawing on exactly the same deep well of German Romantic fantasy that he was. Hoffmann, the brothers Grimm, the doppelgänger tales, the golems and sleepwalkers and the dead who return were the inherited backdrop of the German imagination. What the cinema of 1920 added was a visual form. For the first time you could see the uncanny move.

Caligari: the painted nightmare

Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari was written by two young men, Carl Mayer, an Austrian, and Hans Janowitz, a Czech-born veteran, who had both come out of the war with a deep distrust of authority. Their story was simple and savage: a respectable doctor, the director of an asylum, uses a hypnotised sleepwalker to commit murders, and in the end authority itself turns out to be the madman. They sold it to the Decla studio, where the producer Erich Pommer handed it to the director Robert Wiene.

What made the film legendary was the stylised look of it. The design team, Hermann Warm, Walter Reimann and Walter Röhrig, painters and set-designers who moved in the Expressionist circles of Berlin, decided not to build a town at all. They painted one. Every wall slants. Every window is a jagged wound. Chimneys lean, streets twist into nothing, and even the light and shadow are painted directly onto the sets, so that pools of brightness and slashes of darkness never move, whatever the actors

do. Studio legend later claimed the painted light was forced on them by electricity rationing. Like much studio legend, it is a better story than there is evidence to prove, but it is true that the whole thing was made cheaply, on a small stage, with canvas and paint standing in for expensive conventional methods.

As for the actors, *Caligari* included two of the great performances of the silent screen. Werner Krauss plays Caligari as a hunched, shuffling, gloved horror, half fairground huckster and half something much older and more sinister. Conrad Veidt, tall, thin and white-faced, plays Cesare the sleepwalker, gliding along the painted walls like a shadow that has detached itself from its owner. When Cesare opens his eyes for the first time, in close-up, it is still one of the most frightening moments in cinema.

The film has a twist. A framing story, added during production, reveals at the end that the young man telling the tale is himself an inmate of the asylum, and that the "Caligari" he raves about is in fact the kindly asylum director treating him. Mayer and Janowitz were furious; their attack on authority had been turned into a madman's delusion, with authority restored and benevolent. Who added the framing, and why, has been argued over ever since. But the twist is part of what makes the film so unsettling to this day: we are never quite sure whose eyes we have been seeing through.

Caligari was a sensation. It opened in Berlin in February 1920, ran for months, was argued over in every café, and was exported across Europe and to America, where it caused a stir in 1921. German film had arrived.

The Golem: clay and fire

Later the same year came the second great Weimar horror, and it came from a much older source. *Der Golem, wie er in die Welt kam*, The Golem: How He Came into the World, opened in October 1920 at the grand Ufa-Palast am Zoo. It was the work of Paul Wegener, a big, heavy-featured actor who had been obsessed with the legend for years. He had already made a Golem film in 1915, now almost entirely lost, and a comic sequel in 1917, and this third version told the origin story in full.

The legend comes from the Jewish folklore of Prague. In the sixteenth century, so the story goes, Rabbi Judah Loew, the Maharal, a real and revered scholar, shaped a giant from the clay of the river Vltava and brought it to life with a sacred word, to protect the Jewish community of the ghetto from persecution. In the film, the Emperor has ordered the Jews expelled. Rabbi Loew reads the stars, raises the Golem, and uses it to save his people. But the creature, once woken, cannot be controlled, and it runs amok until, in the film's famous ending, a little girl outside the ghetto walls innocently takes the life-giving amulet from its chest, and the giant falls.

Where *Caligari* was painted, *The Golem* was sculpted. Its designer was Hans Poelzig, one of the most celebrated architects in Germany, and he built the Prague ghetto as a living organism: crooked houses that seem to have grown rather than

been built, roofs like pointed caps, doorways like mouths, winding stairs that breathe. The cameraman Karl Freund, who would go on to an extraordinary career, lit it with flickering fire and deep shadow. Wegener himself, in a great helmet of clay-coloured hair and heavy boots, moves like something that has only just learned to walk. It is a monster that frightens because it is innocent: a creature made to protect, which does not understand its own strength.

The film was an enormous international success, and its imagery, the creature of clay, the scholar's laboratory, the life given and taken away, flowed directly into the horror films that other countries would make a decade later. Its style can be seen in every iteration of *Frankenstein* for a start. It is also, it should be said, a film built on Jewish legend and set in a Jewish world, made at a time when that world was a familiar and respected part of German culture. Its Rabbi Loew is wise and its ghetto is a place of learning as well as fear.

Nosferatu: the symphony of horror

And then, in March 1922, the vampire. *Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens*, Nosferatu, a Symphony of Horror, was made not by Ufa but by a tiny new company called Prana Film, founded by a producer and artist named Albin Grau, who had a serious interest in the occult. Grau wanted to make supernatural films, and he hired one of the most gifted young directors in Germany, Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, to make the first.

The story was *Dracula*. Bram Stoker's novel of 1897 was the obvious choice for a vampire film, and Prana simply took it, changing the names, moving the setting from England to a fictional German port called Wisborg, and moving the date to 1838, the year of a plague. Count Dracula became Count Orlok. Jonathan Harker became Hutter. The plot, the journey to the castle in the Carpathians, the coffins of earth, the ship of the dead, the plague that follows the vampire to the city, remained exactly as Stoker had written it. Nobody asked Stoker's widow for permission.

What Murnau did with it was something entirely his own. Where *Caligari* had been made on a stage, *Nosferatu* went out into the real world: the old Hanseatic towns of Wismar and Lübeck with their gabled warehouses, and the mountains and castles of what is now Slovakia. Murnau understood that horror is most terrible when it walks through real streets in daylight. And his vampire was no aristocratic seducer. Orlok, played by actor Max Schreck (whose surname, wonderfully, means "fright" in German), is a bald, rat-toothed, long-fingered thing with pointed ears and a hunched back, more pest than prince, the bringer of plague. The most famous image in the film is not of Orlok at all but of his shadow: his clawed shadow creeping up a staircase, and his shadow-hand closing over a woman's heart.

The film premiered in Berlin in March 1922 with great ceremony and was much admired. And then the lawyers arrived. Florence Stoker, Bram Stoker's widow, who depended on her late husband's royalties, sued for breach of copyright. She won. In

1925 a German court ordered that every copy of *Nosferatu* be destroyed. Prana Film had already gone bankrupt; it never made another film. By rights, *Nosferatu* should have vanished. It survived only because prints had already been sold abroad and they couldn’t all be found and burned. One of the greatest films of the silent era therefore only exists today by chance and through the failure of the courts.

The shadow and the double

These three great films were not the only films in the genre. A whole cinema of the uncanny grew up in their wake, including Fritz Lang's *Der müde Tod* (1921), known as *Destiny* in the US and Britain, in which a young woman bargains with Death himself for her lover's life. Then there was Arthur Robison's *Schatten* (1923), *Warning Shadows*, in which a travelling shadow-player shows the guests at a dinner party what their desires would lead to. Paul Leni's *Das Wachsfigurenkabinett* (1924), *Waxworks*, in which a poet writes stories for the figures in a fairground waxworks and they come to life. Robert Wiene's *Orlacs Hände* (1924), *The Hands of Orlac*, in which a pianist who has lost his hands in an accident is given new ones, a murderer's. Conrad Veidt is in almost all of them, his long white face becoming the face of the age.

The motifs repeat. The double. The shadow that moves on its own. The sleepwalker and the hypnotist. The automaton and the creature brought to life. The hands that do what their owner does not will. The tyrant who controls other people's bodies. And above all, light: these filmmakers understood, perhaps better than any before or since, that what frightens us is not what we see, but what the darkness half-reveals.

What it means, and what it doesn't

It has become a cliché to say that these films were Germany dreaming its own future: the tyrant hypnotist, the obedient sleepwalker, the creature that cannot be controlled. That argument was made most famously after the Second World War, by critics looking backwards from the catastrophe. It is a powerful statement, and the themes are certainly there, but I think it does the films, and the people who made them, a disservice to read them only as so kind of prophecy. The people sitting in the Marmorhaus in 1920 didn’t know what was coming. They knew what had already happened: a war that had turned ordinary men into killers on command, a state that had sent millions to their deaths and called it duty, a peace in which nothing felt solid, and a city where you might pass, on any street corner, a man whose face had been lost at the Somme.

These films are not a prediction. They are a memory, and a mood, made by artists working at the very edge of a new medium, in a country with nothing left to lose and a great deal to say. They took the oldest fears of German folklore, the double, the golem, the walking dead, and set them loose in the most modern art form in the world, and in doing so they invented a genre that every country has borrowed from

ever since. Every vampire, every mad scientist, every creature in a laboratory owes something to a few hundred people in a few Berlin studios between 1920 and 1924.

Into the dark season

I find these films endlessly fascinating, partly because they show the Weimar Republic at its most creative, and partly because they show how deeply the old German world of forest, castle and fairy tale still ran beneath the modern surface of the early twentieth century. The country of Caligari and Nosferatu was the same country that still told its children about witches in the woods and wolves at the door.

That old world is where my next novel goes. *Dark Inheritance*, out on the first of December, takes Alaric von Trelow out of Berlin to a decaying Junker estate on the Oder, where an old baron believes someone is trying to kill him, a family waits impatiently for him to die, and a village keeps secrets going back decades. It is the most Gothic book I have written, and it draws deliberately on the German fairy tales and the cinema of shadows that shaped the imagination of the age. I suspect Murnau would have known exactly how to light it.

If you are new here, the Alaric von Trelow Mysteries series begins with *Prussian Blue*, the first three novels are available together in one omnibus, and the whole series is in Kindle Unlimited. And if you want more of the real history behind the fiction, every month, join my newsletter, *The Alaric von Trelow Casebook*, where you will also find a free von Trelow story waiting.

All of the films mentioned survive and most can be found in restored versions. Watch them in the dark, with the sound of the wind outside. That is how they were meant to be seen.