

Fritz Lang, “The Future of the Feature Film in Germany” (1926)

Abstract

While Expressionism in the visual arts and in literature was rejected by the younger generation of artists as outmoded and bourgeois, it was stylistically decisive for the films of the Weimar Republic. In this text, which appeared in October 1926 in the prestigious magazine *Die literarische Welt*, director and screenwriter Fritz Lang describes the creative strengths of German feature films, particularly in comparison to American productions. Born in Austria, Fritz Lang (1890-1976) lived in Berlin from the end of 1918, where he initially made a career as a director of silent films. His best-known silent film, *Metropolis*, considered a masterpiece of the genre, was released in 1927 but was not a commercial success. Lang’s sound film *M - Eine Stadt sucht einen Mörder* (1931), on the other hand, was a hit with audiences and established him as one of the most important international film directors. After the National Socialists came to power, Lang decided to emigrate to the USA and from then on made films in Hollywood.

Source

The Future of the Feature Film in Germany

There has perhaps never before been a time so determined as ours in its search for new forms of expression. Fundamental revolutions in painting, sculpture, architecture, and music speak eloquently of the fact that people of today are seeking and finding their own means of lending artistic form to their sentiments. Film has an advantage over all other expressive forms: its freedom from space, time, and place. What makes it richer than the others is the natural expressiveness inherent in its formal means. I maintain that film has barely risen above the first rung on the ladder of its development, and that it will become the more personal, the stronger, and more artistic the sooner it renounces all transmitted or borrowed expressive forms and throws itself into the unlimited possibilities of the purely filmic.

The speed with which film has developed in the last five years makes all predictions about it appear dangerous, for it will probably exceed each one by leaps and bounds. Film knows no rest. What was invented yesterday is already obsolete today. This uninterrupted drive for new modes of expression, this intellectual experimentation, along with the joy Germans characteristically take in overexertion, appear to me to fortify my contention that film as art will first find its form in Germany. For it is not to be found in the absence of a desire to experiment, nor in the absence of a drive toward incessant formal invention (however trustworthy and fruitful the old remains), nor most especially in the absence of uninterrupted overexertion in the name of results, which can only be achieved with that particularly German kind of stamina and imagination, of those who become obsessed with the work from the first idea on.

Germany has never had, and never will have, the gigantic human and financial reserves of the American film industry at its disposal. To its good fortune. For that is exactly what forces us to compensate a purely material imbalance through an intellectual superiority.

From among the thousands of examples that support my theory, I wish to single out only one.

American cinematic photography is regarded, thanks to its as yet unparalleled recording equipment, its film stock and the brilliant work of its technicians, as the best photography in the world. But the Americans have still not understood how to use their magnificent equipment to elevate the miracle of

photography into the realm of the spirit; that means, for example, that the concepts of light and shade are not to be made mere transporters of mood but factors that contribute to plot. I recently had the opportunity of showing an American technician a few scenes from *Metropolis*, in which the beam of an electric flashlight illumined the pursuit of a young girl through the catacombs of *Metropolis*. This beam of light pierced the hunted creature like the sharp claws of an animal, refused to release her from its grasp, drove her unremittingly forward to the point of utter panic. It brought the amiable American to a naive confession, "We can't do that!" Of course they could. But the idea never occurs to them. For them, the thing remains without essence, unanimated, soulless. I, on the contrary, believe that the great German dramatic film of the future will have the thing play just as important a role as the human character. Actors will no longer occupy a space that they appear to have entered by accident; rather the space will be constructed in such a way that the characters' experiences appear possible only in it, appear logical only on account of it. An expressionism of the most subtle variety will make surroundings, properties, and plot conform to one another, just as I believe in general that German film technique will develop along lines that not only raises it to the level of an optical expression of the characters' actions but also elevate the particular performer's environment to the status of a carrier of the action in its own right and, most important, of the character's soul! We are already trying to photograph thoughts, that is, render them visually; we are no longer trying to convey the plot complex of an event but to make visual the ideational content of the experience seen from the perspective of the one who experiences it.

The first important gift for which we have film to thank was in a certain sense the rediscovery of the human face. Film has revealed to us the human face with unexampled clarity in its tragic as well as grotesque, threatening as well as blessed expression.

The second gift is that of visual empathy: in the purest sense the expressionistic representation of thought processes. No longer will we take part purely externally in the workings of the soul of the characters in film. We will no longer limit ourselves to seeing the effects of feelings, but will experience them in our own souls, from the instant of their inception on, from the first flash of a thought through to the logical last conclusion of the idea.

If earlier performers satisfied themselves with being pretty, pleasant, or dangerous, funny or repulsive, film will propel new German actors and actresses from carriers of the plot to carriers of an idea. To become preachers of every creed that has people since they left their abode in the trees.

The internationalism of filmic language will become the strongest instrument available for the mutual understanding of peoples, who otherwise have such difficulty understanding each other in all too many languages. To bestow upon film the double gift of ideas and soul is the task that lies before us.

We will realize it!

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