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by Matt Rossoni

Stellen Rye's 1913 release, *Der Student von Prag* (translated, *The Student of Prague*), was praised as 'the first German art film.' While it is always difficult to pinpoint a film as being the 'first' of its kind – competing closely with this particular claim is Max Mack's short film *Der Andere*, also 1913 – historical circumstances were fertile for a film like *The Student of Prague* to emerge. At an international level, cinema was still predominantly regarded as a form of low entertainment, still caught up in its fairground origins. Debates about cinema were largely concerned with why or why it should not be considered art, especially in comparison to theatre. Artists and theorists working from both inside and outside the scope of film analysis, including, as is particularly important in the case of *The Student of Prague*, the burgeoning study of psychoanalysis contributed to this debate with varying attitudes, ranging from total embracement to sheer revulsion. *The Student of Prague* provided an important point of negotiation in such debates, attempting to win over conservative views of art while at the same time, taking a drastic step forward in terms of forming a uniquely cinematic language.

In 1907, the *Kino-Debatte*, or 'film debate' began in Germany. This was accompanied, shortly afterwards, with the *Kinoreformbewegung* – the film reform movement. This was a collective of bourgeois individuals who disapproved of the newfound and popular cinema, and whom subsequently pushed for greater governmental intervention on behalf of the greater public good and national morality. They were not necessarily against cinema, but instead lobbied for 'healthy and educational films' that would nurture strong German values and deter what they saw as the corruptive influence of the *Schundfilme*, or 'trash film,' which usually referred to foreign films. As Karen J. Kenkel indicates in her essay, "The Nationalism of the Mass Spectator in Early German Film," the reformers, while concerned with both the quantity and quality of culturally sensitive films, were in fact more concerned with the spectators themselves.

The reformers saw a film audience as being a cohesive whole rather than composed of individuals, and believed that the audience adopted the psychology of a crowd, or mass. Specifically, they worried about the innocence of women and children and about the dangerous repercussions to the sexuality of youthful spectators. Numerous studies were published on the connection of the film audience to the psychology of the masses, the general consensus being along the lines of Alfred Döblin's contention that the film audience would become, as Kenkel summarizes, "a frighteningly deindividuated group bound together by the seductive and hypnotic power of the screen" (156). Furthermore, the "film audience's mode of reception," equated with the psychological mass, became "uncritical, emotional, and uncontrolled (or unpatrolled) by a strong ego" (157). However, as Brigitte Peucker demonstrates in her essay, "German Cinema and the Sister Arts", *The Student of Prague* references so many other mediums, including poetry, theatre (especially theatre), and even to some extent, spirit photography, as well as bold actor/character introductions. Thus, the film is in many ways Brechtian. In subtly reappropriating other mediums for cinematic purposes, the differences or capabilities of cinema in comparison to

other arts are easily distinguishable while also creating a distancing effect between viewer and film; if not erasing the reformers' concerns of spectral hypnosis, then the films at least calms them.

At the outbreak of World War I, the reformers, safe from participating in the fighting, celebrated the war's chaos and mass destruction as a means of 'purifying' German culture. The war severely limited international trading in Germany and led to a stoppage in the importation of foreign films, which the reformers embraced. With their pursuit of strong nationalistic portrayals and rejection of foreign material, the reformers exhibited an attitude bordering on xenophobia. Limited availability to foreign films allowed for a growth in domestic film production. Autorefilm arose partly as a means on behalf of eager artists to "differentiate the *Autorefilm* from the *Schundkino*" (Garwood 202). *The Student of Prague* et al. thus brought cinema to the negotiation table, catering to meet conservative views by offering them quality domestic productions while also allowing artists the opportunity to explore the medium and strengthen it from within.

To that end, the idea came about to hire established authors and playwrights to write film scenarios, which would theoretically lead to higher quality, and artistically minded films. They would also attract new audiences by attaching themselves to already popular and well-regarded literary icons. This was a direct attempt to win over middle class conservatives, those safeguarding the populace from film's contemptible 'low brow' form of entertainment. Films were in popular demand, but because they lacked the prestige of traditional art forms, the industry came under fire, especially given that "[i]n the years 1910-1912 certain circles increasingly made the financially successful film industry responsible for the economic distress of theatre" (Diederichs 382). As a result, the film industry became an attractive option to those affected by the decline in theatre. More jobs arose for writers while also offering opportunities to create work outside the scope of theatre or literature.

Autorefilm, raising the prestige of and advancing the medium's artistic capacity, corresponds with the observation of Georg Von Lukács in his 1913 treatise, "Thoughts Toward an Aesthetic of Cinema." In it, Lukács states:

[W]hat has sprung up naively, often against the will of the people, appears only out of the *technology* of the "cinema": an Arnim or a Poe of our day would find for his scenic longing an excellent instrument, as rich and internally adequate as the Greek stage was for *Sophocles*. (17)

Here, Lukács signifies that cinema is both worthy and in need of artisanal advancement, and that writers have the ability to contribute on both levels. Furthermore, in suggesting that many films have often relied merely on the 'technology' of cinema, Lukács points to one of the fundamental arguments *against* film being considered an art form, that is, that film merely replicates reality mechanically and is thus incapable of speaking on its own terms.

This is why the cinema was always compared to the theatre, because of the view that narrative film (already at this point the mainstay) could only present itself as a filmed stage play. Much of early cinema confirms this observation, as events were typically filmed from the fixed frontal position of a theatre seat, in long takes, and with little to no acknowledgment of space

outside the frame. To become an art form, cinema would have to remove itself from the auditorium and capitalize on its own inherent properties. Lukács's article postulates theories of what naturally distinguishes film from theatre, and concludes that film cannot possibly be 'filmed' theatre, for a number of reasons, but also that it is a mistake to claim that film will one day replace the theatre. His argument can be seen as a precursor to later theories on medium specificity, such as those espoused by Noël Carroll and Rudolf Arnheim.

Another theorist of the time, Herbert Tannenbaum, also stresses the fallacy of believing that film can only mimic theatre, or that the former will subsume the latter. Like Lukács, he claims this is because of their specific medium differences. He recognizes, like Siegfried Kracauer would later elaborate on in his essay, "The Establishment of Physical Existence", that some things are naturally cinematic and cannot be realized on stage: "[P]eople never realize . . . that not all beauties of nature give occasion for beautiful photographs; for, in general, the principle of nature is idyllic calm and the principle of the movie theatre is liveliest motion" (4).

According to Lukács, one of the fundamental differences between the two mediums is their handling of 'presence.' The relationship between the live stage actor and audience means that "[t]he stage is the absolute *present*" (13) whereas the lack of actors, setting, etc. via projection of a film designates "[t]he lack of this 'present' [as] the primary characteristic of the cinema" (14). Thus, one cannot be considered 'better' than the other, for they imbue different things. This lack is not a "defect" of cinema, Lukács claims, but simply "its limit, its *principium stilisationis*" (14). Perhaps what is most important in Lukács' essay is that he recognizes the artistic and conceptual potential in the formal means of editing alongside photographic 'reality:' "because it technically expresses absolute reality (albeit only empirical) in every individual moment, the validity of possibility is cancelled out as a category opposed to reality. The two categories become equal. They assume one identity" (15). Here, 'possibility' refers to the reordering of time, which is not realistic, and which allows for dynamic shifts within space and time; something the theatre, with its 'liveliness' is not capable of doing.

There are crucial differences between Tannenbaum and Lukács, however, in terms of their commitment to the medium. The former is somewhat wary. While not as conservative as say, the film reformers, Tannenbaum acknowledges "entertainment and excitement" as important factors in film's popularity, and he has similar concerns about the medium's potential effects on public morality:

We enjoy it when we see how actions occur and how everything lives and is in flux. From there, though, it is only a small step to sensationalism, i.e., to pleasure in gruesome and nerve-wrecking events. This cinema can and must avoid these unhealthy extremes as well as a fomentation of affective excitement to the point of sentimentality. (5)

However, he does not push for governmental intervention as the reformers had, and puts more responsibility on the filmmaker to deliver quality narratives. Whereas Lukács' wholehearted embrace of cinematic potentiality leads him to claim that "*everything is possible*" [his italics] (15), including formalist tricks (for example, "when a cigar butt becomes bigger during the duration of the smoke, until finally in the moment of lighting itself it is put back into the box"), Tannenbaum

sees film's formal properties as subservient to narrative coherence. "The first requirement for a good cinematic scene," he writes, "is a distinguished monumental simplicity" (5). If too many objects, images, etc., are present in one single image, then it will not be possible to follow the lead of the actor, his acting will "simply [be] swallowed up" (5). Thus, Tannenbaum subsequently highlights what he considers to be the most important occupations in film production: the actor, director, and the writer. These critical positions he charges with upholding a film's morality, which should be its primary concern. *The Student of Prague* has a strong core trio by Tannenbaum's definition (and a fourth in cinematographer Guido Seeber) but who are perhaps much more innovative than Tannenbaum would have had in mind.

Prior to *The Student of Prague*, Stellen Rye directed *Der Verführte* (1913) and used the same writer and actor in his next film. Paul Wegener, the lead actor, had his own strong interests in formal experimentation with what he called "kinetic lyricism," and the film was written by the well-known author Hanns Heinz Ewers (qtd. in Peucker 169). That Sigmund Freud and Otto Rank were interested in the film, and particularly Ewers work, in terms of psychoanalytic theory suggests that the film accomplishes far more than the initial idea of making an 'art' film.

Freud's theory of "The Uncanny" and Rank's analysis of "The Double" are similar in many ways, and helps one to better understand what makes *The Student* 'the first German art film.' It may also be seen that, in a way, the reformer's preference for 'science and educational films' is reflected in each respective study, the 'science of the mind.'

Freud's concept of the 'uncanny' includes a few variations. The first is that something seeming uncanny to an individual is the return of a repressed or forgotten childhood memory. Furthermore, the individual can find the uncanny situation to consistently reoccur, driven by an inner desire to repeat. Freud's second argument closely involves the figure of the double, which through the title alone, is apparently closely related to Rank's discussion. Freud suggests that the double derives from narcissism developed by children as a form of self-love. Children learn to suppress/censor their narcissism and project it onto their alter ego. Thus its return as an adult is a return to the primary stages of childhood, hence it is uncanny, and brings with it everything the child had repressed. Only now, instead of a positive form of self-love, the repression carries negative and dangerous baggage. As Freud states, "the 'double' has become a vision of terror, just after the fall of their religion the gods took on daemonic shapes" (426).

In *The Student of Prague*, Balduin, the skilled fencer but poor student, is swindled and essentially sells his (literal) 'mirror image' to the sinister figure of Scapinelli. However, Balduin comes away from the incident with a vast fortune. Earlier in the film he had saved the wealthy Comtesse Margit from drowning, and the two immediately became attracted to each other despite Margit being engaged, although unhappily, to her cousin Baron Waldis-Schwarzenberg. Having sold his mirror image to Scapinelli, Balduin is now able to move up the social ladder and pursue Margit. Eventually the Baron challenges Balduin to a duel, but as the only heir to the Count's fortune (Margit's father) Balduin is asked not to fight. The count knows him to be regarded as the best fencer in Prague, and if Balduin enters the duel he will surely kill the Baron.

Walking through the woods, Balduin comes across his mirror image, as he has a few times

at this point in the film. The mirror image has slain the Baron and leaves Balduin alone to discover the body. Freud's assertion that the double is an embodiment of repressed narcissism is acted out more strongly in this scene than in any other. The suggestion is that Balduin did in fact want to kill the Baron in order to serve his ego and assert his great skill as a fencer. Furthermore, by killing the Baron there is nothing stopping him from marrying the Comtesse, since he now has the financial and social status, thanks to Scapinelli. Balduin was able to suppress these desires, but in turn, they were projected onto his alter ego, the double. The double poses another threat to Balduin, because he is a reminder of his former life as a poor student, as his clothing suggests. The rich Balduin wears elaborate and expensive looking attire, whereas the double is still in his student clothes.

Rank sees the form of the double, or doppelganger, as emerging in anthropological traditions as an extension of the body's shadow or mirror reflection, which was believed to be the extension of the soul and also acted as means for the ego to defend itself against death. Hence the loss of one's soul was closely connected with death. Rank also points out that in *The Student of Prague*, Balduin's double arises every time he faces a romantic encounter with Margit, and that Lyduschka, the poor gypsy who has been in love with Balduin since his days as a poor student, functions as a double to Margit, and works to disrupt the wealthy couple from consummating their love. Sexual love, according to Rank, is threatened by narcissism because it interferes with self-love, resulting in impotency.

Rank states, "[t]he form of defense against narcissism finds expression principally in two ways: in fear and revulsion before one's own image . . . or, as in the majority of cases, in the loss of the shadow-image or mirror-image" (73). We find examples of both in *The Student*. Firstly, we see that Balduin is physically repulsed by the appearance of his doppelganger. It grows increasingly worse the more the doppelganger reminds him of his past. The killing of the baron and the appearances before Margit, who is baffled and frightened by the double/ his past, the more Balduin tries to escape. Second, the loss of the mirror-image is a "strengthening, a becoming independent and superiorly strong, which in its turn only shows the exceedingly strong interest in one's own self." Thus, in the name of self-preservation Balduin must extend his self-love, in addition to being repulsed by his own image, which holds the opposite value. Narcissism in this manner, as Rank notes, regularly leads to suicide, which is what finally happens to Balduin, who can finally not take the haunting and thus, shoots his double, killing himself as it were.

It is a curiosity that Lukács claimed of the cinema, "man has lost his *soul*; in return, however, he gains his *body*" (16). While the stage actor, according to Lukács, most certainly has his soul because of his stage presence, the film actor does not, nor does Balduin. Rather, he gains a second body, and following Lukács' assertion that "[h]is greatness and poetry lie . . . in the way in which his strength and skill are able to overcome physical obstacles," it stands to reason that the very body he has gained is cinematic" (16). The double would not be visually possible if not for trick photography, nor would it be more than a gimmick if the creators of *The Student of Prague* had not set out to elevate the capabilities of cinema.

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