the new

BERLIN 1912 – 1932

onder redactie van
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Racine
Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium

FIG. 1

All illustrations are frame grabs from
Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari (Robert Wiene, 1920)
Flat, painted studio sets

TheNewBerlin_Engels-test.indd 92 14-09-18 16:50

POST-PERSPECTIVAL AESTHETICS IN 'THE CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI'*

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The extension of moving images beyond cinema and television to new exhibition sites and platforms – from museums and art galleries to laptops, tablets, and smart phones – has posed a broad-scale challenge to the regime of linear perspective. The present-day media culture of mobile spectators and proliferating frames and screens has, by many accounts, caused the dissolution of the perspectival system of space dating back to the Renaissance.[1] While film and media scholars have identified various precursors to post-perspectivalism in the history of moving images, they have often sidelined these forerunners as rare deviations from the norm; for Anne Friedberg, "post-perspectival techniques (…) were strategies that remained only exceptions, experiments, the 'avant-garde,' in the vernacular forms of moving-image media."[2] Yet, a more sustained examination of early instances of post-perspectival film aesthetics remains crucial, particularly insofar as the rejection of Albertian perspectivalism coincided with a widely diagnosed crisis of historical thinking in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Occasioned by the exhibition "The New Berlin, 1912–1932," this essay will return to a classic of German Expressionist cinema, Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (*Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*), which premiered at Berlin's Marmorhaus on 26 February 1920. Where many commentators have linked the film's distorted set design to the theme of mental disequilibrium, I will argue that its modernist negation of perspectival representation also entails a critique of the German historicist tradition. Conveying a radical skepticism regarding the possibility of objective, detached observation, Wiene's film instead follows Friedrich Nietzsche's writings in suggesting a perspectivist sense of historical reality as the interplay of finite, locally conditioned interpretations. I thus hope to demonstrate the inseparability of *Caligari*'s post-perspectival aesthetics from its engagement with seismic shifts in modern philosophy – in particular, the decentering and disintegration of the Cartesian subject, as well as the change from historicist modes of thinking to a more complex, relativist perspectivism.

THE DISSOLUTION OF PERSPECTIVE

In his seminal essay, "Perspective as 'Symbolic Form'" ("Die Perspektive als 'symbolische Form,'" 1927), German art historian Erwin Panofsky modified the approach of Alois Riegl, who had examined the relationship between the artwork and its surrounding world through his concept of the unique *Kunstwollen* (artistic will) of every epoch.[3] As Christopher S. Wood notes, Panofsky replaced Riegl's inchoate *Weltanschauungsphilosophie* with a neo-Kantian theory of the "symbolic form," or Ernst Cassirer's term for the spiritual energy through which human consciousness attributes

* This essay is adapted from a monograph-in-progress on cinema and the crisis of historicism.

1. Stereoscopy and 3-D have also marked a challenge to the paradigm of linear perspective in the (pre-)history of moving images; cf. Elsaesser 2013 and Crary 1990.

2. Friedberg 2006, p. 2. Friedberg positions her argument in relation to such accounts as Baudry 1974–1975. Bordwell 1985, Comolli 1980 and Heath 1976.

3. Riegl 2003.

TheNewBerlin_Engels-test.indd 93 14-09-18 16:50

meaning to sensual signs – a phenomenon, as Cassirer emphasised, that occurs across the various realms of cultural expression.[4] Observing correspondences between advances in Western philosophy and the evolution of spatial perception, Panofsky argued that much as the idea of an infinite empirical reality had superseded the circumscribed geo-centrism of Aristotelian thought, the system of central perspective had envisaged endless extension to a vanishing point.[5] Panofsky maintained that perspective is an ambivalent and versatile method, and one that has served as the target of diametrically opposed critiques over the course of its history. Whereas ancient and medieval artists had largely eschewed perspective, associating it with subjectivism and contingency, the Expressionists had rejected it for preserving empirical, three-dimensional space, and thereby retaining an element of objectivity that constrained the "formative will" of the individual creator.[6]

The Expressionist movement advanced a broader trend in early-twentieth-century visual art towards dispelling perspectival geometry and envisioning new conceptions of space. Impressionist paintings of the 1860s and 1870s had already signaled an increasing dissatisfaction with perspectival conventions; instead of representing solid objects in three-dimensional space, works by Edgar Degas, Édouard Manet, Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and others had depicted the fleeting, subjective impressions that these objects left on the artists' perceptual apparatuses.[7] However, whereas works of Impressionism had maintained a connection to physical reality, subsequent art movements (e.g., Post-Impressionism, Cubism) blatantly defied the aim of perspectival technique, as identified by Panofsky: "to construct pictorial space, in principle, out of the elements of, and according to the plan of, empirical visual space."[8] This rejection of art's function as a mimesis of external objects – and, with it, a dismissal of the pictorial surface's status as a window to the outer world – troubled the longstanding Cartesian split between the thinking subject (*res cogitans*) and the extended substance (*res extensa*).[9] Emphasising the untenability of separating the world of objects from a fixed observer, modern artists abandoned what German art historian Carl Einstein, in *Art of the Twentieth Century* (*Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts*, 1926), called the "perspectival calculus of distance," inaugurating "an epoch of technical and formal freedom."[10]

Concurrent with art historians' responses to the innovations of aesthetic modernism, early film theorists recognised cinema for its potential to expand and reconfigure the field of human perception. In *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* (1916), Hugo Münsterberg made a plea for film's aesthetic independence on account of unique methods such as the close-up, through which "an entirely new perspective was opened."[11] Defending film against negative comparisons to the realist theater, Münsterberg emphasised that art's purpose is "not to imitate life but to reset it in a way which is totally different from reality."[12] Eight years later, Béla Balázs' *Visible Man, or the Culture of Film* (*Der sichtbare Mensch oder die Kultur des Films*, 1924) distinguished film from legitimised arts such as painting and theater through its ability to offer spectators a dynamic point of view and a multiplicity of perspectives. Identifying uniquely cinematic scales and shot distances, Balázs celebrated film's ability to capture the ephemeral, often-invisible phenomena of everyday experience and to abstract them from their spatiotemporal coordinates.[13] Finally, in *The Cinema Seen from Etna* (*Le Cinématographe vu de l'Etna*, 1926), Jean Epstein argued that cinema contributes an additional element to three-dimensional spatial representation: "To the elements of perspective employed in drawing, the cinema adds a new perspective in time."[14] Epstein highlighted the versatility of this "temporal perspective," especially on account of cinematic techniques such as slow- and fast-motion.[15]

The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari marked an early

4. Cf. Panofsky 1991, p. 41, and Christopher S. Wood, introduction to Panofsky, pp. 7–24. Cf. Damisch 1994 and Gordon 2010, p. 14.
5. Panofsky 1991, pp. 65–66.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
7. Guillén 1971, p. 326, and Jay 1993, pp. 149–209.
8. Panofsky 1991, p. 71.
9. Greenberg 1993, Greenberg 1961 and Guillén 1970, pp. 292–293, 362.
10. Einstein 1988, pp. 12, 17.
11. Münsterberg 1970, pp. 15–16.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
13. Balázs 2010, pp. 41, 62, 63, 71.
14. Epstein 2012, p. 294.
15. Cf. Lundemo 2012, pp. 207–225.

TheNewBerlin_Engels-test.indd 94 14-09-18 16:50

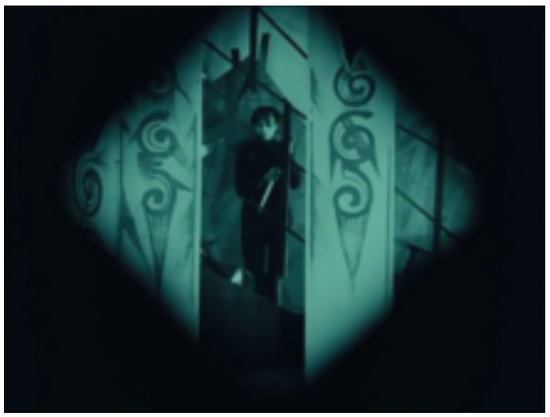

FIG. 2–3

Sharp, oblique angles

FIG. 4

Irregular, crooked shapes

FIG. 5

Exaggerated sizes
and proportions

demonstration of cinema's potential to offset conventions of perspectival representation. Emphasising the medium's stylistic above its naturalist capacities – or, in the terms introduced by Siegfried Kracauer in *Theory of Film* (1960), its "formative" above its "realistic" tendencies – Wiene's film refuses to create the illusion of solid objects in three-dimensional space.[16] The film thwarts the viewer's sense of objects' physical properties and depth relationships through flat, painted studio sets with sharp, oblique angles; irregular, crooked shapes; and often-exaggerated sizes and proportions [See fig. 1–5]. Furthermore, whereas perspectival unity had depended on a particular point of observation, Wiene's film creates a highly unstable spectatorial positionality, not least through instances of direct address to the camera, alternation between the first- and third-person voice in the inter-titles, and unresolved ambiguities regarding narrational credibility. Writing in the *Berliner Abendpost* on 29 February 1920, film critic Eugen Tannenbaum argued that Wiene's film does not depict "the perspective from the auditorium," but rather imposes the point of view of a madman: "the viewer is forced to see everything through *his* eyes: bizarre, grotesque, distorted, full of dark secrets and inexplicable connections."[17] Other reviewers similarly noted the film for its "suspension of perspective,"[18] abandonment of "all laws of things in space,"[19] and representation of the world "from a different viewpoint than that common until now."[20]

Challenging the association of film with the faithful reproduction of three-dimensional space, *Caligari* thus destabilised a linear-perspectival scheme that had reigned from Renaissance art to

16. Kracauer 1997, pp. 33–36. On Kracauer's myriad writings on *Caligari*, cf. Baer 2015.

17. Tannenbaum 1920, reprinted in Brill 2012, p. 313.

18. Proskauer 1920, reprinted in Brill 2012, p. 316.

19. Flüggen 1920, reprinted in Brill 2012, p. 321.

20. J. P. M., 1920, reprinted in Brill 2012, p. 319.

TheNewBerlin_Engels-test.indd 95 14-09-18 16:50

Impressionist painting. Though not fully exploring the possibilities of camera movement and montage, *Caligari* nonetheless deployed stylistic and narrative devices to enact what Kracauer would identify as the "dissolution of traditional perspectives" – a general process that he attributed to photographic media, with their capacity to record and reveal unusual aspects of physical reality.[21] While Kracauer disparagingly categorised German Expressionist films as among those "which neglect the external world in freely composed dreams or visions,"[22] it may be more productive, following Friedrich Kittler, to place the films in a trajectory that includes optical devices (e.g., *camera obscura*, magic lantern, stroboscope), romantic literature (Friedrich Schiller's *The Ghost-Seer* [*Der Geisterseher*, 1789], Novalis' *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* [1802], E.T.A. Hoffmann's *The Devil's Elixirs* [*Die Elixiere des Teufels*, 1815]), and emerging sciences (psychiatry, hypnotism, psychoanalysis), all of which involve illusions, hallucinations, and blurred boundaries between dreams and palpable reality.[23] If, as Kittler argues, the medium of film mobilises the spectator's gaze and manipulates his or her "unconscious psychological states,"[24] it decenters the transcendental subject and suggests a more finite, relational regime of vision – or what Nietzsche had theorised as perspectivism.

THE ADVENT OF PERSPECTIVISM

In its four-century-long "scopic regime,"[25] the technique of linear perspective was metaphorically extended to connote processes of perception and cognition. Etymologically derived from the Latin verb *perspicio* (to look at/into, look/see through, examine, observe), the term "perspective" came to designate a particular line of sight on an object, as well as a spatial or temporal distance necessary for proper valuation or judgment.[26] From the seventeenth century onwards, the metaphor was employed by thinkers including Francis Bacon, François de La Rochefoucauld, Blaise Pascal, and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, the latter of whom first transposed the figure to the realm of metaphysics.[27] Whereas Leibniz assumed a divinely assured, "perfect harmony" amongst different epistemic points of view, later philosophers confronted the immanence and potential incommensurability of discrete, localised perspectives.[28] The attendant concept of perspectivism, as developed by Gustav Teichmüller in *The Real and the Apparent World* (*Die wirkliche und die scheinbare Welt*, 1882),[29] was theorised most influentially by Nietzsche and was also taken up by twentieth-century thinkers including José Ortega y Gasset, George Herbert Mead, Edmund Husserl, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.[30] The concept's emergence in modern philosophy thus coincided with the dissolution of perspective in the visual arts, reflecting what Claudio Guillén and Martin Jay have identified as an epochal change in conceiving vision as a possible means of knowledge and understanding.[31]

Across his writings, Nietzsche shifted between semantic registers of perspectivism, moving from an "unbridled" to a more "circumspect" use of the metaphor, as James Conant has argued.[32] In *Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinn (On Truth and Lie in a Nonmoral Sense*, 1873), Nietzsche emphasised the impossibility of "correct perception" or "pure knowledge" of an external object, undistorted by the subject's cognitive perspective.[33] Nietzsche's early work nonetheless presupposed the possibility of *conceptualising* "the essence of things," unmediated by forms of human subjectivity – a conceptualisation, as he later acknowledged, that would itself be unavoidably perspectival in character.[34] Questioning a fatalistic sense of inescapable confinement within subjective consciousness, Nietzsche restricted the scope of the metaphor and argued for the untenability of the antithesis between the noumenon and phenomenon, or the thing-in-itself (*Ding an sich*) and its perspectival appearance.[35] By *Zur Genealogie der Moral* (*On the Genealogy of Morals*, 1887), Nietzsche called for

21. Kracauer 1997, p. 9. Cf. *ibid*., pp. 9, 56, 235–236, 293–294, 300, and Miriam Hansen, introduction to *Theory of Film*, pp. xi, xxi.
22. Kracauer 1997, p. 37.
23. Kittler 2010, pp. 98–189. On dreams and reality in Kracauer's film theory, cf. Kracauer 1997, pp. 163–166.
24. Kittler 2010, p. 175.
25. Jay 1993, p. 187.
26. Conant 2005, p. 14, and Guillén 1970, pp. 284–285, 312–313, 310, 328, 336, 338. Guillén notes that the metaphor of perspective could also evoke visual illusion; see *ibid*., p. 310.
27. Guillén 1971, pp. 314–325.
28. Leibniz 1952, section 357; quoted in Conant 2015, p 15. See also Jay 1993, p. 188.
29. Nohl 1903. See also Guillén 1971, p. 325, and Jay 1993, p. 188.
30. Guillén 1971, pp. 332–345, and Jay 1993, p. 188.
31. Guillén 1971, pp. 326, 358, and Jay 1993, pp. 188–189.
32. Conant 2005, I, p. 8.
33. Nietzsche 1979, p. 86, cited in Conant 2005, I, pp. 40–41.
34. Conant 2005, p. 46, and Conant 2006, p. 34.
35. Conant 2006, pp. 35, 38.

TheNewBerlin_Engels-test.indd 96 14-09-18 16:50

FIG. 6

Iris shot

rethinking the entire conceptual opposition between objectivity and subjectivity, emphasising their necessary admixture and interaction in the quest for truth.[36] Rather than postulating the existence of an endless multitude of perspectives as an indication of humans' untranscendable epistemic constraints, Nietzsche now invoked the possibility of employing "a *variety* of perspectives and affective interpretations in the service of knowledge."[37]

Nietzsche's theorisation of perspectivism raised critical issues for the discipline of history. The advent and metaphorization of Renaissance perspective had prompted increasing reflection on the particularity of the historian's viewpoint; already in the eighteenth century, Johann Martin Chladenius had recognised the historian's perspectival position as a determining factor in his or her understanding and interpretation of the past.[38] Whereas Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte (Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, 1822–30) had adopted an avowedly omniscient view – "the sum total of all possible perspectives"[39] – Leopold von Ranke had espoused the more modest, self-effacing ideal of impartial, objective representation, or showing the "naked truth without adornment."[40] Critiquing historicism in both guises, Nietzsche not only denied the existence of a transcendent, supra-individual point of view, but also questioned the assumption of a single, actual history that could be methodically reconstructed. Furthermore, dispelling Hegel's affirmative theodicy and Ranke's optimistic faith in the alliance of ethics and power,[41] Nietzsche instead presented historical reality as the interplay of fallible and value-laden interpretations. Thus, although perspectivism has often been conflated with historicism (both of which seem to have subjectivist and relativist implications),[42] it bears emphasis that Nietzsche's writings destabilised and even undermined the latter's basic tenets, anticipating the "crisis of historicism" widely diagnosed by German-speaking intellectuals following World War I.

Emerging contemporaneously with this crisis, *Caligari* enacted the idea of perspectivism through narrative and aesthetic features. Wiene's film is intensely preoccupied with how historical

36. *Ibid*., p. 43.

37. Nietzsche 1969, p. 12; cited in Conant 2006, p. 44.

38. Koselleck 2004, pp. 133–134. See also Gadamer 2004, p. 183, and Jay 1993, p. 189.

39. Hegel 1975, p. 30.

40. Von Ranke 1824, p. 28; quoted in Koselleck, 2004, p. 131. It bears emphasis that Ranke also postulated an omniscient God: "I imagine the Deity – if I may allow myself to make this observation – as seeing the whole of historical humanity in its totality (since no time lies before the Deity), and finding it all equally valuable" (Leopold von Ranke, *Weltgeschichte IX*, part 2, 5, 7, cited in Gadamer 2004, p. 207).

41. Iggers 1965, p. 292.

42. On this point, cf Guillén 1971, p. 333.

TheNewBerlin_Engels-test.indd 97 14-09-18 16:50

FIG. 7

An interchangeability of roles

FIG. 8

Solipsistic perspectivism

accounts are mediated and distorted through subjective consciousness; the first scene alone focuses on an act of first-person narration and deploys multiple iris shots, which highlight the incompleteness of the perspective offered by the individual storyteller (and by the camera lens) [See fig. 6]. The film's inner story likewise emphasises forms of visual and cognitive limitation, with multiple secrets, inexplicable occurrences, and instances in which both the film's characters and its viewers are deceived or denied information – an epistemic instability reduplicated through the film's spatiotemporally indeterminate settings and disorienting, post-perspectivalist set design.[43] The final sequence, which discloses the narrator's unreliability yet maintains the Expressionist style, offers neither a detached, stable point-of-view on the action nor narrative clarification and resolution. Refusing insight into the "actual" course of events, the film's concluding scenes instead suggest a proliferation of incommensurable accounts without an external standard of judgment.[44] Furthermore, denying viewers a definite specification of the identities, ethical commitments, and degrees of sanity of both doctor and patient, the film intimates an interchangeability of roles and even an arbitrariness of institutional power structures [See fig. 7].

Abandoning the historicist ideal of unbiased, comprehensive representation, *Caligari* instead stresses the invariable partisanship and epistemic limitations of all historical reports. In its skepticism regarding the attainability of pure truth, as well as in its self-reflexive figuration of all human knowledge as bounded, imprecise, and relative, the film recalls fifteenth-century philosopher Nicholas of Cusa's doctrine of "learned ignorance" (*docta ignorantia*).[45] However, whereas Nicholas postulated the essential incomprehensibility of an Absolute Being who alone "apprehends what He is,"[46] *Caligari* instead follows Nietzsche in confronting the philosophical dilemmas accompanying the proverbial death of God – a death, as Martin Jay emphasises, that also eradicated the "God's-eye view."[47] *Caligari*, in my analysis, thus takes up Nietzsche's early invocation of a relativist, subjectivist, and even solipsistic perspectivism, as envisaged in the film's final depiction of the insane asylum, where each patient is radically insular and discrete in

43. See also Kasten 1990, pp. 46 and 131, Christian Kiening and Ulrich Johannes Beil, "Nachwort," in Kurtz 2007, p. 179, and Robinson 1997, p. 28.

44. See also Elsaesser 2000, p. 80, and Kaes 2009, p. 77.

45. On the link between perspectivism and Nicholas of Cusa, see also Guillén 1970, pp. 293, 370, and Jay 1993, p. 189.

46. Nicholas of Cusa 1440/1981, p. 25 (I, 16: 44).

47. Jay 1993, p. 190.

TheNewBerlin_Engels-test.indd 98 14-09-18 16:50

assumed identity and worldview [See fig. 8]. Notably, the multiplicity and incommensurability of different perspectives extends beyond the *mise en scène* to interpellate the film's own viewers, faced with a bewildering array of possible interpretations of the work itself. In this regard, Wiene's film foregrounds problems of epistemology and hermeneutics following the de-transcendalisation and dissolution of Cartesian perspectivalism, whereby all cognising subjects are implicated as finite, locally conditioned participants within the dynamic process of history.[48]

EPILOGUE

In *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* (2006), Anne Friedberg briefly invokes *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* as an early cinematic attempt to break with the linear-perspectival paradigm. Noting that the film's distorted set design was not only "used to indicate a nonperspectival image," but also "equated with psychic disequilibrium,"[49] Friedberg continues a tradition of associating *Caligari*'s modernism with its theme of madness – a tradition associated with the Kracauer of *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947),[50] but extending as far back as Herbert Jhering, who proclaimed shortly after the film's premiere, "insanity becomes the excuse for an artistic idea."[51] As I have suggested, this mode of interpretation forecloses an investigation into the film's broader historical-philosophical concerns. Whereas Jhering contended that *Caligari*'s use of Expressionist design "opposes the notion of a sick reality to the notion of a healthy reality,"[52] I have argued that the film's post-perspectival aesthetic calls into question the very existence and accessibility of a normative historical reality – one external to the subjective perspectives of discrete individuals.

Drawing on Friedberg's work, one media scholar has recently argued that contemporary video installation art "marks a radical break with the perspectival coherence typical of cinematic cultures and replaces it with the dissolution of perspectives that characterizes a postcinematic aesthetics."[53] Where this scholar attributes the deconstruction and multiplication of perspectives to a post-cinematic age – one that rejects "linear perspectivity, linear time and Euclidean space, all of which (…) belonged to practices of early and mid twentieth-century cinematic cultures"[54] – I have emphasised the need for sustained engagement with the cinematic experiments and classical film-theoretical writings that explored the potential of film to break with perspectival unity a full century ago. Rather than homogenising the history of film aesthetics in order to herald the radical novelty of postcinematic *dispositifs*, scholars might consider the possibilities for tracing an alternative genealogy of digital moving-image culture, lending non-dominant models of filmmaking a new significance in our own time.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 187, and Koselleck 2004, p. 129.

49. Friedberg 2006, p. 306, n68.

50. Kracauer 2004, pp. 61–76. On the interpretive problems of Kracauer's argument in *From Caligari to Hitler*, see Baer 2015.

51. Jhering 1994, p. 620. Cf. e.g. Cendrars 1988, p. 271, and Wangenheim 1973, p. 118.

52. Jhering 1994, p. 620.

53. Åkervall 2016, p. 37.

54. *Ibid.*, 46. Åkervall's account stands in notable contrast to that of Elsaesser, who writes, "during the first ten to fifteen years of motion picture history there is ample evidence to suggest that filmmakers could and did draw on quite a range of techniques and traditions in the organization of pictorial space"; see Elsaesser 2013, pp. 230–231.

TheNewBerlin_Engels-test.indd 99 14-09-18 16:50