# "Images of the Secret Self": The Idea of the Non-Human in German Expressionist and Early American Horror Cinema

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## Abstract

*In historian Leslie Fiedler's book "Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self" (1978), he argues that monsters are intriguing for us because we look at them as mirrors of ourselves. Although the fantasy of manipulating nature emerged centuries ago, Germany's Expressionist silent cinema had its own place and message for using monsters. In the post-First World War climate, characters such as Cesare in Robert Wiene's Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920), Paul Wegener and Carl Boese's golem (1920), and Fritz Lang's pseudo-Maria (1927) are all reflections of the era's political situation. Meanwhile in the US, genetic imagery was a known and popular topic and movies like Frankenstein (1931) directed by James Whale were inspired by the German works. It also sums up the cultural, ethical, and moral issues of the 1920s, which are still valid today. Although the cultural environments of the two countries are different, they both make use of the same concept in order to show greed for power: the concept of the non-human.*

**Keywords:** German Expressionism, Robotics, American Horror, Genetics, Non-Human.

## Introduction: The Idea of the Non-Human

When Henry Frankenstein made his monster come alive, he was convinced of his own unconditional superiority over the living, saying: "Now I know what it feels like to be God." (*Frankenstein* 1931) The only thing he did not think about was his responsibility towards the creature he brought into this world. This raises the following questions: are we aware of the possible consequences of manipulating life? Can our limitless curiosity and desire for control be stopped? Should it be stopped? In the century which saw the birth of biotechnology and advanced weapon technology, these questions were (and still are) more relevant than ever before.

Frankenstein is not the only film that reflects on such questions. This paper explores the connection between the multiple concepts of the non-human and their visualization in early American horror and German Expressionist cinema as reflections on post-war Germany and the United States. The best works of the 1920s and 1930s have challenged the concept of the non-human, fusing the artistic imaginary with scientific possibilities of the future. Filmmakers foreshadowed genetic engineering and robotics addressing the main cultural, ethical, and political issues entailed in the growing role of technology in the twentieth century.

When talking about the "non-human", I use this term instead of – for instance – "artificial being", on purpose. Although the designation "artificial" would fit the characters of our film examples perfectly since people have created them and they have not come into existence naturally, the term "non-human" focuses on the living and natural. Hence, I now want to focus on these human characteristics and those that differ from this human-likeness and try to explore the line between natural and manmade.

An example of this can be found in the fact that although menace, fear, and violence appear in different forms in the movies discussed below, they all share the common fantasy of bringing to life a human-like creature with "extended" qualities that an ordinary person does not possess. A condition of these qualities lies in the fantasy of the extraordinary creatures coming into existence artificially and/or controlled by other people. This seems to elude the possibility of the "framework" of life: birth and death, which is inescapable for the ordinary man. (Barzilai 2016, 10)

## German Expressionism on Film

German Expressionism was established before World War I and reached its peak in the 1920s, during Weimar Germany. It became not only an avant-garde movement but it also mirrors a common, universal feeling of shock and fear – valid reactions in chaotic times. Expressionist cinema created a sense of claustrophobia and distortional reality by bringing distorted creatures to life and using unusual, painted background sets with curved and tilted interior walls. They all amplify the illusion of an upside-down world and the power of the irrational. (Nochimson 2010, 118) Filled with constant moral, economic, and political tension, Expressionism was not only a style, but also a worldview where people were heavily bound to suspense. (Caligari: Wie der Horror ins Kino kam 2014)

Another characteristic of German Expressionist film is the duplicate character with duplicate personality. As the selected films show below, one side of these characters represents evil in the form of the destructive power of nature; meanwhile the other one is more or less inactive, or in the case of *Metropolis*, represents a counterbalance to the wicked.

## The Tyrant

In *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), the somnambulant creature of Dr. Caligari is the metamorphosis of national shock and fear. Cesare lies in deep sleep during the day in a coffin, and Dr. Caligari releases him at night. Cesare kills people at his master's command, like a machine. He is a manipulated brute; a sinister being who spreads misery wherever he appears. In every frame in which he is present, the state of fear is extreme, which can be seen also in the imagery of the film. Take for

example the famous scene where Cesare appears in Alan's bedroom and kills him: shadows on the wall and objects are "split" like the sharp edges of a broken piece of glass. The cinematographers achieved this effect by painting the shadows directly on the floor and the walls. As for the light, they used flat light that produced minimal contrast between shadow and light. (Cousins 2011) The same imagery is highlighted in the scene where the somnambulist kidnaps Jane and runs away with her through the city: the shapes of the distant obstacles look like enlarged pitchforks. The movie's whole imagery follows the principles of Expressionist paintings: the liberation of forms from their objectivity in order to make place for the spiritual, and the depiction of the space from more than one angle, which leads to a distortion and corresponds to the tension of the narrative.

Figure 1 – Cesare appears in Alan's bedroom (Wiene 1920)

The narrative also underpins this "upside-downness" in a surprising twist: at one point, Francis (who is after Caligari) discovers his diary that reveals the mechanism of madness and its underlying psychology with the sentence written in it: "Du musst Caligari werden" ("you have to become Caligari"). This means one has the right to cross every ethical border in order to become tyrannical, which, again, reflects society as a madhouse. Cultural theorist Elisabeth Bronfen adds to this approach with Freud's analysis of the psyche: Caligari's case is one in which his id becomes his ego, meaning his instincts and desires take over his rational self. The "masterpiece" of the scientist "becoming" Caligari is Cesare, the somnambulist.

Cesare is a patient of an asylum, a human on the inside and the outside who is transformed into a "weapon" by being controlled by Caligari. His sleepwalking is a symbol of the machinery of the controlling state and ordinary people manipulated by it. Dr. Caligari, who himself is the director of the asylum, can be seen as the head of this machinery. Although Cesare is not disfigured, he is the distant relative of Nosferatu and Golem (Caligari: Wie der Horror ins Kino kam 2014): on the one hand, they all share a kind of non-human character; on the other, all these creatures are the results of the subconscious of the public sense and the human mind.

At the end of the film, however, the political edge of the story was removed: it turns out that Francis (who is after Dr. Caligari), Jane, and Cesare (who now does not seem to be dangerous at all) are all inmates of the same asylum and we were in the imagination of Francis all along.

## The Golem

Other films reflect the impaired stability of German society. Referring directly to the situation of the Jewish minority in Eastern Europe, *The Golem: How He Came into the World* (1920, part of a "trilogy" of three films) recounts a Jewish folktale from the sixteenth century.[1] Set in medieval Prague, the spiritual leader and scientist Rabbi Loew reads the stars, which tell him that danger is upon him and his Jewish community. In order to defend the community from the impending doom, the rabbi forms a giant from clay that comes alive under a magic spell. Unlike Caligari's tyrant or the pseudo-Maria of Metropolis (used explicitly for the self-serving purposes of their masters), the golem was created to protect others. He can even be seen as a heroic character, after saving the Christian emperor and his courtiers in their collapsing palace, teaching them a lesson in not condemning Jews. On a metaphorical level, this is a message for the need for revival of the nation and the rearrangement of its values. (Barzilai 2016, 22) The golem follows instructions and comes alive/becomes inanimate by the power of an amulet that Rabbi Loew inserts in his chest; but like a human, he develops responsiveness to human interaction. An example can be found in a scene where the rabbi takes him to the emperor and the golem receives a flower from one of the ladies in attendance. Another one is depicted in the final scene, which is at the same time the end of the golem's service and life. After getting out of the ghetto by breaking its gate, he sees little girls playing outside of it. When they see him, they all run away, except one. He takes the child into his arms. Out of curiosity, she pulls out the amulet and the golem goes unconscious peacefully, as a hero. Then we see all the children sitting on him and playing with flowers as though it were his funeral. Wegener also evokes our sympathy towards him by showing him in everyday situations, such as during woodcutting, or buying groceries in the local store.

Figure 2- The golem comes to life (Wegener and Boese 1920)

The golem saves the people's lives once, but then it turns against the rabbi and the community. In its character and fate, the golem is very similar to Frankenstein's creature, but there is a significant difference in how people approach the creature's maker. In The Golem, the community expects the rabbi to stop the creature that has gone rogue. Whereas in Frankenstein, the people chase away the monster as their enemy, and after he dies in flames, the world seems to go on as though nothing had happened and nobody holds Frankenstein responsible.

The golem, as we meet him in the movie, is a male warrior from a Jewish tale, always bound to Jewish culture. In the twentieth century, however, the figure received another dimension: the embodiment of the advancing technology that includes weaponry. The golem, therefore, can be seen as the very metaphor of a war-machine that can be easily re-created and multiplied, even refined, but over which total control is not possible. (Barzilai 2016, 11) Therefore, it possesses the power to destroy the world. The death of the golem refers to the defeat of war and purposeless violence, but gives flashes of hope for a possible reanimation as happens in the film, when children, the symbol of innocence and peace, take over the golem and play with their flowers.

Although the imagery of the setting is different than that depicted in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, its principles have affinities. The somewhat unrealistic, mock-up-like design seems to take away the weight of the houses and streets and the walls of inner spaces are tilted and curved, underlining the tension of the narrative.

## The "Maschinenmensch"[2]

When Fritz Lang first visited New York, he was awestruck by the sight of the giant skyscrapers as seen from the harbor. The imagery of *Metropolis* (1927) was born from the question: how would a city like this look like in a hundred years? The movie's powerful visual design this time does not rely on Expressionist imagery; instead, it was influenced by Futurist architecture, mediating momentum, forwardness, a powerful and somewhat aggressive vision of machinery of the European avant-garde through cinema.

Figure 3 – The pseudo-Maria of *Metropolis* (Lang 1927)

The society in the film is divided into a working class and an upper class. The former works literally underground, operating giant machines night and day, while the upper class lives in the skyscrapers, and the two classes have very little knowledge of each other.

A robot, created by inventor Rotwang, stands at the center of the story. It is a "Maschinenmensch" (a mechanic human, Caligari: Wie der Horror ins Kino kam 2014) which relates to today's robotics. It is meant to be used to serve both upper-class and personal interests, designed to carry out evil deeds either way. Modelling his creation on Maria, a young heroine of the underground world, the inventor uses her to take revenge on the head of the city, while the head of the city wants to undermine Maria's reputation amongst the workers with her look-alike.

The fake Maria's "humanness", therefore, is confined to its outward appearance. Since the term "robot" was coined by Czech writer Karel Čapek in 1920, only a few years before the movie was made, people were thinking about robots as "big, boxy, vaguely human contraptions, clomping around like ambulatory refrigerators". (Beckerman 2017) As film historian Dennis Doros says, "Robots, previous to this, had always been mechanical, they'd always been nuts and bolts. This robot is sexy, alluring. That had never been considered before. She has curves." (Beckerman 2017)

The pseudo-Maria stirs up deep discontent by calling the working-class people "Living food for the machines in Metropolis" (Metropolis 1927) and convinces them to destroy their central machine, which causes the city to be flooded. She deceives the people with her human-likeness on the outside but her movements and facial expressions are angular, mechanized, and emotionless, completing her bold talking and acting. In contrast to the golem or Frankenstein's creature, the fake Maria never shows human emotions, embodying a complete contrast to the real Maria. Separating the robot from its living double, it wears strong makeup and daring dress in, for example, the famous dancing scene. Concentrating on close-ups on the fake Maria's face during talking to the crowd (her eyes wide open, with excessive facial mimic), Lang creates a metaphor of insanity. Often cutting to the faces of the audience showing their growing discontent, the frames depict the political struggles of Weimar Germany that slowly was on its way to the next World War. Extending these struggles, these pictures, also show how easily manipulatable we all are. The pseudo-Maria is, therefore a mirror of society which, as Fritz Lang argues, has lost its humanity by fading into the machinery they work for. Another reference to Germany is the set of the laborers' working environment, that was built after photographs that were taken in concentration camps. (Nochimson 2010, 123).

## American Cinema

The Golem: How He Came into the World was first screened in Hollywood in the fall of 1921 and generated a "golem cult" (Barzilai 2016, 105), leading

to several movies and theater performances on the topic.[3] American films made after The Golem explore contemporary issues of society, such as the phenomena of migration of the Jewish population in the United States or the issue of anti-Semitic violence against them.

The fruitful interaction in the 1920s and 30s between Hollywood and German cinema relied on two phenomena. From the mid-twenties on, German films, on one hand became immensely popular in Hollywood and German film production on the other, wanted to be very much like Hollywood. (Caligari: Wie der Horror ins Kino kam 2014) Influences of German pictures can be seen in James Whale's Frankenstein, which heavily borrowed the concept of *The Golem*'s character. Also the imagery of Rotwang's "mad scientist's lab" with the cracking-dazzling apparatus, circulating electricity, flasks and bulbs became an influence for Whale and many other filmmakers.

A difference, however, lies in the narrative of Frankenstein and their German influences: if we think about The Golem and Metropolis, we can see that not only the creature and the monster, but also the community has an important role in the films. As *Metropolis* is built upon the idea of the divide between the working class and the upper class, so too *The Golem* builds upon the idea of the sixteenth-century Jewish community in Prague as a reflection of the German state of society. Frankenstein also shows different layers, but the story is much more about Frankenstein, the inventor: his fears, his dilemmas, his dedication to science. German Expressionist cinema reflected on post-war experiences and the state of national spirit, and American cinema, with Frankenstein, has personalized this national trauma.[4]

## The Monster

*Frankenstein*, nevertheless, draws from the genetic fantasy of its time. Although very little was incorporated into films or any other art form, fantasy about genetics were present and popular in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s. The general public considered it a subject that everybody, including artists, had the right to have access to. (Fenyvesi 2020). The public's attitude can be perceived in the narrative of the film as well: Frankenstein's experiment launches as a two-man project with his impaired servant, when his friend, his sweetheart Elizabeth, and his old professor discover his secret. Before bringing him to life, Frankenstein show the lifeless body of the monster to all of them. In another scene, the men of the village set on chasing the monster in order to destroy him.

Leslie Fiedler states, that

> If monsters project any experience of the self, it is of that self dissolving in the depts of a nightmare or a particularly bad 'trip'. They evoke in us chiefly fear and loathing, which we may, indeed, need as therapy or askesis, but from which we gladly awake. (Fiedler 1978, 23)

Henry Frankenstein was inspired by curiosity and greed of power upon nature that lead him to create a flesh-and-blood being out of the fusion of body parts of different people. Balancing on the margin of artificial existence, the monster is a fusion of the living and the dead, human and man-made. What Frankenstein has created, with the words of Fiedler, is a nameless metahuman (Fiedler 1978, 22) which by accident was equipped with the brain of a criminal. Dr. Frankenstein consequently calls the monster an "it", instead of "him", which would indicate that Frankenstein does not consider him as a human, but rather as an object. However, the idea of killing the monster after it finishes off his servant also horrifies him. "It's murder" he says, proving that he is also not quite sure how to think about his own creature. This is perhaps his first move since the beginning of the film which is not fueled by his superiority and dominating nature, but empathy, as he also seems to recognize his own responsibility towards the monster. This compassion evaporates quickly when Frankenstein joins local people to hunt down the creature after it kills the daughter of a man while he is away at the festival – and no one ever raises the question of the scientist's responsibility, nor that of anybody else.

Figure 4 – Frankenstein shows the monster to his guests (Whale 1931)

As has been mentioned before, elements of Frankenstein were taken from the movie The Golem. First of all, is the character of the monster and the sympathy we may feel towards him. Frankenstein's creature seems innocent, almost child-like as he is afraid of fire or enjoys a game on the bank of the river. In the latter scene, facial expressions make his awakening sense of beauty visible – a definite sign of being human. Throwing the girl into the lake is not the sign of brutality as the community thinks, but his own logic and the increasing excitement in the play. They threw flowers as "boats" in the river, and the monster thinks that Maria also can float like a flower. His logic is not different than that of any other human being, his sense of destruction comes from getting the criminal's brain and being punished with fire. Like an abused child, his mind was distorted even before his growing awareness of good and bad deeds. This scene is one proof that, as the golem, he has the ability to develop human qualities which narrows the gap between being artificial and human. Also, after he was brought to life,

he could perform only basic instructions: sitting down or getting up. The murders he commits later prove the awakening of his own will.

Not only his character, but the imagery of the film is similar to its forerunner. Let us look at the scene from The Golem in which Rabbi Loew first brings the clay figure to life. There are the three of them in the frame: the golem standing, the rabbi, and his assistant. The latter observes the scene quietly as the monster takes his first step on his master's command. Frankenstein's monster is lying on an operating table when he produces the first sign of consciousness, surrounded by the scientist and his hunchback assistant, too. Frankenstein then raises his shaking hands in the air and gives the triumphant shout "It's alive!" Then, his friend and old professor need to apprehend him as a reaction to his demented behavior. In this context, Frankenstein himself turns into the monster, such as Caligari turns into the tyrant, and Rabbi Loew becomes the actual hero (and these are all implied by the similar composition of the frame).

## Conclusion

Films of the Weimar Republic of Germany and American Horror do not use "classic" forms of violence in order to reflect terror; therefore, we do not see guns, shootings, fights, or war material, but instead, we see a transformed reality through transformed creatures and imagery (Nochimson 2010, 11).

For the German Expressionist pictures, the non-human became the depiction of terror that reflects on the horror and shock of the war. In the US, German influences are embodied in *Frankenstein*, although it reflects on genetics, which was accessible to the wider public. Although the narrative of each film presents different messages, the idea of the non-human results in an unstoppable danger that can easily get beyond our control. The tyrant, the golem, the "Maschinenmensch" and the monster are all short-lived beings, victims of the fatal failure of their creators.

I have started my analysis with Leslie Fiedler's statement, saying that monsters are intriguing for us because we look at them as mirrors of ourselves. I would add that the cultural fantasy of non-human creatures is an attempt to exceed our natural boundaries, theoretically as much as practically and the depiction of them is a surviving strategy to understand what is going on around us. Another possible way to interpret the case of the somnambulist, the golem, the machine, and the monster is that we are the scientists and the non-human creatures we create are the proof of our curiosity, lust for power, evil minds, fear, rage, and sense of destruction. Just as our effort to live in peace is a demonstration on the films' happy ending, for instance, Lang concludes at the end of *Metropolis*: "The mediator between the head and the hands must be the heart".

## Endnotes

[1] *The Golem: How He Came into the World* is the third piece of Paul Wegener's series about the story of the Golem. The first one was called *The Golem* (released 1915) that was followed by *The Golem and the Dancing Girl* (1917). Both are claimed to have been lost. Today, a third film made in 1920 is falsely called *The Golem*.

[2] The reason I decided not translate "Maschinenmensch" (in some places of the movie appearing as "Maschinen-Mensch) is the imperfect equivalent of the English "machine-man". "Maschinenmensch", correctly translated is rather a "mechanical human" that underpins the appearance with human characteristics. Furthermore, I find the original more expressive.

[3] Examples would be H. Leivick's "Dramatic poem in eight scenes" called The Golem from 1921 or Der Goylem: Muzikalisher legende in dray akten mit a prolog ("The Golem: Musical Legend in three acts with a prologue") written by Max Gabel in the same year.

[4] The phenomenon of "personalizing" a national trauma also appears later in American film history: Italian Neo-Realism was born in the 1940s as an effort to process the terror of the Second World War. About the same time, American film noir took the characters and the synthesis of their Italian forerunners and formed personal stories out of them.

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