



# From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film

*Siegfried Kracauer , Leonardo Quaresima (Editor)*

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A landmark, now classic, study of the rich cinematic history of the Weimar Republic, *From Caligari to Hitler* was first published by Princeton University Press in 1947. Siegfried Kracauer--a prominent German film critic and member of Walter Benjamin's and Theodor Adorno's intellectual circle--broke new ground in exploring the connections between film aesthetics, the prevailing psychological state of Germans in the Weimar era, and the evolving social and political reality of the time. Kracauer's pioneering book, which examines German history from 1921 to 1933 in light of such movies as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, *M*, *Metropolis*, and *The Blue Angel*, has never gone out of print. Now, over half a century after its first appearance, this beautifully designed and entirely new edition reintroduces Kracauer for the twenty-first century. Film scholar Leonardo Quaresima places Kracauer in context in a critical introduction, and updates the book further with a new bibliography, index, and list of inaccuracies that crept into the first edition. This volume is a must-have for the film historian, film theorist, or cinema enthusiast.

In *From Caligari to Hitler*, Siegfried Kracauer made a startling (and still controversial) claim: films as a popular art provide insight into the unconscious motivations and fantasies of a nation. In films of the 1920s, he traced recurring visual and narrative tropes that expressed, he argued, a fear of chaos and a desire for order, even at the price of authoritarian rule. The book has become an undisputed classic of film historiography, laying the foundations for the serious study of film.

Kracauer was an important film critic in Weimar Germany. A Jew, he escaped the rise of Nazism, fleeing to Paris in 1933. Later, in anguish after Benjamin's suicide, he made his way to New York, where he remained until his death in 1966. He wrote *From Caligari to Hitler* while working as a "special assistant" to the curator of the Museum of Modern Art's film division. He was also on the editorial board of Bollingen Series. Despite many critiques of its attempt to link movies to historical outcomes, *From Caligari to Hitler* remains Kracauer's best-known and most influential book, and a seminal work in the study of film. Princeton published a revised edition of his *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* in 1997.

## From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film Details

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# From Reader Review From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film for online ebook

## Dara Salley says

I almost had to buy this book on Amazon. There was no copy to be found in the entire greater Columbia, SC library system. I didn't particularly want to own this book, and luckily my boyfriend was able to obtain a copy from a small satellite branch of USC. When I finally received the musty book there was a card glued to the back, listing all the dates when it had been checked out. The book was checked out less than a dozen times since it was purchased by USC Beaufort in 1972. My checkout date was scrawled at the bottom of the list (7/14) and the entry before that was from 3/95. I tried to imagine this lonely book sitting on the shelf for almost two decades. When it was last checked out I was in elementary school and knew nothing of the joys of German expressionism and silent film. I grew up, graduated elementary school and high school, got a B.S. in chemistry, moved to New York, got a master's degree and moved to South Carolina where I was finally able to rendezvous with this book. All while it waited patiently in Beaufort.

My point is that this doesn't seem to be a very popular book, despite the fact that Rodger Ebert described it as, "one of the most well-known books about movies ever written". The magic of Netflix streaming has allowed me to gain a newfound interest in silent movies. After watching a dozen or so, I quickly realized that many of the best silent movies were made in Germany (Metropolis, The Last Laugh etc.). That struck me as odd because nowadays, Germany is not known for its film industry. It seemed likely to me that some sort of serendipity occurred in Germany in the 10's, 20's and 30's that lead to the creation of masterpieces. This period is also an interesting moment in German history; the rebuilding of the economy after WWI, the rise of socialism and Hitler. I was intrigued and wanted to know more.

Stephen Kracauer's book can be easily summarized in one word, "paralyzed". He uses that word several dozen times in each chapter. It refers to the confusion of the German public after WWI and their unwillingness to extend their emotional and intellectual boundaries. Kracauer explains in detail how popular movies produced during this era exposed the immaturity of the German people during this period. Many German silent movies show the folly of rebellion, with the rebellious hero either returning, cowed, to his mother's embrace or learning the value of authority. Other movies show the nascent growth of the use of film as a means of propaganda, a skill that reached fruition during WWII. Anyone can use hindsight to find the seeds of Nazism in pre-war German culture, but Kracauer has a unique perspective because he was a German film critic since the 1910's. He is able to refer back to his past writings, and those of his fellow critics, and discern the authoritarian yearnings in mass entertainment.

I can't imagine that this book would be interesting for someone unfamiliar with silent movies. I'm very interested in its subject matter and I still found it a chore to get through. It reads like a thesis, with lots of repetition and conjecture. However, if you're looking for a book that will give you a deeper understanding of German silent film, this is it. Hopefully this book won't have to wait another twenty years to be checked out again.

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## Christopher says

This is an incredibly dense survey of the trends in German cinema from its inception through the rise of Hitler. Written by Siegfried Kracauer, a cultural critic in Germany at the very time he describes, the book is

rich in detail and insight into the development of Expressionism and what came after. Kracauer, himself Jewish, fled Germany at the birth of the Nazi regime, eventually settling in the United States, where *From Caligari to Hitler* was published in 1947.

As a work of cinematic history, there is a plenty to recommend it, but many of Kracauer's analyses into the aesthetic merits (or lack thereof) of the various films grow tiresome. It's not his fault that the passage of time since the original writing has rendered insignificant many of the movies he considered important, or raised the artistic value of films he dismisses, but such developments make it harder for a modern reader to navigate the intricacies of Kracauer's text. One thing that remains impressive, however, is Kracauer's command of English (not his native tongue), which, though sometimes dry and brittle, does not feel awkward. So it's a mixed bag, but an important read for students of early German cinema.

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### **Javier Avilés says**

Interesante. Aunque pueda parecer que un análisis a posteriori puede enfocarse para que demuestre el resultado que ya conocemos, no es menos cierto que, al menos las grandes películas alemanas de la época que conozco, lo que propone Kracauer no es descabellado.

Y sirve también para repasar el cine de esos "tiempos interesantes" (ironía)

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### **Nico Battersby says**

Fascinating for fans of film history. Apply some analysis to your own countries films - you'll be amazed

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### **kate says**

Surprisingly humorous for a book about German culture.

The period of crises after world war one, through reparations into the reign of the nazis, is especially tumultuous. the films made pierce the germanic psyche in the depths of its disarray.

I have discovered that studying film provides a far more complex and layered history than straightforward political history books, which I am enjoying a great deal.

Most of the films discussed are free online, so I spent autumn lost in a self-designed german expressionism film course.

Life frighteningly does imitate art. The author slowly reveals the hitler foretold on the screen, just as italian cinema invented il duce, while discussing some of the greatest films ever made, including: metropolis, the cabinet of dr caligari and Nosferatu.

A terrifying excerpt describing the plot of the film *'The Captain of Kopenick'* (1931):

*"In his despair, the ingenious cobbler finally decides to capitalize on the spell any officer's uniform casts over German soldiers and civilians alike. He buys a worn-out uniform and dons it in a*

*men's room from which he emerges as a demigod.*

*His disguise is more than transparent; but who would dare to scrutinize a magic phenomenon?*

*The self-appointed captain marches two squads of soldiers whom he meets on the street to the town hall of Kopenick, arrests the dazed top officials "by order of his Majesty," without encountering the slightest doubt of his right to do so, and then asks for the passport office, the real objective of his military expedition."*

Even more terrifying: dialogue and plot from the same pre-hitler film:

*"Friedrich is a town clerk imbued with pride of the fatherland, the army, the Kaiser. He considers ill luck what the other resents as a flagrant injustice. Their discussion develops into a clash of two concepts of authority, and as Voigt freely voices his exasperation, Friedrich retorts:*

*I refuse, and I am not even allowed to listen to you. We are governed by justice. And when you are crushed, you just have to submit to it. You have to keep quiet. Then you will still belong to us."*

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## **Ryan says**

a pretty fascinating look at the flow between art and culture. it's a little more of a "chicken and the egg" relationship than the book wants to admit - it basically takes the stance that germany's weimar cinema paved the psychological road for hitler's rise to power - but the bottom line is that it is one of the first serious discussions of films power over political and cultural zeitgeist. just because it's popular entertainment doesn't mean it won't influence the way we think, people.

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## **Printable Tire says**

I spent a great amount of time with Siegfried Kracauer over the last semester in a class I took on Weimar Cinema: along with this book, I also read a significant amount of his Weimar-era essays collected in the Mass Ornament. Of the books I read last semester, Caligari to Hitler was my favorite. Apart from being a good writer capable of beautiful phrases and stylistic flourishes, I find Kracauer to be an interesting, though tragic, figure. Schooled as an architect, he wrote intellectual pieces for German newspapers during the 20's, and was one of the first to take the ephemera of modern life (movies, hotel lobbies, can-can girls) as serious subjects worthy of observation. To say he thought them worthy of observation is not to say he thought them of worth; but just as someone today might analyze reality television, selfies, or tumblr, he was one of the first (at least in Germany) to see popular activities as a mirror of the populace itself. Today one can major in media studies if one chooses, but I find it interesting that the birth of this field of intellectual study began in newspapers, which could in theory be read by anyone capable of reading, making them arguably more relevant and "humane" than any such studies now, which are segregated to the enjoyment of a select

intellectual circle and often laden with snobbish cynicism and a heritage of endless jargon.

It is then interesting that being one of the Godfathers of media theory, Kracauer was in some ways a self-made intellectual, inventing some of the jargon of theory out of whole cloth. With no history in the field to fall back to, his observations are more personal and “solution” based: whereas now one may observe media without a grandiose claim for relevance, Kracauer was always looking for the Answer of Big Questions. For example, his essays in the *Mass Ornament* seem to show him attempting to find for the modern age an Answer: no longer satisfied by the sanctity of church and alienated by the fleeting inhumanity of the hotel lobby, he never did find an Answer for How to Be in the modern age, and perhaps there is none. Nonetheless, I would propose one answer Kracauer, with his genuine German earnestness and seriousness, could never accept: to live in the modern age, one must play-act. One must be a part of the church and the lobby, commit to both but never fully to either, for total commitment to either inevitably leads to a fascism of your soul. But Kracauer never seems to have thought of compartmentalizing, of adopting multiple identities for multiple roles. His way of thinking is too serious, and he sees no redemption through levity.

*Caligari to Hitler* was attempted years after the Third Reich had fallen, after Kracauer had forgone any versatility in his observations and had become more rigid in his judgments. Before the Nazis had irrevocably conquered the hearts and minds of Germany but were quickly rising to such power, Kracauer had been offered jobs at leftist newspapers but had turned them down, perhaps believing, in vain, in the power of public debate over preaching to a complicit audience. Perhaps like other intellectuals his view of the Nazis at that time was also one of incredulosity, for how could such an obvious conglomeration of buffoons and thugs and schmaltz win the hearts and minds of Germany?

And yet the Nazis soon did conquer Germany's spirit, with schmaltz and platitudes and violence. The same Germany that saw during the Weimar Republic an era of progressive ideas and sexual freedom became willfully conquered by authoritarian rule and fascistic ideology. And Kracauer had seen his friends murdered, and been forced to exile himself to America.

*Caligari to Hitler* was then his attempt, after the war had ended and with funds procured by the US government, to discover why the Third Reich had happened. He had found no answers to the modern age in the Weimar Era, but perhaps he could find why they had not been found, or rather why the final answer had become the Final Solution.

The flaws of such an approach are expressed very well by Leonardo Quaresima in his introduction when he describes it as “history [being] read backwards and forced to follow its own footsteps.” *Caligari to Hitler* is an exhaustive survey of most of the films produced by Germany in the Weimar Period, with an emphasis on the plots of the ones Kracauer (sometimes inaccurately) remembers, or has interviewed people about, or has access to (films being not as accessible as they are now, and some lost to time). His perspective is often cycloptic, for he reads into everything a subconscious premonition of fascism. His perspective is then itself fascist, as he can no longer read any ambiguity into anything. At best, he comes off as obsessive, at worse, a conspiracy theorist. In his mind, no film did enough, no progressive movement pushed hard enough at another Answer to oppose the Nazi's Solution. He gives the devil his due, and often seems to admire the Nazi film's ability to cunningly ape the style of its predecessors, to force its will through emotional manipulation on its audience. He wished leftist films had the same strength, but does not seem to grasp if they did they would not be good films, and in their own way fascist. He seems to want the impossible in films, some ideal cinematic progressive propaganda vision, and sees the lack of this vision, be it through popular and sentimental or artistic and ambiguous films, to be complicit with the rise of fascism. And yet it seems to me (and perhaps this is reading in too much) that by saying the left never did enough to offer an option beyond fascism he is also saying, “I did not do enough to offer a solution beyond fascism. And yet

there must have been a solution. There must have been another solution, and I will find it if I search.”

But alas no solution is found, except for the false one of reading everything as a precedent to evil. Nonetheless, Kracauer’s surveys are always interesting, and his analysis of the use of maps in Nazi films is something I’ve never thought of before. Interestingly, he seems to be especially critical of youth films because the Nazis were particularly adept at influencing their disciples when they were young and in need of direction and discipline.

Perhaps *Caligari to Hitler* is in its own way a warning tale against a sort of humane, personal approach to media analysis, the kind replaced since the 70’s by an often detached, ambiguous, politically-oriented one. Kracauer is certainly a snob, and in many ways elitist, but he seemed generally convinced he could find the solution to modernity’s biggest questions through an analysis of movies, through finding the Perfect Movie. The fact that his quest is ultimately fruitless and desperate makes one believe that such an approach can only lead inevitably to heartbreak.

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## **James F says**

This is the classic study of the early German cinema. The book is organized more or less chronologically, divided into four sections, "The Archaic Period, 1895-1918" on the earliest silent films before and during World War I, "The Postwar Period, 1918-1924", "The Stabilized Period, 1925-1928", and "The Pre-Hitler Period, 1929-1933", which is also the period of the earliest sound films. Most of the important films, or at least those which the average person with an interest in cinematic history will have seen or heard of, are covered, though with differing degrees of emphasis. The expanded 2004 edition also contains an epilog on the Nazi propaganda films of World War II.

The critical introduction by the modern editor, Leonardo Quaresima, should probably be read after the book itself; it gives the false impression that the book will be very academic and require a familiarity with the Frankfurt School and various other authors who are influences on Kracauer. In fact, his account is quite straightforward and self-contained, and whatever German historical background is needed to understand it is included in the text -- it was, after all, written for an American audience.

This is not to say that the book is simply a description of the films; Kracauer, writing during the Second World War, was attempting to use the films as raw material for understanding the psychological conditions for the rise of Hitler. For example, he makes the interesting point that in the immediate postwar period, after the unsuccessful Revolution of 1919, the German middle class, unhappy with the lack of real freedom in the Weimar Republic but afraid that any resistance would lead to their losing their political and economic position to the socialists, avoided any real analysis of their historical situation but projected their feelings of oppression into the supernatural, with a vogue of horror films such as *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* and *Nosferatu*. (Parallels with the current vampire craze, anyone?) His psychological analyses of the general tendencies I found quite convincing, but like most authors with a general thesis he pushes it too far and applies it to immediately in analyzing specific films.

Anyone with an interest in the early cinema needs to read this book, if only because every other book on the subject takes it as the starting point, whether they follow his thesis or polemicize against it.

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## **Jennifer says**

A classic in German film studies. How early German film mirrored the pre-Hitler German subconscious.

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## **Kronen says**

This is an interesting piece of work for anyone who is interested in the German cinema in between the 2 world wars. The point of view of Krakauer, who tries to find the prodromes of what will be the political changes in the cinematographic production, might sound aprioristic, however the work is still fascinating and is a must have to every enthusiast of the silent era. Many movies are being analyzed in what it has been "the golden era of German cinema".

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## **jade says**

aaargghghh. i used this book for a research paper about Murnau's Nosferatu, and boy howdy was it frustrating. the "procession of tyrants" argument is half-baked at best. he theorizes that you can watch the rise of fascism through Murnau/Lang/forgot the other director off top of my head, and he tries to look back, but the whole idea feels cherry-picked for evidence. (i think i sort of agreed with him while i was reading and writing, but now i'm re-reading and feel rather iffy on the whole thing.) the heavy psychoanalytic angle is where he derails: i think it's clear he wrote this long after having seen some of these films. the bits about UFA are utterly fascinating, as are the insights into the habits of German film audiences. but you can pretty much read Dialectic of Enlightenment, by his buddy Adorno, and get a better argument. good reading for German film enthusiasts/scholars, though.

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## **Tosh says**

A super fascinating subject matter - where culture, (evil) politics, and cinema art all meet up. Siegfried Krakauer is very much like Walter Benjamin, in that he looks at popular culture and writes about it in a new light. Basically what this book is about is Germany from the 20's to the 30's. Kind of scary in its scope and how mass entertainment or art can be reflective of what is happening in the (that) world.

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## **Fernanda says**

Apesar dos pesares, gostei bastante. Como é um livro antigo (1946), tive que relevar algumas coisas. Não tem um bom panorama histórico, fica tudo meio jogado ou pouco explicado, então eu entendi porque tenho base, mas talvez outros não conseguissem muito bem.

Um problema das análises, que, apesar de justo, incomoda, é o fato de serem completamente spoilers. O autor conta os filmes, resumidamente, até o fim. O lado bom é que minha memória é fraca e eu já esqueci a grande maioria dos finais, sendo que muitos acabam em suicídio (uma obsessão alemã do período).

Acho que tem algumas forções de barra, mas que crítica de cinema não tem? O apêndice explicando as questões da propaganda e do Triunfo da Vontade, paralelo a outros dois filmes, foi especialmente interessante.

O ponto mais positivo foi que, além de conseguir encaixar todos esses filmes num contexto histórico concreto, que envolve não só a psicologia em si como fatos que ocorreram (Primeira Guerra Mundial, Quebra da Bolsa, República de Weimar, etc), deu pra conhecer alguns bons títulos do cinema alemão.

E fiquei espantada pelo pouco caso que ele fez de A Caixa de Pandora e a indiferença em relação a Metrópolis.

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### **Mikey says**

Kracauer's treatise on that most influential of German Expressionist films is very well-known in film circles and is an interesting read, but it doesn't hold up to today's scrutiny and should really only be read for historical purposes. His central thesis, that *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* was a reflection of the changing social mindset of post-World War I Germany and predicted the rise of Nazism, is not only far-fetched, but it's not well fleshed out. He doesn't address nearly enough German films to establish the German social mindset of the time, and it's clear that he hasn't seen *Caligari* in a while. Maybe we can forgive him this, because this was before the DVD (or even VHS) era, but it makes the book a real anachronism.

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### **Julia says**

After reading many books by Kracauer's fellow essayist Walter Benjamin, I was expecting a very heavy book on the history of German cinema. This book was all that and more! Where Benjamin can sometimes wonder off topic, Kracauer is focused on linking his analysis of German cinema to the rise of the Third Reich. The content is heavy without being dense or getting too dry. It was truly an engrossing read in both its content and historical context (being published near the end of the second world war). Make sure you have a subscription to a good video streaming service such as FilmStruck so you can watch the films Kracauer describes. Also, in the beginning, Kracauser rushes over what he calls "the archaic period" of German cinema from 1895-1918, it could be possible that there was not much research at that time, but if you are interested in German films from that time period than I recommend Film 1900: Technology, Perception, Culture, which is an English translation of a German study on early cinema. I also wrote a review for that title as well.

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