THE POETICS OF ANIMISM
Realism and the fantastic in expressionist literature and film

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No-one doubts that the genuine thing cannot be that which appears as external reality. Reality must be created by us.

(Edschmid 1918: 369; my translation)

I. Introduction

Although the expressionist movement flourished only briefly, during the turbulent decade of 1910 to 1920, it dominated German modernism and produced the most radical and wide-ranging impulses in literature, art and film. As an avant-garde and experimental movement it was concerned with undermining inherited forms of realism. Yet many key works of expressionism nonetheless depend for their effectiveness upon maintaining a tension between realism on the one hand, and the alternatives to realism, particularly the mode of the fantastic and its dreamlike situations on the other (see Murphy 1999: Chapter 5). Certainly expressionism is often characterized by its unhesitating embrace of certain anti-realistic forms, and by its use for the purposes of abstraction of such strategies as excess, hyperbole, extreme characterization, and extravagant, theatrical gestures. Yet the most remarkable works of expressionism always hold these elements in tension with realism. They frequently create an overarching realist framework that provides the context that constrains such hyperbolic expressionist forms, thus making them all the more powerful. To take one brief example, in “The Metamorphosis,” written in 1912 and one of Kafka’s key texts of the expressionist decade, the absurdity of the situation arises not from the fantastic element, namely the transformation itself, but from the tension between Gregor Samsa’s new situation as a bug and his attempt to continue with his “realistic” and quotidian attitudes, such as his regular, everyday behavior, and all the usual concerns associated with his workaday world, such as his anxiety about missing the next train to work. The narrative also proceeds for the most part in a largely sober, restrained and realist fashion in its descriptions of the bourgeois apartment, the family and its undisturbed
routines, even though the image of the insect at its center stands out as entirely fantastical and at odds with the realist context.

In expressionism, a perfect balance between realism and the fantastic is not always present. This is particularly true of cinema: the visual component tends to push towards the real, emphasizing the object-world, and the horizon of the audience’s expectation is often set generically towards approaching film “realistically.” Nevertheless, my argument will be that a good number of the most significant scenes and images in expressionist and Weimar films, such as Metropolis, are in fact not only attributable to the fantastic – corresponding to their expressionist provenance – but are most readily comprehensible via that mode. Within their overarching narratives such fantastic scenes are often unexpected and so are easily overlooked or written off as simple “hallucination” by a straightforward “mimetic” reading of the narrative. This is particularly true of the kind of reading that is geared primarily towards understanding the text in terms of verisimilar representation and towards finding a workable “realistic” orientation within its object-world. I will argue furthermore that an audience familiar with some of the key characteristics of expressionist literature and theatre is more likely to be able simply to accept at face value and to inhabit the endlessly ambiguous and irresolvably enigmatic world associated with the fantastic – which is typical of many expressionist and Weimar films – and to do so without tying down this enigmatic world to the terms of a realist representation. In other words, such an audience is also more likely to be attuned to the kind of reading that suspends “reality-testing,” so to speak, and correspondingly, is more likely to accept such scenes as straightforwardly fantastic even though they are at odds with real world experience.

II. Expressionist projection and abstraction

In expressionist literature and film, the fantastic very often takes the form of a centrifugal projection from the protagonist onto the outside world, so that the “exterior” reality that the subject (and the audience) encounters is a hybrid and subjectivized realm. The common forms of projection here involve a world that does not exist as an observable entity of the kind that might be recorded or represented in an objective fashion, nor an observer who exists discreetly and separately. Instead the world is co-created by the subject. Two forms of projection in particular are significant.

In the first variety, particularly prominent in much early expressionist poetry, the subject experiences the real world of twentieth-century modernity as overwhelming, alienating or threatening, and the poem registers such effects upon the self in terms of deeply subjectivized images of the world. The war poetry of August Stramm for example deploys fragmented lines and aphasic formulations. In the poem “Patrol” this linguistic dissociation helps to evoke the breathless and horrifying experience of being a soldier exploring dangerous enemy territory, in which he expects an attack any moment:
Here, the subject projects his anxieties in anthropomorphic fashion upon an environment in which he fears that death lurks around every corner, so that the glint in a window becomes a treacherous smile, the branches of a tree appear to form murderous hands capable of throttling him, and even the very stones around him appear to harbor a threat.

A second, major aspect of this projective mode in expressionism occurs in texts that transform the entire external world into an extension or correlative of the subject. This similarly takes the form of a projection outwards of the inner fears, anxieties and fundamental concerns of the individual. This feature is particularly prominent in expressionist theatre, where the hero’s desires and anxieties are immediately “realized” by being dramatized in the outside world. For example, in Paul Kornfeld’s The Seduction (“Die Verführung” 1918) the protagonist falls in love with a woman from one moment to the next and without further ado murders his new rival, her fiancé. Similarly in Arnolt Bronnen’s Patricide (“Vatermord” 1915), the son openly desires his own mother, and enacts his extreme oedipal feelings towards the father instantly by murdering him. Walter Hasenclever’s The Son (“Der Sohn” 1914) also dramatizes the perceived oedipal tyranny of the father in a manner which, from a conventional standpoint, is quite unbelievable and unrealistic but which is entirely typical of the expressionists’ strategy of creating hyperbolic and subjectivized images rather than real-life scenarios: the father virtually imprisons his son, and treats him as if he were a young child by placing the 20-year-old under the control of a governess.

This projective structure is typified above all by the so-called expressionist “Ich-drama” (“drama of the self”) and “Stationendrama” (“station drama”). These are largely devoid of conventional realist concerns such as setting, characterization, dramatic tension or linear “plot.” They commonly consist instead of picaresque and frequently dreamlike encounters, with the central figure wandering amongst reflections of his own persona on the path towards an undefined goal of redemption or enlightenment. The “station drama” follows the lead of August Strindberg’s Dream Play (1902) in basing the protagonist’s dreamlike journey on a path analogous to the Stations of the Cross. Prominent examples here are J.M. Becker’s The Last Judgement (“Das letzte Gericht” 1919) and Ernst Toller’s The Transformation (“Die Wandlung” 1919) in which the seemingly independent figures that the protagonist encounters are most readily understood as mere offshoots or correlatives of his own self. The landscape too primarily mirrors psychological impulses or emotional forces emanating from the subject rather than reflecting any substantial aspect of the real world outside. In The Last Judgment for example the hero’s desire to unite and “merge” with his lover is reflected directly in the environment, which at one point is transformed into a symbolic mise-en-scène whose effect is to efface all signs of difference between the hero and heroine: it takes place in the white-on-white infinity of a “snowy landscape” at dusk.
The dizzying events and rapid changes of personnel and scenery in such expressionist dramatic works do not necessarily make sense in terms of logic, causality, or real-life context. They correspond instead to the shifting of psychological and emotional forces within the mind of the protagonist. Yet where the expressionist play dramatizes the world of the subject by embodying his concerns symbolically in other figures and by producing doubles and split selves of this central individual, it succeeds in playing out in external form those internal conflicts that can be construed as being repressed or concealed from the subject himself.

This creation of an expressionist constellation of selfhood and the manner in which it is projected onto the external world has much in common with dreaming and the functioning of the unconscious. Yet it is important to stress that we are not dealing here with a literary attempt to simulate the dream as such. In “The Metamorphosis” the dreamlike aspects of the transformation are always held in tension with realistic detail, as in the case of Gregor Samsa’s understated and thoroughly “bourgeois” attempt to ignore his dilemma and simply catch the next train to work. This tension produces an ambiguity that discourages us from interpreting the narrative merely as a dream. What we are dealing with in such narratives is rather the attempt to draw upon some of the characteristic features and functions of dream as a means of dramatizing the self, and to illuminate the ways in which the self has a particular scope to explore its fears, anxieties and desires within the realms of the dream and the fantastic. In this case, the dreamlike scenario of the insect offers an aesthetic image rather than a logical concept or definition. In other words, it presents a concrete visualization of an abstract psychological issue that would be beyond the grasp of a conventional, rationally-oriented form of representation.

A central tenet of expressionist writers is to abstract what they consider the “essence” of reality, the most typical or vital elements beneath the surface level or sheer appearance of reality. There is a corresponding lack of concern with the superfluous chaff of realism and the real. This process of abstraction is a key element in the programmatic writings by figures associated with the expressionist movement such as Wassily Kandinsky, Wilhelm Worringer, and Kasimir Edschmid. Abstraction is associated with the “visionary” qualities described by Edschmid, and he focuses on the way that the expressionists look beyond the reality in front of them in order to grasp its significance via a more abstract notion beyond. This concentration on the essential often leads firstly to an elliptical and frequently aphasic form of writing – and this applies equally to expressionist prose, dramatic speech and, as we saw with Stramm’s “Patrol,” poetry too – characterized by syntactical foreshortening, linguistic reduction, the omission of articles and the bunching of single-line images or nouns, as in the so-called “telegram style” of writing. Secondly this tendency is also responsible for the expressionist predilection for visionary proclamations and extravagant gestures, often conveyed via hyperbolic forms such as caricature and melodrama. In emphasizing the visionary, the expressionists correspondingly demonstrate a disregard for lifelike detail or the depiction of the fallen world of facticity. As Edschmid says, the expressionists “did not look. . . .They did not photograph. They had visions.” With this anti-realistic focus expressionists attempt not to imitate but to pressurize the real into revealing the world of essence beyond. For in expressionism, Edschmid
maintains, “everything takes on a connection to eternity,” so that rather than simply seeing “the sick man who suffers,” in the vision of the expressionist the sick man “becomes sickness itself” (1918: 363; my translation).

III. Expressionist dream poetics and metaphorization

In expressionist literature and, I would argue, in much of expressionist cinema, the tendency towards abstraction replaces the kind of narrative discourse that is built upon rationality and intellectual scrutiny and produces instead discourse typified by dense images and dreamlike metaphors. This creates that expressionist textual characteristic of a sheer accumulation or aggregation of individual impressions, images and tableaux that always take priority over any linear progression of the narrative. In many respects the works of Franz Kafka serve as paradigm for all expressionism in this regard, for it was Kafka who thought of his literature as the representation of his “dreamlike inner self,” and that his fantasies produced “whole orchestras of associations” (Kafka 1983: 387). I would argue that this latter effect is related to the oneiric density of Kafka's writing, with its indeterminacy, multiple meanings, and endlessly suggestive yet always understated associative quality – the characteristic of his prose that seems constantly to highlight its own need for interpretation. But it is above all its “metaphorization,” its creation of a narrative based upon the elaboration and extension of a single, often dreamlike figurative image, which makes Kafka's method essential to the particular form of abstraction that I want to elaborate upon here.

As we have seen, in the expressionist text the focus on the concerns of the central subject often operates according to what we might term a “poetics of animism.” This produces in the text an animistic universe, again similar to the dream, in which the world is centred on the key figure and in which all the other figures as well as the environment function as mere reflections of this subject. This animistic “dramatization of subjectivity” (Murphy 1999: 148–50) means that even though this environment appears to operate autonomously the narrative structure is deeply subjective since the text externalizes the subject’s inner concerns. In this regard it is crucial to bear in mind that with this animistic structure the expressionist text has suppressed the vital distinction between subject and object. For the meaningfulness of the narrative world and its metaphorical or symbolic density largely derives from its significance for the central figure. As the case of Kafka's writing illustrates most clearly, any overriding context that would allow the reader to make sense of the metaphorization “objectively” is simply not given, and any more determinate material or potentially illuminating clues as to its significance remain within the limits of the protagonist's private sphere. Consequently all those unlikely events in Kafka's works (such as a man being arrested out of the blue for unspecified and merely existential crimes, or a captured ape learning to speak) are presented in a way that treats them as simply objective and taken for granted. As a consequence of the blurring of the subject/object boundary, such events are not questioned, not “reality-tested,” and so come about in that inexplicable and dreamlike fashion that is characteristic of the fantastic mode in expressionism.
The method of metaphorization is again deeply intertwined here with the key expressionist notion of "abstraction." The goal for the expressionists is always to abstract the essence of the situation or of the character and push this element into the foreground, disregarding any concerns for realistic representation or real-life context. As Walter Sokel has demonstrated in examining the "extended metaphor" which underlies "The Metamorphosis," it is by these means that Kafka abstracts the essence of the main character Gregor Samsa, and makes him identical with his wish "for irresponsibility and parasitic withdrawal from an active and mature way of life" (Sokel 1959: 46). In the figure of the bug, Gregor Samsa is "transformed into a metaphor that states his essential self, and this metaphor in turn is treated like an actual fact." Clearly the process of abstraction that condenses the character and his fundamental situation into a metaphor for the crisis affecting his identity produces a very different effect from any straightforward attempt at expressing this through a conventionally logical and verbalized form. For the metaphor is deeply ambiguous, and like a dream, it has the dual function of both expressing and simultaneously disguising meaning. The dramatic metaphorization of subjectivity is also more than a simple symbolic abstraction of the character's identity, and rather than simply producing any direct and clear-cut explanation for Samsa's existence, this central ambiguous image serves to guide and structure the entire narrative.

The image of the bug then is primarily metaphorical, a conceptual figure which serves as an external correlative for Gregor Samsa's interior world. Yet it is handled as if it were a real-life entity rather than a mere abstraction, as Sokel has demonstrated (1959: 47). Corresponding to the expressionist practice of animism, all those extreme thoughts, unspeakable desires and nightmare anxieties that are normally confined to the interior world are instantly dramatized externally and emerge full-blown within the real world. It is not just that Gregor Samsa's pitiful situation leads him to think of himself as a bug, but that this private self-perception is fantastically transformed into an exterior reality, so that the internal imagining emerges in the outside world as observable fact to which all the other characters must respond. The fantastic provenance of the bug-metaphor continues to be emphasized by the fact that the text furnishes us with certain concrete descriptions pertaining to the reality of the insect body, such as Gregor's "hard, shell-like back," or "curved brown belly" (Kafka 1992: 76–7). Yet besides such occasional indications, the reader is largely left to his or her own devices to produce a mental image of the fantastic creature that fits the otherwise realistic parameters of the story. With no specific details we are forced for example to imagine or calculate the size of Gregor Samsa: surely the insect must be large enough to reach and turn the key in his bedroom door? In which case is he a bug or rather some kind of hybrid as big as a human? The impossibility of thinking together or bringing into alignment these two incompatible notions is precisely what characterizes the relation between the fantastic and the realistic within expressionist narratives. For we must constantly reconcile the being of the insect with Gregor's nature as a considerate and still sensitive human who, even in the midst of his unusual predicament, does not want to trouble his parents by falling out of bed with a crash.
Even in those expressionist texts by Kafka and other writers in which there is much more lifelike detail, the realism is once again always held in tension with the fantastic. In Kafka’s short story, “In the Penal Colony” (1916), the description of the complex punishment-machine is intricate, with detailed explanations of its function (it inscribes the commandment that has been transgressed upon the body of the offender by means of a set of needles), and its mechanical parts (such as the “harrow” and the “bed”). Yet the more complex the description becomes, the more grotesque is the effect of associating the mechanical rigor and logic of the apparatus with the nightmarish and fully absurd uses to which they are put. A similar paradoxical effect associated with realistic detail can also be seen in Alfred Döblin’s “The Murder of a Buttercup” (first published 1910). The text appears at first to be written in a straightforwardly realistic mode, opening with a description of a quotidian setting and an arch-bourgeois protagonist taking a recreational walk in the forest. Yet it soon turns out that the hyper-realistic mode of detailed observation of the protagonist (involving the literary equivalents of cinematic slow-motion and microscopic close-up) as he vents his anger by thrashing at the undergrowth is being used against the grain: the realism is being applied to events which are purely hallucinatory, and as a result the disproportionate detail heightens the absurdity of the character’s unfounded belief in the veracity of his delusions. This disjunction between a precise, almost photographic approach to detail, and the fantastic nature of the events concerned is reflected in expressionist and Weimar cinema, and it is to this paradox that I now turn.

IV. Cinema and the expressionist poetics of animism

So far I have explored the way that expressionist literary texts dramatize subjectivity by projecting an animistic vision from an internal sphere onto an external world. I want now to look at three films which have clear links to expressionism and to its poetics of animism: Robert Wiene’s *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1920), Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927), and Karl Grune’s *The Street* (1923). Of the three, *Caligari* seems at first glance most obviously linked to this animistic structure, with the plot involving an internal frame-narration told by, and centered on the key character, Francis. The hazy and dreamlike world that we encounter in the narrative is not only centered on Francis but constructed primarily on the foremost questions concerning his identity: his desires for Jane, the rivalry he feels towards his friend Alan as a competitor for Jane’s love, and his oedipal anxieties towards the authoritarian Caligari. It is also mixed with a degree of sexual rivalry towards Caligari and is evident to the viewer not least with the erotic undertones of Caligari’s peculiarly exhibitionist approach to Jane in the sideshow tent. Consequently, I would argue that the plot makes sense most obviously if we view it as a dramatization or metaphorical playing out of Francis’s own fragile selfhood.

The protagonist Francis is revealed at the end of the film to be an inmate in an asylum, who is relating his nightmarish story to a fellow patient. At the most obvious level of interpretation, he appears simply to have fabricated the entire story of his persecution by the tyrannical and murderous Caligari and by the somnambulist Cesare.
whom the doctor has brought under his control in order to carry out his crimes as well as to demonstrate the extraordinary reach of his powers: in expressionist terms Caligari is an archetypally omnipotent and manipulative father-figure. From this standpoint Francis appears to have made up his tale – foreshadowing the plot of the American neo-noir film, *The Usual Suspects* (1995) – merely on the basis of the material at hand, drawing upon his surroundings and upon the figures he finds among his fellow inmates in the asylum. Given the other nightmarish dimensions of the scenario, this evokes the regular mechanism of dreaming, which draws for its material strongly upon the contents and characters of the dreamer’s waking life during the previous day. Furthermore, the distorted and pointedly dreamlike setting of the film, with its exaggeratedly skewed architecture, its sharp and angular scenery, and its painted and clearly two-dimensional backdrops, emphasizes simultaneously the constructed nature of the world inhabited by these figures. To this extent it has a self-reflexive effect, and points not only to the fabricated quality of the narrative, but perhaps also to its origin as a projection and as an extension of subjectivity on the part of the protagonist and storyteller Francis.

Yet there are a number of moments in the film that pointedly short-circuit any clear distinction between the inner, framed narrative and the framing narrative that surrounds it. Perhaps the most prominent short-circuiting effects concern the “mad” markings and streaks of paint on the walls of the asylum, which we might initially assume to be a narratorial signpost indicating the insanity of the nightmare scenario told by Francis as an inmate in an asylum. Yet these markings appear on the walls of the asylum not only when Caligari is put in a straitjacket (in Francis’s narrative), but are also prominent when Francis in turn is put into a straitjacket within the supposedly sane world of the outer frame tale. The boundary between the realms of the sane and the insane has been effaced and the subject and object worlds are now clearly interchangeable. Furthermore, if these markings continue to exist in the “normality” of the outer, framing tale, they clearly cannot be taken simply as markers, as indications of the delusions of a madman.

The characteristics linking Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* to the expressionist literary movement have not been explored in great detail by commentators. Yet for anyone familiar with expressionist prose and drama, the protagonist Freder is in many respects a prototypical expressionist son-figure. As in Hasenclever’s expressionist play *The Son* (1914), the younger man here has a seemingly traumatized relationship to his controlling father, Joh Fredersen, the industrialist and master of Metropolis. The depiction of the father as an absolute authority owes much to the perennial expressionist inclination towards hyperbolic imagery and father-obsessions. Fredersen is typically pictured in a godlike position at the very top of the tower of Metropolis, controlling and conducting surveillance upon the city from his own high-tech panopticon. This powerful image of the omnipotent and omniscient master is particularly relevant for the father-son relationship, since Fredersen continuously asserts his control over his son and, besides occasionally eavesdropping on him, also deploys a spy, saying, “I wish to be informed of my son’s every movement.” The oedipal tyranny against which Freder
struggles is also embodied in the familiar expressionist constellation of a psychological doubling of father-figures. For there is not only his actual father, Fredersen, to contend with but also his “almost-father,” the scientist Rotwang, a former rival of Fredersen for the love of Freder’s mother. Freder struggles against the authoritarianism of both father-figures, and the oedipal dimension is demonstrated where he is pictured as troubled by a form of sexual rivalry with them. For example, Freder faints when he finds his beloved Maria apparently embracing his father. The sexual undertones in Rotwang’s attentions towards Maria are also emphasized when he kidnaps her and at one point forces her back upon a table, leaning right over her prostate body; or again when he corners her in the dark catacombs and makes a beam of light from his flashlight play along the length of her body, as if it were a vicarious gaze or a caress.

Also typically expressionist is the attempt to overthrow a sterile, mechanical and inhumane form of society – a society that reflects the key characteristics of these two dominant technocrats, the authoritarian and despotic father-figures. The young Freder also clearly espouses the expressionists’ value of the liberating spirit (“Geist”), associated with that area of expressionism characterized by “vitalism.” He is frequently seen dashing vigorously and purposefully between locations on his higher mission, and this pictorializes the vitalist energy and striving that is central to the narrative. At the same time, Freder embodies a typically expressionist longing for fraternity, notably with his frequent articulation of solidarity towards his brothers and sisters among the exploited lower orders, and particularly, as the recovered footage from the original version of the film now makes clear, with his ploy of exchanging clothes, identities, and lifestyles with one of the anonymous and merely numbered workers.

While the narrative of *Metropolis* does not focus quite so directly upon the characteristic expressionist theme of madness as in *Caligari*, it nonetheless features a large number of passages that are clearly indebted to the related themes of nightmare, fantasy and feverish hallucination. Yet it is significant that many of these passages are presented in the film in such an ambiguous manner that we do not necessarily interpret them in the first instance as hallucinations deriving directly from Freder at all. Early in the film for example Freder witnesses a scene in the machine room when an exhausted worker faints at the controls and allows the pressure in the main machine to build up to a dangerous level. In the explosion that follows, many workers are injured or killed, and Freder appears to be blown against a wall. When the huge machine is then transformed into a carnivorous, sphinx-like monster or “Moloch” devouring the workers, the look on Freder’s face and his gesture of trying to wipe clean the space in front of his eyes suggest that he cannot believe what he sees. Indeed, given such outward expressions of his inner turmoil the viewer might be tempted to ascribe the entire occurrence to a hallucination by Freder, were it not for the fact that the rows of workers marching in synchronized step into the mouth of the monster are already familiar from the film’s opening scene when they marched into the elevator for the “change of shift.” Freder did not witness this, and his particular perspective played no part in its construction or its emergence within the narrative. Yet the “objectivity” of the earlier scene is now merged with the nightmarish and seemingly subjective Moloch-scene,
thereby blurring the distinction between subject and object in a fashion characteristic of the expressionists’ animism.

The subject/object boundary is called into question in similar fashion when Freder, at home in bed recovering from a nervous collapse and, nonetheless, appears to witness the magical scene of the robot Maria’s seductive and mesmerizing dance at the distant Yoshiwara nightclub, a spectacle that we know is witnessed “objectively” by both his father and Rotwang (see Murphy 2007).

There are many scenes throughout the film Metropolis that, while not presented specifically as hallucinations, nonetheless have an exaggerated, not to say “fantastic” quality about them, and we tend as viewers simply to overlook or to accept these, rather than to question them. For example, at the opening of the film, the syncopated and machine-like movements of the workers, whether they are marching in step to their shift or operating the factory machinery in a shared rhythm and choreographed fashion, are entirely “unrealistic” and, more than anything else, the scene forms a hyperbolic image expressing the reification of the workers. Most of all, the peculiar man-sized clock-machines that the workers operate seem to have little to do with any obviously practical productive purposes or technical processes, and from a realistic perspective one would wonder if at this supposed stage of technological progress and automation it is not completely superfluous for a human worker still to have to struggle and manipulate the huge arms of the clock. Again, from this straightforward, realistic perspective the machines are meaningless, unless of course their purpose is primarily to be found at the level of metaphor: to demonstrate the complete reversal of subject and object, and the subjugation of man to machine. Indeed I would argue that, corresponding to the expressionist poetics of animism, these clock-machines function primarily on an abstract level that, as with Kafka’s “Metamorphosis” or “Penal Colony,” establishes an extended metaphor: in this case a nightmare scenario as an image of technology and the way it has become a mode of slavery, capable of torturing reified humanity within its new mechanical organization of human time.

Even in those films of the Weimar period in which the characteristics of expressionism appear much less evident than those features of the realism associated with the “neue Sachlichkeit” (“new sobriety” or “new objectivity”), that artistic movement which began to dominate in the wake of expressionism, I would argue that some of the key moments are nonetheless often still indebted to expressionist imagery, animistic fantasy and the characteristic blurring of the boundary between subject and object. One such pointed moment of the fantastic occurs for example in Karl Grune’s city film The Street (“Die Straße” 1923). In the opening scene we see a couple’s city apartment in which the wife busies herself in the kitchen while the husband lies back upon the sofa looking up at the ceiling and the play of shadows upon it from the streets below. Gradually, however, the random, flickering shadows begin to form into recognizable shapes in which a man approaches a woman, appears to address her briefly, and then saunters off with her. The film narrative leaves it fully ambiguous as to whether the husband actually sees the shadowy reflections of a real encounter below, or simply falls asleep and transforms the shadows in his dreams. But in articulating in external
form his own hidden desire this scene becomes a pivotal moment for the narrative by forming a catalyst for a typically expressionist moment of awakening and escape (“Aufbruch”) – a fantasy of a radical break with the old routines of a humdrum existence for which Georg Kaiser’s story of the errant bank teller in the play “From Mornings to Midnight” (1912) is the prototype. This moment of fantasy motivates the husband’s sudden departure, his abandonment of his wife and of his stale marriage, and prompts his attempt to find excitement and amorous distraction in the city.

Another notable moment of the fantastic in the film occurs when the husband later pursues a woman on the street. As he passes underneath a sign in the form of a huge pair of spectacles advertising an optician’s office, the giant eyes in the sign suddenly light up unexpectedly and begin to flash, as if the external world were reflecting his inner crisis and the eyes were the outward projection of his own guilty conscience. It is only when the lights go out and the eyes “close” that he feels able to pass underneath, as if he has been given permission by an outside power to pursue his desire.

V. Conclusion

The fundamentally fantastic character of moments like those discussed is easily overlooked in the course of viewing the kind of realist film such as “The Street” that largely calls for a conventional, mimetic reading which tends to exclude the unrealistic and fantastic as simply incompatible. Yet in conclusion it is clear that an awareness of the persistent expressionist elements associated with animist projection motivates us to pay particular attention to the key moments of the narrative that are otherwise easily ignored. It also leads to a corresponding acceptance of certain counterintuitive and uncomfortable interpretative positions, such as the blurring between subject and object, the playing out of enigmatic metaphors (such as human as bug), and the impossible balancing of elements that are incompatible and ontologically opposed to each other. It also allows us to keep in play the important tension between realism and the fantastic that underlies some of the most remarkable achievements not only of modernist literature but of Weimar cinema too.

It is the pointed ambiguity and the effacement of the subject/object boundary that indicates the need to pay particular attention to the significance of the hallucinatory or fantastic elements of such scenes in Metropolis and other expressionist films and literary texts. For these are scenes that in the course of viewing or reading we are all too likely to suppress or overlook under the compulsion to make realistic sense of them. As with the vast majority of the key works of expressionist literature, such scenes simply cannot be adequately grasped via a straightforward realist-mimetic approach. Rather, they make sense primarily when understood as the exteriorization of the interior world of the protagonist, such as the typically extreme dichotomization in Metropolis in the portrayal of the woman: the “doubled” Maria takes on the extreme forms as either a lustful and treacherous witch inciting discord, or as the maternal and saintly female Messiah preaching harmony to the downtrodden masses. In other words, we begin to get some purchase on these enigmatic images if we can accept and bear in mind that
the supposed object world we are encountering is in fact a reality that is deeply colored by the fantastic and by an imagination that treats the metaphorical as fact. Although it has not previously been highlighted in the research on this field, this is a crucial way to approach all expressionist cinema, for an awareness of this animist poetics is necessary in order to comprehend the fundamental structure of such films. For expressionist and Weimar cinema characteristically contains a large number of such ambiguous scenes whose enigmatic and fantastic quality is often simply elided in critical interpretations. Such fantastic elements begin to develop their wider significance only when they are linked more broadly to expressionism and the animistic projection of inner conflicts, and when they are understood as the result of the process of “metaphorization.”

References