# Paweł Sitkiewicz: The Cabinet of Dr. Gotard. Bruno Schulz and German Expressionist Film

*Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass* resembles, in terms of plot, Robert Wiene's most famous German Expressionist film, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920). The similarities do not end with the storyline. They also extend to the expressionist creation of the diegetic world, characters, atmosphere of mystery and many significant details which I will refer to further on in this essay.

Is it plausible that Bruno Schulz saw a film about a demonic hypnotist and his medium, and was then inspired by the unusual plot when writing a story about Dr Gotard's sanatorium? Of course—a realist would say. After all, many poets and writers of the interwar period made reference to cinema in their work. It is nevertheless difficult to prove such a claim. A sceptic would say that the analogy is at best superficial or even coincidental, at worst delusional.

However, I am not the first to ask about the affinity between Schulz's prose and German Expressionist Film. It was pointed out by Janusz Rudnicki in his lecture *Fabryka waty cukrowej i kino 'Urania'* [The Candyfloss Factory and the 'Urania' Cinema], delivered during the Schulz Festival[1]. Interestingly, Rudnicki arrives at—in my opinion—extremely accurate conclusions (I will cite them at the end) despite following the wrong track. He finds seemingly solid proof: a poster featuring Asta Nielsen in the short story *A Night in July*, which he attributes to Georg Wilhelm Pabst's expressionist film *Joyless Street*, screened at Izydor Schulz's picture house [*iluzjon*] in Drohobych. This argument is, unfortunately, easily refuted. Firstly, the film is from 1925, while *A Night in July* describes a child's experience of visiting his brother's cinema operating before the First World War. Secondly, of various known posters for *Joyless Street,* none of them resemble Schulz's description. Thirdly, aside from big cities, original posters were rarely imported from the producer; more often they were made by a local artist, or even a printer, based on materials from the distributor. Finally, *Joyless Street* has little in common with German Expressionism: it was the first in a series of celebrated realist films of the 1920s, categorised as part of the New

1 J. Rudnicki, *Fabryka waty cukrowej i kino 'Urania'*, lecture during Bruno Schulz. Festiwal 2015, Wrocław, 15 X 2015.

Objectivity movement, which told a story of post-war poverty and hopelessness without Caligarian stylisation.

In my opinion, Schulz had in mind one of the famous melodramas with Asta Nielsen, who was the most popular actress in Europe on the eve of the Great War. The investigation must therefore be carried out with greater diligence. Unfortunately, we are further forced to rely on circumstantial evidence. Schulz does not say a word about either *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* or any other film in any of the surviving letters.

The only clue in the correspondence is a meeting in 1938 with Siegfried Kracauer, a brilliant writer, essayist and film critic who began writing a book during the war with the telling title *From Caligari to Hitler* (published in 1947). It was in this book that he included his most famous interpretation of German Expressionist Film as a barometer of the social sentiment of Germany fleeing from freedom towards tyranny. "Perhaps it would be best if you wrote to him immediately from Paris and asked him for a *rendez-vous*"[2], Maria Chazen advised Schulz, giving Kracauer's address and telephone number. He seized the opportunity. A surviving postcard proves that they had arranged a meeting, so it is possible that they discussed contemporary culture, including film, which was at the forefront of the German author's interests at the time.

We know that Schulz could have seen Wiene's masterpiece, if not in Drohobych, then in nearby Lviv. The film was distributed by the Cinematographic Film Rental Office "Gladyator", which had exclusive rights to Małopolska (Lesser Poland) and Galicia. Based on press reports, *Caligari*, subtitled *A Madman Among Madmen*, was screened in Lviv from 7 March 1921 by as many as two theatres: "Marysieńka" and "Kopernik" (in towns and villages, as a rule, care was taken not to duplicate the repertoires). Since the office had two copies of the title, the film most likely reached Drohobych. *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* returned to the screens two years later, but probably only in Warsaw.

Bruno Schulz may also have seen other German films from this period. They were quite popular in interwar Poland, as the figures show. In the 1920s, repertoire imported from the western neighbour accounted, at its peak, for nearly 60 per cent of imports, especially in the former Prussian and Austrian partitions, where the influence of German-language culture was strong despite the objections of censors[3]. For example, in 1923, 181 German films were purchased, in 1924—194, and three years later—as many as 217. As a result, all the classics of German expressionism were shown in Poland, including: *Metropolis*, *Destiny*, and *Doctor*

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**2** B. Schulz, *Księga listów*, collected and prepared by J. Ficowski, Gdańsk 2008, p. 297.

**3** Data quoted from the article: W. Jewsiewicki, *Filmy niemieckie na ekranach polskich kin w okresie międzywojennym*, "Przegląd Zachodni" 1967, no. 5.

*Mabuse the Gambler* by Fritz Lang, *Raskolnikow* by Wiene, *The Golem* by Paul Wegener, *The Student of Prague* by Henrik Galeen, *Waxworks* by Paul Leni, as well as films loosely related to the movement, among them *The Last Laugh* and *Phantom* by Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau[4]. Films classified as New Objectivity were also screened, including Pabst's *Joyless Street*.

Given the statistics, there is a high probability that Schulz was well acquainted with German film of the 1920s, especially as he enjoyed going to the cinema. According to Jerzy Ficowski, he was an outright cinephile who caught the film bug as a child in his brother's picture house. Ficowski places Izydor Schulz's "Urania" cinema on par with Jakub's shop, considering it a valuable source of literary inspiration, or even "mythological fodder"[5].

Even before the war, cinematic elements were noticed in *The Cinnamon Shops* (also known as *The Street of Crocodiles*) and *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*. The first to draw attention to this was Stefania Zahorska, who wrote that the cinematic nature of Schulz's stories implies a particular model of visual imagination: the images he creates are tangible and at the same time flowing and sensuous[6]. It is a literature of dynamic metaphor, pulsating and undergoing continuous transformations. Ignacy Fik wrote in a similar vein, based on the general assumption that cinema has influenced the construction of time in contemporary prose. It is no longer limited to the present and past tense but explores "all illusions, inaccuracies of perception, side associations, mistakes, and sensory anomalies, fighting for their equality with real reality"[7]. These reflections were inspired by his reading of *The Cinnamon Shops*. According to Fik, Schulz "mimics cinematic reality" and "actualises the imagination [...] of abnormal people". Many critics were not so literal,ring the Drohobych writer's work to phantasmagoria, a magic lantern or shadows cast on a screen.[8] Therefore, as has been shown, the filmic nature of Schulz's prose was perceived as inherently expressionist and was associated neither with photographic realism nor with dynamic montage of images.

Besides, Schulz was always seen as an expressionist writer, rooted in the tradition of E.T.A. Hoffmann and Gustav Meyrink. One gets the impression that before the war this was treated as an accusation, a sign of epigonism, especially since Expressionism in literature and theatre was no longer in fashion and was associated with Young Poland's effusiveness. "He lays down his paints coarsely

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**4** Based on pre-war press and advertisments.

**5** J. Ficowski, *Regiony wielkiej herezji i okolice. Bruno Schulz i jego mitologia*, Sejny 2002, pp. 133–134.

**6** S. Zahorska, *Co powieść zawdzięcza filmowi?*, "Kurier Literacko-Naukowy" 1934, no. 29, p. 3.

**7** I. Fik, *Co za czasy!*, "Nasz Wyraz" 1938, no. 7/8, pp. 1–2.

**8** More on this issue in the following text: *Phantasmagorias. Some Thoughts on Bruno Schulz's Cinematic Imagination*, "Schulz/Forum" [current volume].

and excessively, smears them, dabbles in them, showing a complete incapacity for refinement"[9], Stefan Napierski wrote about *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*, accusing Schulz of excess, "sloppiness" and decadence, and even form over substance. Instead of the real world, the critic saw only "puppets, marionettes, fetishes that have slipped out of the waxworks cabinet", as well as an abundance of costume, which reminded him of Meyrink's panopticon and thus—to put it bluntly—with the type of sensibility that is the root of German Expressionist Cinema.

Schulz's association with Expressionism as an art movement probably dates back to the period before the Great War. In those days he was studying in Vienna, which was still regarded as a breeding ground for artistic innovations in European art. This movement, being in its heyday, had a strong influence on the intellectual climate of the time. As Witold Nawrocki writes, "Generationally Bruno Schulz could have belonged to the younger group of expressionists, had he ever wished to associate with any artistic group. However, one thing cannot be ruled out: he must have looked upon their activity with interest [...]"[10]. According to Nowicki, Jakub's lecture on mannequins "sounds like a quotation from an expressionist manifesto". Thus, a fascination with Expressionist cinema would have been a natural complement to Schulz's youthful interests.

Although *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* was released in Polish cinemas in the summer of 1921 with much fanfare—as the cultural event of the season and one of the most renowned films of the decade—it did not attract mass audiences. "*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* left the screens after a couple of days", wrote Adam Ważyk in his memoirs. "I managed to watch it at the last screening. There were only a handful of viewers in the theatre, foreign cars from the diplomatic corps were parked outside the cinema"[11]. Ważyk's account corresponds to the mentions in the press. It was a bad time to show masterpieces. On 18 March 1921, a peace treaty was signed with Bolshevik Russia. The war that put the newly reborn Poland's independence at stake, had only just ended. In a devastated country mired in crisis, an eccentric film by an unknown director without any big names on the posters could not elicit the emotions it deserved. The audience apparently preferred light and escapist repertoire to the dark depths of Expressionism.

Nevertheless, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* was a film that had such a great impact on Polish prose writers and poets that it cannot be ignored, as Leon Trystan noted as early as 1923[12]. There was even an informal club of writers fascinated by

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**9** S. Napierski, *Dwugłos o Schulzu*, "Ateneum" 1939, no. 1, pp. 156–163.

**10** W. Nawrocki, *Bruno Schulz i ekspresjonizm*, "Życie Literackie" 1976, no. 43, p. 7.

**11** A. Ważyk, *Kwestia gustu*, Warszawa 1966, p. 29.

**12** L. Trystan, *Wznowienia: Gabinet Dr. Caligari*, "Film Polski" 1923, no. 1, p. 27. It was also pointed out in later years by W. Otto (*Literatura i film w kulturze polskiej dwudziestolecia międzywojennego*,

Film still from **The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari**, directed by Robert Wiene, 1920.
Bruno Schulz, **Joseph and Dr. Gotard**, ca. 1933.

Film still from **Raskolnikow**, directed by Robert Wiene, 1923.
Bruno Schulz, **A two-horse carriage driving through the city, geometric drawing**, before 1930
Bruno Schulz, **A woman and two men against a geometric city landscape**, before 1930

*The Cabinet*. Among them were Antoni Słonimski, Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, Karol Irzykowski, Adam Ważyk, Tytus Czyżewski, Leon Trystan, Anatol Stern and, more broadly, the milieu of the avant-garde enthusiasts.

In an enthusiastic review written in poetic style in 1920, Słonimski praises Wiene's film, the work of a madman and genius, calling it the beginning of a new artistic discipline and, at the same time, a sensation—a "poisonous hothouse flower" that grew out of Expressionism[13]. "All that was a dream is in fact real life. Oneiric, unsettling nightmares, the terrifying logic of events that could not take place, the realness of phantasmagoria shamelessly brought to the silver screen, the horror of unfamiliar yet forefelt phantasmata—the hideous and swooning beauty of dreams. All of this walks together in a morbid, somnambulic procession enchanted by the dreamlike glow of the cinematograph projector", Słonimski wrote in *Kurier Polski*. The motif of cinema infected by Caligarian imagination would return in other reviews of that time, thus providing a framework for interpreting the film.

That same year, Słonimski wrote the poem *Negatyw* [The Negative], which he included in the collection *Godzina poezji* [An Hour of Poetry] and which contains many references to Wiene's masterpiece. The speaker first adopts Caesar's perspective, stooping over Jenny's sleeping body with a knife and murderous intent, and moments later—the perspective of Caligari, who awakens his medium "sleeping in a trance". In the culminating moment of the poem, the hypnotist gives the order to kill:

> Into the bed's reflected, twisted black depths
> Where awaits me the pallor of sheets
> Strike, drive the knife![14]

*Negatyw* is a tribute to the power of film images that captivate, unleash dreams and see through into the depths of consciousness like a somnambulist Caesar.

Ważyk and Czyżewski also wrote poems inspired by *The Cabinet*. For Irzykowski, *Caligari* became an expression of the alliance between cinema and painting, and even a turning point in the history of the correspondence in the arts. "Artificial decorations in *Caligari* are already entering the field of animated film, that hitherto embryo from which the great, proper film of the future

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Poznań 2007, p. 78–79); E. & M. Pytasz (*Poetycka podróż w świat kinematografu, czyli kino w poezji polskiej lat 1914–1925*, in: *Szkice z teorii filmu*, ed. A. Helman, T. Miczka, Katowice 1978).

**13** A. Słonimski, "Kurier Polski" 1920, no. 101; quote: id., *Romans z X Muzą. Teksty filmowe z lat 1917–1976*, selection, introduction and editing: M. Hendrykowska, M. Hendrykowski, Warszawa 2007, pp. 51–52.

**14** Id., *Negatyw*; quote: id., *Romans z X Muzą*, pp. 54–58.

will one day emerge"[15], he wrote in *Dziesiąta muza* [The Tenth Muse]. In turn, Anatol Stern wrote in a review published in "Skamander" that *Caligari*, "having unleashed a storm of psychologism in cinema, turned the screen into an arena of the most morbid psychic perversion"[16]. Years later, he shared with the readers of "Wiadomości Literackie" the spiritual transformation he experienced after watching Wiene's film. Although eight years had passed since its Polish premiere, the demonic doctor would not leave the poet's head. He had aroused a longing for "an image showing a creative re-evaluation of the world of things and psyches—reality"[17]. Stern, bored with photographic realism, was awaiting the return of Caligari, who had crossed the dividing line between reality and fantasy before disappearing. He was not waiting alone. He wrote the column in the plural, as if wanting to speak on behalf of a generation.

Leon Trystan, the critic, screenwriter, actor and director, and brother of Adam Ważyk, was also clearly afflicted by the expressionist infection of the imagination. He wrote about the birth of a new style in the arts: Caligarisme, which is characterised by "perversion of line" and "lack of undertones", mocks the "canons of symmetry", geometrises the world, and breaks with the rules of Euclidian space.[18] It allows us to reject the laws of physics, to blur the lines between perception, dreams and imagination. This mode of perception must have captivated Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, who, according to Janusz Degler, held in esteem *The Cabinet* and other films by the German expressionists.[19] The author of *The Shoemakers* was, after all, considered an expressionist. Moreover, the catalogue of an exhibition of Witkacy's work in Poznań features two paintings of Dr Caligari (from 1922, types E and D, thus heavily deformed, "without copying nature")[20]. Witkacy was fascinated by film, despite officially disdaining it. A letter dated 23rd April 1938 addressed to Bruno Schulz clearly indicates that they were at the cinema together[21].

Could a film buff writer fascinated by German art who followed cultural trends at home and abroad, studied in Vienna then engulfed in an expressionist fever, used a filter in his writing to distort the banality of everyday life, and did not fear perversion in any shape or form miss a film that initiated the most important movement in the history of German cinema that was reported in the daily and cultural press long before the premiere? Common sense does not allow us to end

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15 K. Irzykowski, *Dziesiąta muza. Zagadnienia estetyczne kina*, Kraków 1924, p. 210.
16 A. Stern, *Kino*, "Skamander" 1922, n. 25/26, p. 527.
17 Id., *Gdzie jesteś Caligari?*, "Wiadomości Literackie" 1928, no. 13 (221), p. 3.
18 L. Trystan, op. cit., p. 27. See also: id., *Fotogeniczność*, "Ekran i Scena" 1923, no. 10–11, p. 2.
19 J. Degler, *Witkacy i kino*, "Dialog" 1996, no. 3, p. 132. The source of this information is not provided.
20 *Wystawa obrazów Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza oraz Firmy Portretowej "S. I. Witkiewicz"* [catalogue], Poznań 1929.
21 B. Schulz, *Księga listów*, p. 287.

the investigation process here. Someone like Bruno Schulz, a loner and oddball, could not have missed *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* without good reason. From the chronology of the writer's life and work, we know that he was then suffering from poor health and was unsure about taking up a job at a secondary school. He must have had a lot of free time. All the facts, publications and recollections cited above bring together reasons why he should have taken an interest in the expressionist world of somnambulists, hypnotists, wax figures, golems, madmen, or at least feel a spiritual kinship with this type of sensibility. Bruno Schulz, like no other writer of the interwar period, fits into the Club of Caligarists.

The final evidence that we have is prose and drawings.

*Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass* is a short story in black and white, or alternatively in various shades of grey like in an old film. In several places, the narrator emphasises the lack of colour, the "greyness of the aura", and the fact that the world is seen "through black glasses"[22]. The way the space is created brings to mind the expressionist techniques of the set designers in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*: Jakub rides a demonic train that winds like a labyrinth; the sanatorium, that resembles a hospital for the mentally ill, has distorted proportions (a wall-length buffet, an enormous dog kennel, dark corridors with a labyrinth of doors, doorframes, and nooks and crannies); the nearby town is almost abstract—it's the "otherwise complete darkness", that provides a backdrop for the window that "shone, like a grey rectangle". "Trees, houses and people merge", as if the film were losing its sharpness or drowning in too high a contrast of black and white. The sanatorium staff behave like puppets. The patients, in turn, are like somnambulists—they either wander around the town, or sleep in their beds. The father oscillates on the verge of life and death. He lies hibernating in his room, yet at the same time he reigns in the dining hall, strangely animated, like Caesar who simultaneously rests in a box as a wax puppet and runs around town murdering people.

At the head of the institution is a demoniac doctor with a foreign-sounding surname. We do not know if he is a charlatan, a hypnotiser or perhaps a genius. His sanatorium also holds a secret. Somnambulic behaviours, as Anton Kaes reminds us in his book about cinema in the Weimar Republic, was regarded in those days as one of the symptoms of madness, a way to shut oneself away from the world, migrating inward under the influence of trauma[23]. That is why they were so readily used by German expressionists, who, according to Kaes, translated extreme psychological states, such as suffering, madness or nightmares into a visual language replete with violent means of expression.

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**22** Id., *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*, trans. C. Wieniewska, in: id., *The Collected Works of Bruno Schulz*, ed. J. Ficowski, London 1998. All short stories by Schulz are quoted from this source.

**23** A. Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema. Weimar Culture and the Wounds of War*, Berkeley 2011, p. 66.

The influence of film expressionism or, more broadly, of German cinema from the period of the Weimar Republic, including New Objectivity, can also be found in other short stories by Schulz, particularly in *The Street of Crocodiles*, where the literary "set design" is ostentatiously fake and deformed ("betrays with all its cracks its imitative character") and on top of that devoid of correct proportions, monochromatic ("as in black-and-white photographs"). Crocodile Street vividly resembles Melchiorgasse from *Joyless Street* or the town from Rahn's *Tragedy of the Street* (1927). It is riddled with decay, inhabited by an "inferior species of human being" including prostitutes and "scum".

The most fascinating evidence, however, is to be found in Bruno Schulz's drawings[24]. *Księga obrazów* [The Book of Artworks] contains several works that resemble sketches of expressionist set design or exaggerated stills from such films as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* or *Raskolnikow.* The most interesting works in this set are two pencil drawings: *A woman and two men against a geometric city landscape,* and *A two-horse carriage driving through the city, geometric drawing* (both created before 1930*).* The first of these portrays a man wearing a disproportionately tall top hat who looks like Werner Krauss playing Dr Caligari. As a side note, it is worth mentioning that Dr Gotard in Schultz's illustrations for *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass* is making the same famous gesture as his film counterpart. In addition, he has an equally demonic expression on his face.

The cityscapes are not so much geometrised, as deliberately deformed: the walls and streetlamps are not at right angles, the windows and chimneys appear in unexpected places, stairs lose their orderly perspective. Human figures remain nonetheless realistic. In Robert Wiene's most famous films, the same concept was the basis for the set design, or more broadly, the artistic concept that became the hallmark for the Caligaric style in cinema. Comparing the drawings with the film stills reveals a striking and probably not coincidental resemblance. The subject matter is also analogous: prostitutes, demonic psychiatrists, mannequins, wax figures, hypnotised men, a city by night.

It is hard to believe that all these convergences are due to chance.

And even if Schulz did see *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* or other German films from the same period, does this mean anything? —the sceptic would ask. In my opinion, the captivation with German expressionism and the poetic references to the films of the Weimar Republic are further evidence of Bruno Schulz's cinematic imagination, and equally—one of the keys to understanding his style and sources of inspiration.

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**24** B. Schulz, *Księga obrazów*, ed. J. Ficowski, Gdańsk 2012. All drawings have been referenced based on this edition. [The English titles referenced in the present translation may be found in: idem, *The Drawings of Bruno Schulz*, ed. J. Ficowski, Evanston 1990.]

According to Janusz Rudnicki, in expressionist cinema and in Schulz's short stories the actors are reduced to "elements of the overall composition of the image". Other common traits include the dynamisation of space, dreamlike reality, the montage of frames that undergo constant transformation, or "freedom from a definitively imposed form"[25]. Schulz and German filmmakers of the 1920s, as well as expressionist painters and poets, were eager to use fantasy themes. They had a penchant for deformation of reality and strong means of expression. According to Jerzy Speina, what distinguishes Schulz's prose is "a maximised force of expression, an extreme dynamisation of the image, expressed in an ecstatic scream, not only figuratively but also literally—in short, the extremism of artistic expression, the most significant characteristic of the expressionist method"[26]. In my opinion, this "extreme dynamisation" is best explained by the influence of cinema.

What may raise doubts is that Schulz did not explicitly indicate the sources of his cinematic inspiration (according to the principle that for something to be significant, it must be visible). The only solid point of reference is the poster with Asta Nielsen. It would have been enough to call the doctor "Gotardari" or to add the distinctive glasses to the illustration of him, and everything would become clear for both readers and literary historians. A writer of Schulz's calibre, who had the ambition to invent an original language to write The Book, could not accept such a simplistic solution. For his fascination with film did not exclude a detachment from all external influences.

May an episode from Witkacy's biography serve as indirect evidence. When the decorations for the staging of *The Pragmatists* were created without respecting his recommendations, he became outraged that they had been made into a "some kind of subpar imitation from Caligari's set"[27]. He did not appreciate the deformation and geometrisation of space. And yet he liked Wiene's film and had painted the character of the demonic doctor several times! In my opinion, Witkacy thought that the theory of Pure Form, to which he dedicated all his talent as an artist and philosopher, was something more than Caligarisme. He did not want to be perceived as a derivative writer who steals from a muse considered inferior. Schulz's prose may be viewed in a similar way. Being an aficionado did not justify referencing films, let alone writing variations on them. Images from expressionist masterpieces melted with fantasy, memories, the mythology of his native Drohobych, literature of the period as well as other elements to form a solid

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**25** J. Rudnicki, *Fabryka waty cukrowej…*

**26** J. Speina, *Bankructwo realności. Proza Brunona Schulza*, Warszawa–Poznań 1974, p. 98.

**27** S. I. Witkiewicz, *Z powodu krytyki „Pragmatystów" wystawionych w Elsynorze*, in: id., *Nowe formy w malarstwie i wynikające stąd nieporozumienia. Szkice estetyczne*, ed. J. Degler, L. Sokół, Warsaw 2002, p. 138.

alloy – a noble one, precisely because of this. However, scholars of Schulz's work have no doubts that he was susceptible to various external influences – from painting (Kubin, Rops, Goya), literature (Mann, Kafka, Rilke), and philosophy (Jewish mysticism, the Bible).

The comparison of Schulz's prose and German Expressionist cinema can also be seen as an opportunity to explore the broader influence of 1920s German cinema on Polish interwar culture. For this very reason, I have extensively quoted texts from the Club of Caligarists. German Expressionism inspired individuals in theatre, screenwriters, poets, prose writers, graphic designers and filmmakers in Poland and in the world—from both arthouse and genre cinema (horror, thriller, fantasy)[28]. In many countries German Expressionism was assimilated, integrating it with local art movements that also advocated moving away from *mimesis* towards the subjectification of perception. Bruno Schulz was in good company alongside Jean Cocteau, Sergei Eisenstein or Bertolt Brecht. At the same time, this movement provoked a wave of controversy. There was debate about whether directors like Wiene and Lang had infected European culture with the disease of Caligarisme that puts effect above content.

German Expressionist cinema proved to be an important argument for those seeking affirmation that cinema was an art form. They enjoyed references to Romanticism and opposed a realistic representation of reality—whether in novels, theatre, cinema or painting. They preferred a different type of representation: the external world as a projection of the protagonist's psyche.

There is also no doubt that cinema of the Weimar Republic was compelling in terms of plotlines: it told fantastic stories, featured demonic characters, and held the audience on the edge of their seats throughout the entire screening. It was also a mine of reusable characters and motifs. At that time, it was already recognised that Expressionist décor and dark stories concealed a commentary on contemporary issues. "Former German production during the post-war period […] was undoubtedly the reflection of the psyche of an environment disturbed and disoriented by defeat and revolution"[29], wrote Leon Brun in 1937, a decade before Siegfried Kracauer's thesis.

Even if Bruno Schulz did not watch *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, there is a lesson to be learned from this experiment. The interwar period was, as its name suggests, an interlude between the two acts of the Great War, the period from Caligari to Hitler. It begins with chaos: the disintegration of the old world and

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**28** For the influence of German Expressionism on mass culture of the interwar period, from the USA to France to the USSR, see: O. Brill, *Der Caligari-Komplex*, Munich 2012; J. Ziwjan, *Caligari in Rußland. Der Deutsche Expressionismus un die sowjetische Filmkultur*, in: *Die engewöhlichen Abenteuer des Dr. Mabuse im Lande der Bolschewiki*, ed. O. Bulgakowa, Berlin 1995.

**29** L. Brun, *Spojrzenie na świat przez ekran*, "Srebrny Ekran" 1937, no. 9, p. 7.

Film still from **Joyless Street**, directed by Georg Wilhelm Pabst, 1925.
Bruno Schulz, **Two women and two men in the street**, before 1932.

concludes with the hecatomb that marks the ultimate end of an era dating back to the 19th century. In the interwar decades, Expressionist tendencies in art, sometimes explicitly named, and other times hidden under artistic projects, deriving from individual experiences, gained particular significance despite the reluctance of many critics. These tendencies allowed for a sense of disillusionment, breaking with the constraints of *mimesis* and, using metaphor to explore the essence of human experience, reaching its metaphysical core. "In some sense we derive a profound satisfaction from the loosening of the web of reality; we feel an interest in witnessing the bankruptcy of reality"[30], wrote Schulz in a quasi-letter to Witkacy.

*Translated from Polish by Natalia Dore and Kamil Walczak*

**30** *Bruno Schulz: An Essay for S. I. Witkiewicz*, in: *The Collected Works of Bruno Schulz*, p. 369.