3 Relativist Perspectivism

Caligari and the Crisis of Historicism

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The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. "Whither is God?" he cried; "I will tell you. We have killed him—*you and I."*
—Friedrich Nietzsche[1]

"I give you the right to lock me up; I am giving you the possibility of healing me." This is the meaning of the avowal of madness: avowal signs the asylum contract.
—Michel Foucault[2]

Abstract

This chapter repositions Robert Wiene's Expressionist classic, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), at the nexus of two sets of developments: the popularization of Albert Einstein's Theory of Relativity and widespread recognition of the relativist implications of historicist thought; and the rejection of perspectival conventions in the visual arts and the emergence of perspectivism in philosophy. Eliciting comparisons to Einstein's theory upon its release, Wiene's film challenges basic tenets of the German historicist tradition, conveying a radical scepticism regarding the possibility of detached, disinterested observation. With its enigmatic narrative and distorted, post-perspectival set design, *Caligari* dismisses Leopold von Ranke's ideal of faithfully and impartially reconstructing the past. Instead, the film follows Friedrich Nietzsche's early writings in suggesting a perspectivist sense of historical reality as the interplay

1 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 181.

2 Michel Foucault, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling: The Function of Avowal in Justice*, ed. Fabienne Brion and Bernard E. Harcourt, trans. Stephen W. Sawyer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 13.

Hagener, M. & Y. Zimmermann (eds), *How Film Histories Were Made: Materials, Methods, Discourses*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2024
DOI: 10.5117/9789463724067_CH03

of finite interpretations. *Caligari*'s legacy thus consists not only in its modernist aesthetics, but also in its engagement with fundamental historical-philosophical questions.

Keywords: Expressionism, Weimar cinema, historicism, philosophy of history, Albert Einstein, theory of relativity

Despite its antagonism toward all metaphysical claims, the positivism popularized by Auguste Comte in the nineteenth century often expanded into a universalizing scientism, whereby natural-scientific methods were transposed to the examination of human history, culture, and society at large.[3] Given this imperialist tendency, it is both ironic and suitable that one of the major challenges posed to the Baconian epistemology adopted by positivism—namely, Albert Einstein's Theory of Relativity—seemed to reverberate within all realms of academic study and creative endeavour in the following century. Published in 1905, Einstein's "On the Electrodynamics of Moving Bodies" ("Zur Elektrodynamik bewegter Körper") implied a relativist perspectivism decisively at odds with the empirical mode of observation widely practiced across diverse scholarly and artistic realms—from the natural sciences to the disciplines of history and sociology, and from the "experimental novels" of Naturalist authors to the *plein-air* paintings of the Impressionists.[4] Where practitioners in these realms had assumed the position of fixed, detached observers whose viewpoint was separated from the external world, Einstein's theory suggested a more decentred, spatiotemporally dynamic, and non-absolute relationship between subject and object. Such a relativist form of interaction, as I hope to demonstrate in this chapter, found expression in both the modernist works and historical-philosophical debates of the Weimar era.

Emerging contemporaneously with Einstein's theories, works of aesthetic modernism likewise rejected traditional, widely accepted standards of observation, evoking a new mode of relationality between human subjectivity and the objective world. While the Impressionists had already substituted an apprehensive space for that of ordered, Euclidean geometry, modernist artists abandoned the mimesis of perceived reality altogether, replacing a

3 Leszek Kolakowski, *The Alienation of Reason: A History of Positivist Thought*, trans. Norbert Guterman (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1968), 9–10.

4 Albert Einstein, "On the Electrodynamics of Moving Bodies," in *The Principle of Relativity*, trans. George Barker Jeffery and Wilfrid Perrett (New York: Dover, 1952), 35–65.

fragmentary consciousness for the fixed, detached observer and negating rather than faithfully imitating the exterior realm.[5] Most evident in the turn away from figurative painting, the "dehumanization of art" (José Ortega y Gasset) in fact occurred across a broad range of media, finding its corollary in the retreat from the realistic, coherent plot in literature and the dismissal of harmonic tonality in music.[6] In a 1923 manifesto, Russian author Yevgeny Zamyatin rendered explicit the correspondence between scientific paradigms and artistic practices, characterizing bourgeois and socialist realist forms as "projections along the fixed, plane coordinates of Euclid's world."[7] Emphasizing the proven non-existence of such a "finite, fixed world," Zamyatin called for a more complex form of literature—a literature with the pioneering, self-reflexive inquisitiveness of Einstein, who "managed to remember that he [...], observing motion with a watch in hand, was also moving," and thereby succeeded in "looking at the motion of the earth from *outside*."[8]

Among the modernist movements in art and literature that suggested a new worldview along with a more mutable, impermanent order of spatial relations is Expressionism. As Georg Marzynski wrote in a 1920 study, Expressionist painters shifted emphasis from external reality to human subjectivity, constructing works from colours and forms untethered to the realm of sensory experience. In this way, Marzynski argued, Expressionist artists sought to liberate European painting from the representational function it had performed since the Renaissance; whereas earlier art consisted of "subjectivized objects," their works portrayed "objectifications of the subject."[9] Similarly, Walter Sokel later contended that in the dramas of August Strindberg and the Expressionists, the protagonist's physical environment is not "the source of experience," but rather "a structure designed for the purpose of expressing emotions."[10] In Sokel's analysis, Expressionist dramatists rejected the postulate of a fixed, given external nature,

5 See Linda Dalyrimple Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

6 José Ortega y Gasset, "The Dehumanization of Art," in *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Writings on Art and Culture*, trans. Willard Trask (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1956), 1–50.

7 Yevgeny Zamyatin, "On Literature, Revolution, Entropy and Other Matters," in *A Soviet Heretic: Essays by Yevgeny Zamyatin*, ed. and trans. Mirra Ginsburg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 112.

8 Ibid., 111–12.

9 Georg Marzynski, *Die Methode des Expressionismus: Studien zu seiner Psychologie* (Leipzig: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1920), 11, 34.

10 Walter H. Sokel, *The Writer in Extremis: Expressionism in Twentieth-Century German Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959), 39.

envisioning the world instead as "a field of magnetic and gravitational forces radiating from the soul."[11] The theatrical mise en scène of Expressionist dramas, according to Sokel, is thus dynamic, serving as a projection of the protagonist's ever-fluctuating interior states: "The scenery of the Expressionist stage changes with the psychic forces whirling about in it, just as in the universe of relativity space is modified by the matter it contains."[12]

For many commentators, however, the art form most capable of representing the dynamics of the Einsteinian universe was film.[13] Perhaps most famously, Sergei Eisenstein, Jean Epstein, and Dziga Vertov invoked the Principle of Relativity and the fourth dimension in their theoretical writings on cinema's medial properties and aesthetic possibilities.[14] As Annette Michelson has argued, the three film-makers shared an interest in the power of montage techniques (e.g. freeze-framing, slow, fast, or reverse motion) to reveal, suspend, or even reconfigure spatiotemporal and causal relations, thereby offering a new mode of experiencing and knowing the phenomenal world.[15] Einstein's ideas also found cinematic articulation in the German context—most explicitly in Hanns Walter Kornblum's 1922 educational film, *The Fundamentals of the Einsteinian Relativity Theory* (*Die Grundlagen der Einsteinschen Relativitätstheorie*), but also in relation to works of Expressionism, distinct less for their montage techniques and trick sequences than for their distorted mise en scène. In a 1920 essay, Herman Scheffauer invoked Einstein while celebrating Expressionist cinema's plastic and dynamic conceptualization of space, which, in his view, lent the medium a "fourth dimension."[16] For Scheffauer, the first film to exemplify

11 Ibid., 38.

12 Ibid.

13 On Einstein and the emergence of cinema, see Harro Segeberg, "'Is Everything Relative?': Cinema and the Revolution of Knowledge around 1900," in *Film 1900: Technology, Perception, Culture*, ed. Annemone Ligensa and Klaus Kreimeier (New Barnet: John Libbey Publishing, 2009), 67–76.

14 See Sergei Eisenstein, "The Fourth Dimension in Cinema," in *Selected Works, Volume I: Writings, 1922–34*, ed. and trans. Richard Taylor (London: BFI, 1988), 185; Jean Epstein, *Jean Epstein: Critical Essays and New Translations*, ed. Sarah Keller and Jason N. Paul (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 294, 312–14, 319, 324, 348–49, 367, 400; and Dziga Vertov, *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. Annette Michelson, trans. Kevin O'Brien (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 9, 41, 78, 131.

15 Annette Michelson, "Reading Eisenstein Reading 'Capital,'" *October* 2 (Summer 1976): 32; and Annette Michelson, "The Wings of Hypothesis: On Montage and the Theory of the Interval," in *Montage and Modern Life, 1919–1942*, ed. Matthew Teitelbaum (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 65.

16 Herman George Scheffauer, "The Vivifying of Space," in *The New Vision in the German Arts* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1924), 46.

this new spatial sensibility was Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (*Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, 1920), the sets of which seemed to apply and visualize "Einstein's invasion of the law of gravity."[17]

In this chapter, I will examine *Caligari* in terms of the relativist perspectivism that was widely invoked in the early twentieth century. During this period, the popularization of Einstein's Theory of Relativity converged with increasing recognition of the relativist implications of historicist thought, and the dissolution of perspective in the visual arts coincided with the emergence of perspectivism in modern philosophy, especially in the wake of Nietzsche. Locating *Caligari* at the nexus of these broad-scale developments, I will build on the work of Thomas Elsaesser, who has accounted for the film's unique stylistic and formal features with reference to Weimar cinema's "double 'legitimation crisis'" vis-à-vis German cultural tradition and an increasingly hegemonic American film industry.[18] Where Elsaesser links the film's reflexive qualities to a "meta-critical discourse," I will position the work as a meditation on conceptions of time and history.[19] And while Elsaesser notes *Caligari*'s "radical skepticism as to evidentiary truth in the cinema," I will argue that the film adopts an ironic stance regarding issues of historical ontology, epistemology, and narration more generally.[20] *Caligari*'s legacy, in my analysis, consists not only in introducing aspects of aesthetic modernism to the medium of film, but also in demonstrating the possibilities of an "intellectual" or "cerebral" cinema—one that engages with fundamental questions of the philosophy of history.

The Critique of Positivism

Positivism made an enormous contribution to empirical sciences such as history and sociology in the nineteenth century, offering these emerging disciplines a model of primary source research, scientific exactitude, and objective, detached neutrality. Nevertheless, the extension of naturalist postulates to the *Geisteswissenschaften* (human sciences) raised many vexing questions for intellectuals in Central and Western Europe: Might not human life and activity bear unique, vital, and dynamic qualities

17 Ibid., 47.

18 Thomas Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imaginary* (London: Routledge, 2000), 95.

19 Ibid., 5.

20 Ibid., 103n54.

that are obscured when social existence and behaviour are treated like objects of natural-scientific scrutiny? Are there dimensions of one's being, interiority, and lived experience that exceed the purview of a phenomenalist epistemology, which relies on sense perception and denies any distinction between appearances and essences? Can one yield genuine knowledge of spiritual-intellectual realms from a passive, disinterested mode of examination, abstaining from value judgements and proceeding strictly according to inductive generalization? And, finally, is it possible to figure the subjectivity and historicity of the observer without thereby sacrificing a claim to universal validity?[21] Such questions fuelled a "crisis of science" addressed by Max Weber in his celebrated 1917 lecture, "Science as a Vocation" ("Wissenschaft als Beruf"), delivered at a time when many in the younger generation expressed radical scepticism about the ultimate purpose and meaning of specialized intellectual inquiry.[22]

The general rebellion against science at the end of the "long nineteenth century" also entailed the rejection of a specific tradition of historical thinking.[23] Though not a simple positivist, Leopold von Ranke had upheld a correspondence theory of truth, pursuing the ideal of faithfully and impartially recreating empirical reality—or, in his well-known words, showing "*wie es eigentlich gewesen* [how it essentially was]."[24] Ranke's mode of historiography, involving the rigorous collection of individual facts, was criticized as early as 1874 by Friedrich Nietzsche, for whom it connoted a dry, ascetic antiquarianism as well as the dissolution of all foundations into a ceaseless, Heraclitean flux.[25] Philosophers including Wilhelm Windelband, Heinrich Rickert, and Wilhelm Dilthey later addressed epistemological and methodological issues related to the science of history, seeking to

21 Kolakowski, *Alienation of Reason*, 1–10; and H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2002), 33–66.

22 Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in *Essays in Sociology*, trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 129–56.

23 On the German historicist tradition, see Friedrich Meinecke, *Historism: The Rise of a New Historical Outlook*, trans. J. E. Anderson (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972); Georg G. Iggers, *The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1968); and Frederick C. Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

24 Leopold von Ranke, "Preface to the First Edition of *Histories of the Latin and German Peoples*," trans. Wilma A. Iggers, in *The Theory and Practice of History*, ed. Georg G. Iggers (London: Routledge, 2011), 86.

25 Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," in *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 108.

provide a firm basis for historical knowledge and understanding.[26] Their inability to wield off the relativist implications of historicism presaged a crisis of historical thought diagnosed by Ernst Troeltsch in the disorienting post-war years, when a Rankean faith in the meaning and coherence of the historical process seemed to be decisively shattered.[27] In *Historicism and Its Problems* (*Der Historismus und seine Probleme*, 1922), Troeltsch discerned a "historical relativity of values" in the German historicist tradition—one, in his view, with "a certain analogy to the physical Theory of Relativity, which, in its set of problems so strongly intensified by Einstein, concerns the whole world today."[28]

Expressionist artists participated in the early-twentieth-century revolt against science, following a lineage of philosophical reactions to positivism. As Siegfried Kracauer argued in a 1918 essay, visual and literary works of Expressionism betrayed a Nietzschean vitalism, countering an "Apollonian intellectuality [*Geistigkeit*]" with elementary and instinctually driven being, "irrepressibly animated and suffused with Dionysian fervor."[29] Kracauer attributed the movement's interest in recovering an "*Ur*-ego" to the repressive, hegemonic power of science, which renders the world increasingly objective and converts the individual into "a purely impersonal intellect."[30] Writing sixteen years later, Georg Lukács set Expressionism against the backdrop of the Kaiserreich's "philosophy of life," which, in its attempts to mediate between neo-Kantianism and historicism, tended toward an "extreme relativism" and even "mystical irrationalism."[31] For Lukács, one of the exemplary figures in this context was Hans Vaihinger, whose *The Philosophy of "As if"* (*Die Philosophie des Als Ob*, 1911) theorized human fictions on the basis of a Kant- and Nietzsche-derived "idealist positivism."[32]

26 See Charles R. Bambach, *Heidegger, Dilthey, and the Crisis of Historicism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

27 Ernst Troeltsch, "Die Krisis des Historismus," *Die neue Rundschau* 33 (1922): 572–90.

28 Ernst Troeltsch, *Der Historismus und seine Probleme* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1922), 219. See also Otto Hintze, "Troeltsch und die Probleme des Historismus: Kritische Studien," *Historische Zeitschrift* 135, no. 2 (1927): 227: "An die Stelle der Beurteilung nach einem absoluten Wertsystem war die lebendige Beziehung zu einer für den Betrachter geltenden, aber historisch bedingten Wertwelt getreten. Es war eine ähnliche Wendung wie die, die in der Naturwissenschaft durch die Einsteinsche Relativitätslehre hervorgebracht worden ist."

29 Siegfried Kracauer, "Über den Expressionismus: Wesen und Sinn einer Zeitbewegung: Abhandlung," in *Werke*, vol. 9.2, ed. Ingrid Belke (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2004), 46–47.

30 Ibid., 49, 63.

31 Georg Lukács, "Expressionism: Its Significance and Decline," in *Essays on Realism*, ed. Rodney Livingstone, trans. David Fernbach (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 80.

32 Hans Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of "As if": A System of the Theoretical, Practical and Religious Fictions of Mankind*, trans. C. K. Ogden (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1935).

Vaihinger himself hinted at a link between Expressionist aesthetics and the critique of positivism. In his analysis, the sceptic or logical pessimist discredits a naïve identity theory of truth, according to which the psyche "portray[s] the objective world truthfully and without alteration," preferring to regard thought instead "as though it distorted reality like a pair of coloured spectacles or a concave mirror."[33]

The Expressionists' rejection of a positivist epistemology—their insistence, in Gottfried Benn's words, that "there was no reality, only, at most, its distorted image"—also implied a challenge to basic historicist tenets.[34] Manifestos by Kasimir Edschmid and others proclaimed a radical break with the past—a break often articulated in terms of cultural iconoclasm, Oedipal rebellion, and revolutionary or eschatological politics.[35] Negating all traditions, norms, and stylistic conventions, the Expressionists strove toward a new reality, which they envisioned not through faithful mimesis of a given external world, but rather through the act of pure, unfettered creation. The artificial universe formed by the Expressionists would be detached or even independent from concrete temporal and historical determinants, reflecting what Wilhelm Worringer identified in 1907 as an "urge to abstraction."[36] In contrast to naturalism, which had presupposed a confident relationship between human and environment, abstract art arose, in Worringer's words, from "a great inner unrest inspired in man by the phenomena of the outside world"—that is, from a loss of faith in history as the site of logos and meaning.[37] Such a disillusioned view found explicit articulation in Georg Kaiser's "Historical Fidelity" ("Historientreue," 1923), in which the writer characterized history as a "succession of occurrences that are senseless and purposeless," and described the task of the poet as that of transforming chaos and accident into order and lawful necessity.[38]

In their conception of surface reality as a creation of the intellect, and in their prioritization of non-mimetic art as a link to the eternal, the Expressionists drew from Arthur Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and*

33 Ibid., 163.

34 Gottfried Benn, "Bekenntnis zum Expressionismus," in *Deutsche Zukunft*, November 5, 1933, quoted in Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Merlin Press, 1971), 18.

35 Kasimir Edschmid, *Über den Expressionismus in der Literatur und die neue Dichtung* (Berlin: Erich Reiß, 1919), 31.

36 Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, trans. Michael Bullock (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1997), 4.

37 Ibid., 15.

38 Georg Kaiser, "Historientreue: Am Beispiel der Flucht nach Venedig," in *Werke*, vol. 4, ed. Walther Huder (Frankfurt am Main: Propyläen, 1971), 577.

Representation (*Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, 1818–1819). The first prominent irrationalist among Western philosophers, Schopenhauer had presented a pessimistic vision of human life as lacking sense, direction, and meaning. Opposing Hegel's philosophy, Schopenhauer described the material of history not as a source of general knowledge, but rather as "the particular in its particularity and contingency."[39] Much as Schopenhauer had undermined an affirmative, theodicean view of history, likening its movement to "clouds in the wind [...], often entirely transformed by the most trifling accident," Expressionist theorists Worringer and Wassily Kandinsky dismissed a coherent or teleological *Geschichtsbild* (conception of history), reflecting a sense, in the former's words, that "man is now just as lost and helpless vis-à-vis the world picture as primitive man."[40] Bernhard Diebold also alluded to Schopenhauer's aesthetics in his prescient 1916 article, "Expressionism and Cinema" ("Expressionismus und Kino"), and the screenwriters of *Caligari*, Carl Mayer and Hans Janowitz, explicitly modelled their title character's appearance after the nineteenth-century philosopher.[41] Upon its release in February 1920, one critic even lauded *Caligari* for departing from a naturalist preoccupation with "'objective facts,'" depicting instead "the world as will and representation of the madman."[42]

The Rejection of Realist Aesthetics

Like Worringer, who identified opposing aesthetic drives in the history of art—a mimetic empathy with the vital, organic world and an abstractionist retreat into a realm of tranquil, crystalline form—Kracauer would later observe dual forces at work in the evolution of photographic media. In *Theory of Film* (1960), Kracauer noted the contemporaneous popularization of photographic technology and positivist methodology in the nineteenth century as well as their common promise of accurately and impersonally

39 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, trans. R. B. Haldane and J. Kemp (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1909), vol. 3, 224.

40 Ibid., 224; Worringer, *Abstraction*, 18; and Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans. M. T. H. Sadler (New York: Dover, 1977).

41 Bernhard Diebold, "Expressionism and Cinema," trans. Alex H. Bush, in *The Promise of Cinema: German Film Theory, 1907–1933*, ed. Anton Kaes, Nicholas Baer, and Michael Cowan (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 416; and Carl Mayer and Hans Janowitz, *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari: Drehbuch von Carl Mayer und Hans Janowitz zu Robert Wienes Film von 1919/20*, ed. Uli Jung and Walter Schatzberg (Munich: edition text + kritik, 1995), 52–53.

42 Eugen Tannenbaum, "Expressionismus im Film," *Berliner Abendpost*, February 29, 1920.

reproducing physical reality.[43] While realists across scientific and aesthetic fields celebrated photography's ability to record and reveal nature, other commentators and practitioners—particularly those upholding Romantic ideals—emphasized the medium's artistic qualities, as derived from the selective rendering and creative shaping of raw visual material. Kracauer discerned a comparable interplay between "realistic" and "formative" tendencies in the history of film, which was already split in its early years between the Lumière brothers' *actualités* and the staged fantasies of Georges Méliès. Echoing Erwin Panofsky, who had distinguished film from older representational media in its compositional process "from bottom to top"—a process, Panofsky argued, corresponding to a materialist rather than an Idealist worldview—Kracauer postulated a "basic aesthetic principle" of cinema, prioritizing visual engagement with the infinite, transitory, and fortuitous realm of physical existence.[44]

Given the frequent association of realist and Impressionist aesthetics with photographic representation, the relationship between Expressionism and cinema was a contentious issue among film theorists, enmeshed in broader debates about the medium's specific properties and artistic potential. As Rudolf Kurtz wrote in 1926, "Of all art forms, film seems to be the least art and the most nature. Already its most essential means, photography, is perceived as fundamentally inartistic."[45] Kurtz argued that while Expressionism in film necessarily entailed compromise, the movement had nonetheless enriched the medium's visual repertoire, conjuring up "effects that lie beyond the photographable."[46] In a 1934 essay, Rudolf Arnheim likewise credited Expressionism with film's artistic development. Though criticizing the blind transference of stylistic principles from graphic art and painting to three-dimensional, cinematic space, Arnheim acknowledged Expressionism's important influence on film, likening it to the movement's impact on other arts: namely, the prioritization and freer application of formal factors, thus ending "a period in which the object was overvalued."[47]

43 Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

44 Erwin Panofsky, "Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures," in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 168; and Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 38.

45 Rudolf Kurtz, *Expressionismus und Film*, ed. Christian Kiening and Ulrich Johannes Beil (Zurich: Chronos, 2007), 51.

46 Ibid., 52, 84.

47 Rudolf Arnheim, "Expressionist Film," in *Film Essays and Criticism*, trans. Brenda Benthien (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 85.

Kracauer, whose aforementioned 1918 essay had recognized the movement for creating new artistic means, similarly argued in 1939 that Expressionist films, while overly theatrical, had been fruitful in establishing the necessary distance from outer reality to approach it anew, released from the constraints of inhibition and convention.[48]

Widely identified as the first work of Expressionist cinema, *Caligari* held a central position in classical film-theoretical debates on modes of engagement with physical reality. From its initial release onwards, Wiene's film was praised by some for its attempt to redefine cinematic practice apart from naturalist representation—or, as one reviewer wrote in 1920, for lifting the medium "out of the realm of photography into the pure sphere of the artwork."[49] Among *Caligari*'s numerous detractors, criticisms included the film's disregard for the medium's unique features and devices; impure combination of naturalistic and stylized elements; excessive, even enervating décor; and, finally, linkage of Expressionist aesthetics with the theme of insanity. In his 1947 essay, Panofsky argued that insofar as *Caligari* presented an adulterated pro-filmic space, it avoided the problem of cinema: namely, "to manipulate and shoot unstylized reality in such a way that the result has style."[50] Writing four years later, André Bazin similarly characterized *Caligari* as a failed attempt to depart from film's inalienable spatial realism, replacing "the world of experience" with "a fabricated nature" strongly influenced by theatre and painting.[51] Finally, in *Theory of Film*, Kracauer positioned *Caligari* as the earliest cinematic effort to abandon the medium's recording function. For Kracauer, Wiene's work prioritized free and autonomous creation above "camera-realism" in a misguided, even retrogressive quest to attain the legitimacy of the traditional arts.[52]

Caligari thus served as a negative example in numerous mid-twentieth-century theorizations of cinematic ontology and generic aesthetic boundaries. If, however, with a nod to Kracauer, one pursues an analogy between *Caligari*'s reworking of "camera reality" and contemporaneous intellectual efforts to rethink the nature and epistemology of "historical reality," one might also interpret the film in terms of historical-philosophical

48 Kracauer, "Über den Expressionismus," 77; and Siegfried Kracauer, "Wiedersehen mit alten Filmen: Der expressionistische Film," in *Werke* vol. 6.3, ed. Inka Mülder-Bach (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2004), 269.

49 Roland Schacht (aka Balthasar), "Caligari," *Freie Deutsche Bühne* 29, March 14, 1920, 695–98.

50 Panofsky, "Style and Medium," 169.

51 André Bazin, "Theater and Cinema," in *What Is Cinema? Vol. 1*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 109.

52 Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 37, 39, 61, 84–85.

debates—and, more specifically, as a critique of nineteenth-century German historicism.[53] Indeed, the Expressionist mise en scène of Wiene's film not only rejects traditional realist aesthetics, but also abandons the historicist quest to establish "how it essentially was" through individualizing observation. *Caligari*'s circular narrative structure also thwarts the historicist stress on evolutionary development, coinciding more with Oswald Spengler's vision of historical cyclicality.[54] Such a correspondence between Expressionist aesthetics and anti-historicism was suggested by Wiene himself in a 1922 text. Writing in the *Berliner Börsen-Courier*, Wiene positioned the Expressionism that emerged in the decade before World War I as a reaction against aesthetic realism, whether in its historicist or naturalist guises. For Wiene, Expressionism marked "an irrepressible countermovement, which turned against the last vestiges of historicism—in short, against all forms of realism," and had since become the goal of film and all other arts in the current era.[55]

Expressionist cinema's visual features and narrative structures are thus interpretable not only within a metacinematic or metacritical discourse—that is, as reflections of/on the properties, possibilities, and cultural-industrial positionality of the filmic medium—but also as *metahistorical* considerations of the philosophical tenets of historicist thought. Furthermore, Expressionist film's oft-noted reflexivity aligns it with what Hayden White has called an "ironic" mode of historiography, or one that inspires doubt about its own truth-claims by self-consciously negating that which it affirms on a literal level.[56] Such ironic reflexivity found astute and eloquent articulation in the culture of Weimar Germany—a culture that Helmut Lethen and Peter Sloterdijk have noted for its cool demeanour and disillusioned, cynical reason—and it is also evident in later movements of film history, including the *films noirs* of the 1940s and 1950s and the mind-game films of more recent decades.[57] More broadly, by examining Weimar cinema's extraordinary

53 Siegfried Kracauer, *History: The Last Things before the Last* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1995), 3–4.

54 Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926).

55 Robert Wiene, "Expressionism in Film," trans. Eric Ames, in *The Promise of Cinema: German Film Theory, 1907–1933*, ed. Anton Kaes, Nicholas Baer, and Michael Cowan (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 437.

56 Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in 19th-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 37–38.

57 Helmut Lethen, *Cool Conduct: The Culture of Distance in Weimar Germany*, trans. Don Reneau (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 36; and Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 546.

innovations in aesthetic and narrative form with regard to developments in early-twentieth-century intellectual history, I hope to demonstrate the significant role of film in engaging with large-scale, seismic shifts in modern philosophy—in particular, the decentring and disintegration of the Cartesian subject as well as the change from subject-object modes of thinking to a more complex, relativist perspectivism. In the following, I will study these shifts through a closer analysis of Wiene's *Caligari*.

Framing *Caligari*

Among the major points of contention in scholarship on Wiene's film since *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947) has been the function of the frame narrative, the addition of which, in Kracauer's well-known assessment, transformed "a revolutionary film [...] into a conformist one."[58] Kracauer based his appraisal of the film on a 1941 manuscript by Hans Janowitz, who had attributed the narrative device to Wiene, disavowing its presence in the original script.[59] Numerous scholars have since diverged from Kracauer's critique, offering alternative readings of *Caligari*'s politics; most notably, Anton Kaes has characterized the film as "an aggressive diatribe against the murderous practices of war psychiatry," associating it with "Dada's nihilistic attacks on the establishment."[60] While I would agree with those who have emphasized that *Caligari*'s openness and indeterminacy frustrate all ascriptions of direct socio-historical referentiality and political coherence, I also wish to shift focus to an unexplored area of inquiry: namely, the film's engagement with ontological, epistemological, and historiographical questions of the philosophy of history.[61] In my analysis, *Caligari* marks a challenge to basic historicist tenets, including the objectivity of historical accounts, the reliability and authority of narration, and the alignment of power and ethics. The film, I argue, conveys a radical scepticism regarding the possibility of

58 Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*, ed. Leonardo Quaresima (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 67.

59 Hans Janowitz, "*Caligari*–The Story of a Famous Story," in The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*: Texts, Contexts, Histories*, ed. Mike Budd (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 221–39.

60 Anton Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema: Weimar Culture and the Wounds of War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 53.

61 See Stefan Andriopoulos, "Suggestion, Hypnosis, and Crime: Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920)," in *Weimar Cinema: An Essential Guide to Classic Films of the Era*, ed. Noah Isenberg (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 24; and Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema*, 63, 76, 79, 92, 95.

detached, disinterested observation, suggesting a more perspectivist sense of historical reality as the interplay of finite interpretations.

For Kracauer, *Caligari*'s framing device pathologizes the narrator, Francis, thereby delegitimizing and even reversing his story's implied challenge to state authority. Furthermore, Kracauer views the narrative device itself, with its ambivalent gesture of containment, as the symbol of a collective trend in Weimar Germany toward both solipsistic retreat and inner, "psychological revolution."[62] Apart from its factual errors, internal contradictions, and dubious methodological premises, Kracauer's argument confronts myriad hermeneutical obstacles, most obviously the extension of the film's Expressionist design into the framing scenes and their intertitles. Because the film's concluding episode does not, as Kracauer himself notes, restore "conventional reality," it problematizes the relationship between Expressionist stylization and narrational insanity assumed by many contemporary reviewers.[63] Whereas Kracauer nonetheless maintains that Francis' story is bracketed as a "madman's fantasy," I would emphasize that the film not only ultimately refuses to designate his (and the asylum director's) degree of sanity, but also interrogates the bases upon which the figures' credibility might be evaluated and ascertained.[64] Moreover, in contrast to Kracauer, who associates the film's exclusive use of studio settings with a post-war German withdrawal from the exterior world, I submit that *Caligari* follows Nietzsche in calling into question the very existence and accessibility of a normative historical reality—one external to the subjective perspectives of discrete individuals.

In juxtaposing *Caligari*'s framing scenes with its inner story, Kracauer also discounts the blurring of formal and textual boundaries that characterizes Wiene's film and the Expressionist movement more generally. Distinguishing Expressionist dramaturgy from earlier theatrical practice, Walter Sokel argued that "the physical stage […] ceases to be a fixed frame of a scene or act," and the protagonist's dreamlike vision is no longer placed within an "explanatory frame of reference."[65] Although, as stated, *Caligari*'s Expressionist style is not consistently or unequivocally aligned with one character's psychological state, the film nonetheless disregards the barriers between inner self and external environment, and between enigmatic visions and elucidatory frameworks. In Wiene's film, aspects of characters' appearances, costumes, and props (e.g. the three streaks in the director's

62 Kracauer, *Caligari to Hitler*, 67.
63 Ibid., 70.
64 Ibid., 67.
65 Sokel, *Writer in Extremis*, 38, 45.

Fig. 3.1. Three streaks in the director's hair and gloves.

Fig. 3.2. Cesare's slender, angular physique and knife.

hair and gloves; Cesare's slender, angular physique and knife) correspond to patterns in the surrounding décor, and characteristics of the mise en scène (e.g. irregular shapes, distorted angles) extend not only to the film's framing scenes, but also beyond the diegesis to include the font and design of the intertitles. The film also obscures the thresholds between word and image, and between textual and paratextual elements; the injunction "*Du musst Caligari werden* [You must become Caligari]," which appears before the asylum director in a famous scene, also featured prominently in the film's 1920 advertising campaign.

The film's obfuscation of conventional borders also applies to its narrative and thematic registers. Drawing from the Romantic and Gothic literary works of Mary Shelley (*Frankenstein*, 1818), E. T. A. Hoffmann ("The Sandman" ["Der Sandmann," 1817]), Edgar Allan Poe ("The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether," 1845), and Robert Louis Stevenson (*The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, 1886), *Caligari* features fantastic, uncanny figures or motifs (e.g. ghosts, somnambulists, doppelgängers) that frustrate basic ontological distinctions, such as those between life and death, sleeping and wakefulness, and self and other. Cesare is first hailed for his omniscient and prophetic powers, which extend across temporal horizons ("Cesare knows the past and sees the future"), and he is also revealed to transgress spatial boundaries, repeatedly exiting the fairground area and penetrating into others' private spheres. The central mystery of the story within the story—Who is truly responsible for the series of murders in Holstenwall?—not only bleeds into and even beyond the frame narrative, resisting unambiguous resolution or closure, but is also complicated by a further question opened up by the concluding episode: namely, whether the murders narrated by Francis in fact occurred, or if the entire inner story was merely his subjective delusion. The film's inverse, mutually incompatible endings, alternately depicting the director and Francis in straitjackets in the insane asylum, pose an irresolvable challenge to viewers' capacity for decisive adjudication.

Caligari thus challenges the Kantian analytic of aesthetic judgement, confounding the delimitation of the work (*ergon*) from its addendum or frame (*parergon*), or the intrinsic from the extrinsic aspects of pictorial representation.[66] Emphasizing the non-absoluteness of the boundaries between the aesthetic object and its milieu—or, as Georg Simmel wrote in

66 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 110–11. See also Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 54–73.

"The Picture Frame" ("Der Bildrahmen," 1902), between the work of art and elements of an unmediated nature—*Caligari* deploys frames not toward the dual ends of external defence and internal integration, but rather toward those of "continuing exosmosis and endosmosis."[67] By reduplicating the inner story's themes of permeability and liminality across stylistic, narrational, and paratextual registers, the film eliminates the distance from the spectator that Simmel, following the Idealist tradition, deemed as essential for an artwork's wholeness, coherence, and self-sufficiency. Countering Simmel's conceptualization of the work of art as an autonomous, self-enclosed unity, the film highlights the indefiniteness of all demarcations or "border regions" as well as the non-fixity of the relationship between object and observer.[68] This new, more dynamic mode of relationality, as the following section will demonstrate, involved the dissolution of the perspectival system of space, which had not only contributed to the autonomy and formal order of the image, but had also allowed it to address a single beholder, whose monocular, immobile point of view was separated from the object of representation.

The Dissolution of Perspective

In his seminal essay "Perspective as 'Symbolic Form'" ("Die Perspektive als 'symbolische Form,'" 1927), Erwin Panofsky modified the approach of Alois Riegl, who had examined the relationship between the artwork and its surrounding world through his concept of the unique *Kunstwollen* (artistic will) of every epoch.[69] Panofsky replaced Riegl's inchoate *Weltanschauungsphilosophie* (philosophy of world views) with a neo-Kantian theory of the "symbolic form," or Ernst Cassirer's term for the spiritual energy through which human consciousness attributes meaning to sensual signs—a phenomenon, as Cassirer emphasized, that occurs across the various realms of cultural expression.[70] Observing correspondences between advances in Western philosophy and the evolution of spatial perception, Panofsky argued

67 Georg Simmel, "The Picture Frame: An Aesthetic Study," trans. Mark Ritter, in *Theory, Culture & Society* 11 (1994): 11.

68 On "border regions," see Till Dembeck, *Texte rahmen: Grenzregionen literarischer Werke im 18. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007).

69 Alois Riegl, "The Main Characteristics of the Late Roman *Kunstwollen*," trans. Christopher S. Wood, in *The Vienna School Reader: Politics and Art Historical Method in the 1930s*, ed. Christopher S. Wood (New York: Zone Books, 2003), 87–103.

70 Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. Christopher S. Wood (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 41; see also Wood's "Introduction" in ibid., 7–24.

that much as the idea of an infinite empirical reality had superseded the circumscribed geocentrism of Aristotelian thought, the system of central perspective had envisaged endless extension to a vanishing point, establishing distance between human beings and an objectified world of experience. Panofsky characterized perspective as an ambivalent and versatile method, and one that has served as the target of diametrically opposed critiques over the course of its history. Whereas ancient and medieval artists had largely eschewed perspective, associating it with subjectivism and contingency, the Expressionists had rejected it for preserving empirical, three-dimensional space, and thereby retaining an element of objectivity that constrained the "formative will" of the individual creator.[71]

The Expressionist movement advanced a broader trend in early-twentieth-century visual art toward dispelling perspectival geometry and envisioning new conceptions of space. Impressionist paintings of the 1860s and 1870s had already signalled an increasing dissatisfaction with perspectival conventions; instead of representing solid objects in three-dimensional space, works by Edgar Degas, Édouard Manet, Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and others had depicted the fleeting, subjective impressions that these objects left on the artists' perceptual apparatuses. However, where works of Impressionism had maintained a connection to physical reality, subsequent art movements (e.g. Post-Impressionism, Cubism) blatantly defied the aim of perspectival technique, as identified by Panofsky: "to construct pictorial space, in principle, out of the elements of, and according to the plan of, empirical visual space."[72] This rejection of art's function as a mimesis of external objects—and, with it, a dismissal of the pictorial surface's status as a window to the outer world—troubled the longstanding Cartesian split between the thinking subject (*res cogitans*) and the extended substance (*res extensa*). Emphasizing the untenability of separating the world of objects from a fixed observer, modern artists abandoned what the art historian Carl Einstein, in *Art of the Twentieth Century* (*Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts*, 1926), called the "perspectival calculus of distance," inaugurating "an epoch of technical and formal freedom."[73]

Concurrent with art historians' responses to the innovations of aesthetic modernism, early film theorists recognized cinema for its potential to expand and reconfigure the field of human perception. In *The Photoplay* (1916), Hugo Münsterberg made a plea for film's aesthetic independence on account of unique methods like the close-up, through which "an entirely new

71 Panofsky, *Perspective*, 71.

72 Ibid.

73 Carl Einstein, *Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Tanja Frank (Leipzig: Reclam, 1988), 12, 17.

perspective was opened."[74] Defending film against negative comparisons to the realist theatre, Münsterberg emphasized that art's purpose is "not to imitate life but to reset it in a way which is totally different from reality."[75] Eight years later, Béla Balázs' *Visible Man* (*Der sichtbare Mensch*, 1924) distinguished film from legitimized arts such as painting and theatre through its ability to offer spectators a dynamic point of view and a multiplicity of perspectives. Identifying uniquely cinematic scales and shot distances, Balázs celebrated film's ability to capture the ephemeral, often-invisible phenomena of everyday experience and to abstract them from their spatiotemporal coordinates.[76] Finally, in "The Cinema Seen from Etna" ("Le Cinématographe vu de l'Etna," 1926), Jean Epstein argued that cinema contributes an additional element to three-dimensional spatial representation: "To the elements of perspective employed in drawing, the cinema adds a new perspective in time."[77] Epstein highlighted the versatility of this temporal perspective, especially on account of cinematic techniques such as slow- and fast-motion.

Caligari marked an early demonstration of cinema's potential to offset conventions of perspectival representation. Emphasizing the medium's stylistic above its naturalist capacities—or, in Kracauer's words, its "formative" above its "realistic" tendencies—Wiene's film refuses to create the illusion of solid objects in three-dimensional space. The film thwarts viewers' sense of objects' physical properties and depth relationships through flat, painted studio sets with sharp, oblique angles; irregular, crooked shapes; and often-exaggerated sizes and proportions. Furthermore, whereas perspectival unity had depended on a particular point of observation, Wiene's film creates a highly unstable spectatorial positionality, not least through instances of direct address to the camera, alternation between the first- and third-person voice in the intertitles, and unresolved ambiguities regarding narratorial credibility. Writing in the *Berliner Abendpost* on February 29, 1920, Eugen Tannenbaum argued that Wiene's film does not depict "the perspective from the auditorium [*Zuschauerraum*]," but rather imposes the point of view of a madman: "the viewer is forced to see everything through *his* eyes: bizarre, grotesque, distorted, full of dark secrets and inexplicable connections."[78]

74 Hugo Münsterberg, *The Film: A Psychological Study* (Mineola: Dover, 1970), 15–16.

75 Ibid., 67.

76 Béla Balázs, *Early Film Theory:* Visible Man *and* The Spirit of Film, ed. Erica Carter, trans. Rodney Livingstone (New York: Berghahn, 2010), 41, 62, 63, 71.

77 Jean Epstein, "The Cinema Seen from Etna," trans. Tom Milne, in *Jean Epstein: Critical Essays and New Translations*, ed. Sarah Keller and Jason N. Paul (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 294.

78 Tannenbaum, "Expressionismus."

Fig. 3.3. Flat, painted studio sets with sharp, oblique angles.

Fig. 3.4. Often-exaggerated sizes and proportions.

Other reviewers similarly noted the film for its "suspension of perspective,"

abandonment of "all laws of things in space," and representation of the world "from a different viewpoint than that common until now."[79]

Challenging the association of film with the faithful reproduction of three-dimensional space, *Caligari* thus destabilized a linear-perspectival scheme that had reigned from Renaissance art to Impressionist painting. Though not fully exploring the possibilities of montage and camera movement, *Caligari* nonetheless deployed stylistic and narrative devices to enact what Kracauer, in his *Theory of Film*, identified as the "dissolution of traditional perspectives"—a general process that he attributed to photographic media, with their capacity to record and reveal unusual aspects of physical reality.[80] While Kracauer disparagingly categorized German Expressionist films as among those "which neglect the external world in freely composed dreams or visions," it may be more productive, following Friedrich Kittler, to place the films in a trajectory that includes optical devices (e.g. camera obscura, magic lantern, stroboscope), romantic literature (Friedrich Schiller's *The Ghost-Seer* [*Der Geisterseher*, 1787–1789], Novalis' *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* [1802], E. T. A. Hoffmann's *The Devil's Elixirs* [*Die Elixiere des Teufels*, 1815]), and emerging sciences (psychiatry, hypnotism, psychoanalysis), all of which involve illusions, hallucinations, and blurred boundaries between dreams and palpable reality.[81] If, as Kittler argues, the medium of film mobilizes the spectator's gaze and manipulates her or his "unconscious psychological states," it decentres the transcendental subject and suggests a more finite, relational regime of vision—or what Nietzsche had theorized as perspectivism.[82]

The Advent of Perspectivism

In its four-century-long "scopic regime," the technique of linear perspective was metaphorically extended to denote processes of perception and cognition.[83] Etymologically derived from the Latin verb *perspicio* (to look

79 Martin Proskauer, "'Das Kabinett des Dr. Caligari'—Ein Nachwort und eine Prophezeiung," *Film-Kurier* 2, no. 51 (February 29, 1920): 2; Christian Flüggen, "Das Kabinet des Dr. Caligari," *Deutsche Lichtspiel-Zeitung* 8, no. 12–13 (March 27, 1920): 2; and J. P. M., "Ein Film von Eigenart," *Vorwärts* 134 (March 13, 1920): 2.

80 Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 9.

81 Ibid., 37; and Friedrich Kittler, *Optical Media: Berlin Lectures 1999*, trans. Anthony Enns (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), 98–189.

82 Kittler, *Optical Media*, 175.

83 Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 187.

at/into, look/see through, examine, observe), the term "perspective" came to designate a particular line of sight on an object as well as a spatial or temporal distance necessary for proper valuation or judgement. From the seventeenth century onwards, the metaphor was employed by thinkers including Francis Bacon, François de La Rochefoucauld, Blaise Pascal, and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, the latter of whom first transposed the figure to the realm of metaphysics. Whereas Leibniz assumed a divinely assured, "perfect harmony" among different epistemic points of view, later philosophers confronted the immanence and potential incommensurability of discrete, localized perspectives.[84] The attendant concept of perspectivism, as developed by Gustav Teichmüller in *The Real and the Apparent World* (*Die wirkliche und die scheinbare Welt*, 1882), was theorized most influentially by Nietzsche and was also taken up by twentieth-century thinkers including José Ortega y Gasset, George Herbert Mead, Edmund Husserl, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The concept's emergence in modern philosophy thus coincided with the dissolution of perspective in the visual arts, reflecting what Claudio Guillén and Martin Jay have identified as an epochal change in conceiving vision as a possible means of knowledge and understanding.[85]

Across his writings, Nietzsche shifted between semantic registers of perspectivism, moving from an "unbridled" to a more "circumspect" use of the metaphor, as James Conant has argued.[86] In "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense" ("Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinne," 1873), Nietzsche emphasized the impossibility of "correct perception" or "pure knowledge" of an external object, undistorted by the subject's cognitive perspective.[87] Nietzsche's early work nonetheless presupposed the possibility of *conceptualizing* "the essence of things," unmediated by forms of human subjectivity—a conceptualization, as he later acknowledged, that would itself be unavoidably perspectival in character.[88] Questioning

84 Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Theodicy*, trans. E. M. Huggard (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), section 357.

85 Claudio Guillén, "On the Concept and Metaphor of Perspective," in *Literature as System: Essays toward the Theory of Literary History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 326, 358; and Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 188–89.

86 James Conant, "The Dialectic of Perspectivism, I," *SATS: Nordic Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 2 (2005): 8.

87 Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lie in a Nonmoral Sense," in *Philosophy of Truth*, trans. Daniel Breazeale (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1979), 86, quoted in Conant, "Perspectivism, I," 40–41.

88 Conant, "Perspectivism, I," 46; and James Conant, "The Dialectic of Perspectivism, II," *SATS: Nordic Journal of Philosophy* 7, no. 1 (2006): 34.

a fatalistic sense of inescapable confinement within subjective consciousness, Nietzsche restricted the scope of the metaphor and argued for the untenability of the antithesis between the noumenon and phenomenon, or the thing-in-itself (*Ding an sich*) and its perspectival appearance. By *On the Genealogy of Morality* (*Zur Genealogie der Moral*, 1887), Nietzsche called for rethinking the entire conceptual opposition between objectivity and subjectivity, emphasizing their necessary admixture and interaction in the quest for truth. Rather than postulating the existence of an endless multitude of perspectives as an indication of humans' untranscendable epistemic constraints, Nietzsche now invoked the possibility of employing "a *variety* of perspectives and affective interpretations in the service of knowledge."[89]

Nietzsche's theorization of perspectivism raised critical issues for the discipline of history. The advent and metaphorization of Renaissance perspective had prompted increasing reflection on the particularity of the historian's viewpoint. Already in the eighteenth century, Johann Martin Chladenius had recognized the historian's perspectival position as a determining factor in her or his understanding and interpretation of the past.[90] Whereas Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* (*Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte*, 1822–1830) had adopted an avowedly omniscient view—"the sum total of all possible perspectives"—Ranke had espoused the more modest, self-effacing ideal of impartial, objective representation, or showing the "naked truth without adornment."[91] Critiquing historicism in both guises, Nietzsche not only denied the existence of a transcendent, supra-individual point of view, but also questioned the assumption of a single, actual history that could be methodically reconstructed. Furthermore, dispelling Hegel's affirmative theodicy and Ranke's optimistic faith in the alliance of ethics and power, Nietzsche instead presented historical reality as the interplay of fallible and value-laden interpretations. Thus, although perspectivism has often been conflated with historicism, it bears emphasis that Nietzsche's writings destabilized and even undermined the latter's basic

89 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals & Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1969), III, 12, quoted in Conant, "Perspectivism, II," 44.

90 Reinhart Koselleck, "Perspective and Temporality: A Contribution to the Historiographical Exposure of the Historical World," in *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 133–34.

91 G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 30; and Leopold von Ranke, *Zur Kritik neuerer Geschichtsschreiber* (Leipzig: Reimer, 1824), 28; quoted in Koselleck, "Perspective and Temporality," 131.

Fig. 3.5. Iris shots.

tenets, anticipating the "crisis of historicism" widely diagnosed following the German defeat in World War I.

Emerging contemporaneously with the acute crisis of historical thought, *Caligari* enacts the idea of perspectivism through its narrative and aesthetic features. Wiene's film is intensely preoccupied with how historical accounts are mediated and distorted through subjective consciousness. The first scene alone focuses on an act of first-person narration and deploys multiple iris shots, which highlight the incompleteness of the perspective offered by the individual storyteller and by the camera lens. The film's inner story likewise emphasizes forms of visual and cognitive limitation, with multiple secrets, inexplicable occurrences, and instances in which both the film's characters and its viewers are deceived or denied information—an epistemic instability reduplicated through the film's spatiotemporally indeterminate settings and disorienting, post-perspectival set design. The final sequence, which discloses the narrator's unreliability but maintains the Expressionist style, offers neither a detached, stable point of view on the action nor narrative clarification and resolution. Refusing insight into the "actual" course of events, the film's concluding scenes instead suggest a proliferation of incommensurable accounts without an external standard of judgement. Furthermore, denying viewers a definite specification of

Fig. 3.6. Subjectivist and even solipsistic perspectivism.

the identities, ethical commitments, and degrees of sanity of both doctor and patient, the film intimates an interchangeability of roles and even an arbitrariness of institutional power structures.

Abandoning the historicist ideal of unbiased, comprehensive representation, *Caligari* instead stresses the invariable partisanship and epistemic limitations of all accounts. In its scepticism regarding the attainability of pure truth, and in its self-reflexive figuration of all human knowledge as bounded, imprecise, and relative, the film recalls Nicholas of Cusa's doctrine of "learned ignorance [*docta ignorantia*]."[92] However, whereas Nicholas postulated the essential incomprehensibility of an Absolute Being who alone "apprehends what He is," *Caligari* instead follows Nietzsche in confronting the philosophical dilemmas accompanying the proverbial death of God—a death, as Martin Jay emphasizes, that also eradicated the "God's-eye view."[93] *Caligari*, in my analysis, takes up Nietzsche's early invocation of a relativist, subjectivist, and even solipsistic perspectivism, as envisaged in the film's final depiction of the insane asylum, where each

92 Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*, trans. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning Press, 1981).

93 Ibid., 25 (I, 16: 44); and Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 190.

patient is radically insular and discrete in assumed identity and worldview. Notably, the multiplicity and incommensurability of different perspectives extend beyond the mise en scène to interpellate the film's own viewers, faced with a bewildering array of possible interpretations of the work itself. Wiene's work, as I will demonstrate, thus foregrounds problems of hermeneutics following the detranscendalization and dissolution of Cartesian perspectivalism, whereby all cognizing subjects are implicated as finite, locally conditioned participants within the dynamic process of history.

Problems of Hermeneutics

Recognizing the threat of relativism faced by the historical sciences, Wilhelm Dilthey adapted the interpretive procedures developed by Friedrich Schleiermacher into a methodology for securing knowledge of the past. In "The Rise of Hermeneutics" ("Die Entstehung der Hermeneutik," 1900), Dilthey conceived a process of understanding (*Verstehen*) through an imaginative re-experiencing (*Nacherleben*) of others' psychic states. In this way, Dilthey wrote, the subjective operations of the observer could "be raised to objective validity."[94] Among the many problems with Dilthey's approach was an assumed homogeneity of exegete and author, or subject and object of research. Appealing to "the substratum of a general human nature" as the basis for interpretation, Dilthey neglected historicism's crucial emphasis on the uniqueness of all sociocultural phenomena and values.[95] Thus, although Dilthey sought to resist what he deemed "the inroads of [...] skeptical subjectivity," he failed to offer a satisfactory solution to the aporias of historicist thought, as later formulated by Hans-Georg Gadamer: "how objectivity is possible in relativity and how we are to conceive the relation of the finite to the absolute."[96] Taking up Dilthey's hermeneutic theory, Gadamer emphasized the limited range of vision within the present and the unfeasibility of self-transposition into the past. While postulating the inescapability of tradition and prejudice, Gadamer

94 Wilhelm Dilthey, "The Rise of Hermeneutics," trans. Fredric Jameson, *New Literary History* 3, no. 2 (Winter 1972): 231.

95 Ibid., 243. On the problems of Dilthey's thinking, see Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 222–34.

96 Dilthey, "Hermeneutics," 244; and Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004), 230.

invoked the potential for historical understanding through an ongoing "fusion of horizons."[97]

For Dilthey, hermeneutics promised not only to avert historicism's relativist implications, but also to delineate humanistic inquiry from an imperialist positivism. An innovator of *Lebensphilosophie* (philosophy of life) in the late nineteenth century, Dilthey distinguished the dynamic sphere of human activity from the inanimate objects of natural-scientific research, positing life itself as the foundation of the human sciences. Countering the theory of phenomenalism, which denied the distinction between appearances and essences, Dilthey described the object of the human sciences as "an inner reality, a coherence experienced from within," and he identified the goal of hermeneutics as that of surpassing an author's own self-understanding, as per the "doctrine of unconscious creation."[98] Furthermore, emphasizing the interpreter's immersion in her or his very sphere of investigation, Dilthey problematized the separation of facts from judgements and also eliminated the distance between the observer and objective world; whereas the scientific method had facilitated the amassing of facts based on neutral, disinterested apprehension, Dilthey sought meaningful truth through a more holistic, projective act of interpretation. Finally, in contrast to positivism, which lacked reflexivity regarding the observer's subjective consciousness, Dilthey characterized understanding and interpretation as "active in life itself," and he envisaged the process of historical reconstruction (*Nachbildung*) as a means of self-knowledge.[99]

Caligari followed Dilthey and other "philosophers of life" in critiquing positivism, challenging the privileged relation that it had presumed between vision and knowledge. Wiene's film perpetually reveals the epistemic insufficiency of external signs, featuring figures who deceive sensory perception, assume alternate names or identities, are driven by obsessive ideas, or are even unaware of their own actions. While highlighting modes of observation and surveillance involved in detective work, the film emphasizes the fallibility and manipulability of visual evidence as well as its inadequacy for determining motives—as when a man is wrongfully accused of the murders in Holstenwall due to his possession of a knife (with which he had hoped to divert suspicion for an attempted homicide), or when Francis unwittingly watches Cesare's dummy for hours while the actual somnambulist abducts Jane. The film also confounds basic temporal and ontological boundaries

97 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 305.
98 Dilthey, "Hermeneutics," 231, 244.
99 Ibid., 241, 231.

between the researcher and the object of investigation; in a flashback within the inner story, the asylum director reads an eighteenth-century chronicle of Dr. Caligari and is compelled not only to re-enact the doctor's murderous experiments, but also to "become Caligari." Though Francis and the asylum's doctors later unmask the director after scrutinizing his book and diary, the film's concluding scenes disclose the dubiousness of Francis' own story, thus undermining spectators' assumptions based on the entire preceding action.

Insofar as *Caligari* unsettles attempts to ascertain knowledge on the basis of written accounts, it also destabilizes central tenets of Dilthey's hermeneutic theory. Much as the narrative's unsolvable mysteries thwart an optimism regarding the ultimate attainability of truth, the film's own vicissitudinous history of distribution and exhibition disrupts a philological concentration on "fixed and relatively permanent expressions of life," revealing contingencies and discontinuities in the passage from a work's creator(s) to its present-day exegete.[100] The century since *Caligari*'s premiere has witnessed the circulation of prints varying significantly in length, music, intertitles, and colouration along with the proliferation of spurious, often-contradictory claims regarding the film's authorship, production process, and political meanings. Important discoveries (e.g. the screenplay, a tinted nitrate copy) over the past decades have dispelled numerous legends about the film and have also facilitated more precise, historically grounded readings. In my analysis, however, the unreflexive historicism of much research on *Caligari* is at odds with the film's own pointed critique of nineteenth-century historical methodology. If, as I have sought to demonstrate, *Caligari* rejects a naïve objectivism and abandons the historicist quest for comprehensive representation, the film renders one film historian's recent encyclopaedic effort to document "the true story behind its creation" a rather ironic undertaking.[101]

Caligari emerged at a time when the German historicist tradition was entering a state of acute and widely diagnosed crisis, and the film, I have argued, engaged with contemporaneous metahistorical debates, offering aesthetic responses to ontological, epistemological, and historiographical questions of the philosophy of history. Dismissing the Rankean ideal of faithfully and impartially reconstructing the past, or showing "*wie es eigentlich gewesen*," *Caligari* instead followed Nietzsche in envisioning historical reality as the interplay of finite, locally conditioned interpretations. This perspectivist view corresponded with the insights of Einstein's

100 Ibid., 232.

101 Olaf Brill, *Der Caligari-Komplex* (Munich: Belleville, 2012), 7.

Theory of Relativity, which superseded Newton's ideas of absolute time and space, provoking an epochal shift, as George Herbert Mead later wrote, from assuming "an absolute world of reality of which perspectives are partial presentations" to conceiving another possibility: that of "a universe consisting of perspectives."[102] Einstein's Theory implicated individuals as participants in their very realm of observation, suggesting a more interactive, spatiotemporally dynamic relationship between the cognizing subject and the object of cognition. Enacting this new mode of relationality through its unnerving, enigmatic narrative and Expressionist, post-perspectival style, Wiene's *Caligari* helped herald an age of self-conscious uncertainty—an age, as Werner Heisenberg would write, aware of the impossibility of any "sharp separation between the world and the I."[103]

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102 George Herbert Mead, *The Philosophy of the Act*, ed. Charles W. Morris (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938), 118–19.

103 Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy: The Revolution in Modern Science* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1999), 81.

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