

The Plant Bites! Deviant Plants in *Nosferatu* and *Araune* as Metaphors for Social Instability in Weimar Culture

As is well known, the preoccupation with the occult in fantastic literature would find a continuation in the Weimar era in the realm of expressionist film. Beginning with Lotte Eisner's foundational study *The Haunted Screen* (first published in French as *L'Ecran Démonique* in 1952), scholars of Weimar cinema have frequently traced a genealogy of occult motifs leading from German romanticism through fin-de-siècle fantastic literature to the representations of occultist phenomena in film such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919), *Waxworks* (1924) and *Metropolis* (1927). Given my own genealogy of "plant life" from German romanticism to the turn-of-the-century, it should come as no surprise if—alongside scientific representations of plant movement in films such as *Blumenwunder*—animated plants frequently show up as occultist motifs in the fiction films of the Weimar era. But if Weimar cinema inherited the concern for the occult from romanticism and fantastic literature, the prevalence of occult motifs in these films also registered a new experience of social anxiety. At least since Siegfried Kracauer's influential study, *From Caligari to Hitler. A Psychological History of the German Film* (1947), scholars have sought to understand the predilection for uncanny phenomena in German film of the 1920s symptomatically, i.e. as the traces of social anxieties linked to the experience of profoundly unstable social and political order after WWI. While more recent scholars might not share Kracauer's teleological interpretation of these films as premonitions of Nazism, the bulk of Weimar scholarship has adopted a framework linking these films to the experience of instability, while extending Kracauer's analysis to specific forms of social upheaval including the experience of the war and revolution,²⁰⁷ economic instability and the transformations of class and gender relations.²⁰⁸

207 With the intention to "reverse the perspective of Siegfried Kracauer's influential book," Anton Kaes argues convincingly that the lasting impact of WWI as a pervasive trauma can be read even in Weimar films that don't directly address WWI (4,5). Kaes has also included *Nosferatu* in this category of shell shock cinema as a narrative of separation, mass death and returning home.

208 Richard McCormick's *Gender and Sexuality in Weimar Modernity* reads the style of New Objectivity as symptomatic of a reaction against instability in gender roles.

In the present chapter, I want to propose a similar reading of representations of plant life in Weimar cinema. Whereas an educational-scientific film like *Das Blumenwunder* could represent plant movement as a utopian discovery (in line with Balázs' vision of film as providing an alternative to rationalist thinking), other representations of plant life in Weimar film took on a much more demonic tone. Focusing my analysis on F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922) and Henrik Galeen's *Ahraune* (1928), I argue that such "demonic" and transgressive plants in Weimar film served as metaphors for the perception of social destabilization and the loss of traditional boundaries. Moreover, by comparing two films from the beginning and end of the decade, this chapter also argues that the relation to the experience of social instability changed: whereas *Nosferatu* uses demonic plants to "naturalize" social instability, essentially showing disorder to be an unavoidable state of things, *Ahraune* represents the demonic plant, which by transgressing the stable order, must be punished.

Plants appear briefly in *Nosferatu* and *Ahraune*, playing small but crucial roles in films that reflect on the shifting gender and class relationships as well as the relationship of the scientist to nature. In *Nosferatu*, the protagonist Ellen empathizes with a bouquet of flowers, and the scientist, Professor Bulwer, projects a clip of a Venus flytrap devouring a fly. In *Ahraune*, plants assume a more prominent place in the narrative through the title character, who is created from a mandrake root, even if the mandrake itself appears only a few times. But although plants may be on screen for only a brief time, they nonetheless serve as central metaphors for the profound social instability during the Weimar Republic, reflective of the immediate post WWI period for *Nosferatu* and the height of the stabilization period for *Ahraune*, and they serve to dislocate the position and role of the monstrous.

The two films have received unequal attention by scholars with the lion's share going to *Nosferatu*.²⁰⁹ Many influential scholars have analysed and interpreted *Nosferatu* within the framework of Weimar Expressionist film aesthetics, resulting in a myriad of competing readings. But despite the variety of interpretations, most readings do fall within the frameworks of expressionist film research outlined above; whereas Tom Gunning positions *Nosferatu*

209 *Ahraune* has received little attention from scholars although it was immensely popular at the time (the original film with Brigitte Helm was followed by a remake in sound). A look at Valerie Weinstein's book chapter, one of the few interpretations of *Ahraune*, will be included after the discussion of *Nosferatu*.