

The German silent films of the '20s by Rainer F. Engel

Symphonies of Shadow and Light

There has always been a tradition of horror and the unknown in the cinema. Even early on filmmakers discovered the opportunities of the new medium of film to make the impossible possible. At the beginning it was the moving pictures themselves, causing mistrust and anxiety with the audience not accustomed to them. From the tents and fairs that displayed the earliest of shows, a few spectators suspected the work of the devil behind the mysterious flickering images. Though despised by the intellectuals and the middle-class, the triumphal procession of the new medium of film couldn't be stopped...

I would like to begin this article by thanking Dr. Rolf Giesen and Peter Latta of the "Foundation Deutsche Kinemathek" for their invaluable help compiling information and providing the fantastic images to illustrate the visual flair of the German silent cinema. The foundation dedicates their efforts to preserve the rich heritage of German filmmaking from the past to the present, culminating in the permanent exhibition of the Filmmuseum at the Sony Center at Potsdamer Platz in Berlin, established in the year 2000. Today the Deutsche Kinemathek has 12,000 German and foreign silent and sound films archived. The foundation has also undertaken efforts to reconstruct many important films and make them again available to the general public.

The museum's collection includes over a million film stills, portraits and production photos, 30,000 scripts, 20,000 posters, 60,000 film programs, movie tickets, personal estates as well as projectors, cameras and other devices from the early years of cinema up until today. Drawings, designs and models testify to the development of set design in Germany from 1919 until the present. The Marlene Dietrich Collection-Berlin protects and preserves Marlene Dietrich's huge estate, which the Kinemathek acquired from the City-State of Berlin in 1993. Many rare items, costumes and memorabilia of one of Germany's greatest Stars are proudly on display. But allow me to get to the topic at hand...

Germany 1919: The lost war put an abrupt end to the

Conrad Veidt as Cesare from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*.

The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari.

Conrad Veidt from *The Hands Of Orlak.*

Paul Wegener as *The Golem, 1920.*



Photo provided by Filmmuseum Berlin / Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek

Photo provided by Filmmuseum Berlin / Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek



Der Golem, 1914. This was Paul Wegener's first portrayal as the man of clay.



Max Schreck sans makeup...



...and as Nosferatu.

old order of the Kaiserreich. The Germans, suspended in a state of shock, realized their imperialistic dreams were blown to smithereens. The remaining authorities suppressed the arising revolt, and the Allies demands dictated in the Versailles treaty intensified the population's instability. Inflation and chaos were the immediate consequences in the streets. Mysticism and magic are the dark subjects which the German soul enjoyed devoting itself to. The eternal enticement of the musing leads directly to the apocalyptic doctrine of the Expressionist Movement. Expressionism uses the fullest utilization of the cinematic resources to create a dramatic larger-than-life effect. It also allows the fullest expression or state of emotion to be given. This includes the script, the acting, costumes and the scenery particularly. "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari" was certainly the 'natal hour' of the expressionist film, but its birth was rather a strange convergence of circumstances. The authors Carl Mayer and Hans Janowitz had art in mind while conceiving the story, but producer Erich Pommer just saw a possibility to bring a reasonably budgeted film on the screens of postwar Germany.

Painted sets on canvas guaranteed low production expenses in times of material shortages and a chronic lack of money. The film's architects Hermann Warm, and Walter Roehrig instantly recognized that the material was suitable for an expressionistic approach. The designated director Robert Wiene (1874-1938) didn't. Actually, he had to be persuaded by the architects and authors, but later claimed the sole authorship for the expressionistic decorations. The story is of a carnival showman (Werner Krauss) who abuses somnambulist Cesare (Conrad Veidt) to take revenge upon his enemies. The inquiry of the student Francis exposes Caligari as the director of a lunatic asylum, but the entire story finally proves to be the daydream of one of the institution's inmates. The movie was a worldwide box office smash but stylistically, the world wondered if the Germans finally had lost their collective minds! The Filmmuseum

Berlin possesses the only surviving script from Werner Krauss' estate. An Atelier model made by set designer Herman Warm illustrates in every detail how the film was shot at the studios of Berlin Weissensee. Director Wiene never again matched the artistic success of "Caligari," but he continued tackling the supernatural in films like 1924's "The Hands of Orlak" (again with Conrad Veidt), later remade in 1933 Hollywood as "Mad Love" with Peter Lorre.

Actor, author and director Paul Wegener (1874-1948) was the impetus behind another key figure of the German expressionistic film: The Golem. Wegener touched the subject several times, first in 1914 in the now lost film "Der Golem." A small budget transposed the Golem into the present: An excavation in a synagogue unearths a full-size clay figure immediately bought by a Jewish dawdler. With the help of a magic amulet the Golem (Paul Wegener) is resurrected to watch over the virginity of his owner's daughter. But, when her innocence finally is in danger, the "Man of clay, Man of slay" runs amok!

With a lavish budget at his disposal, Wegener tackled the topic again in 1920 with the "Golem und wie er in die Welt kam." In this version set in the 16th century, the Golem is the guardian of the Jewish Ghetto of Prague. Formed from clay, he is resurrected with black magic by Rabbi Loew. However, an awkward constellation of the stars changes his character: rebelling against his maker he finally destroys the ghetto and burns it down to the ground. In the end, an innocent little girl defeats him by removing the magic amulet from his chest, which returns him into a lifeless heap of mud. Art Director Hans Poelzig created, under the supervision of Wegener and co-director Carl Boese, a Prague of dark shadows, sloping houses and narrow alleyways. One of the first films where script, scenery, photography and direction form a dramatic unity, leaving the boundaries of the stage behind. This film was highly influential both in form and content to Universal's "Frankenstein" films of the '30s.

Ernst Lubitsch, Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, Fritz Lang and Georg Wilhelm

Rare Nosferatu publicity stills.

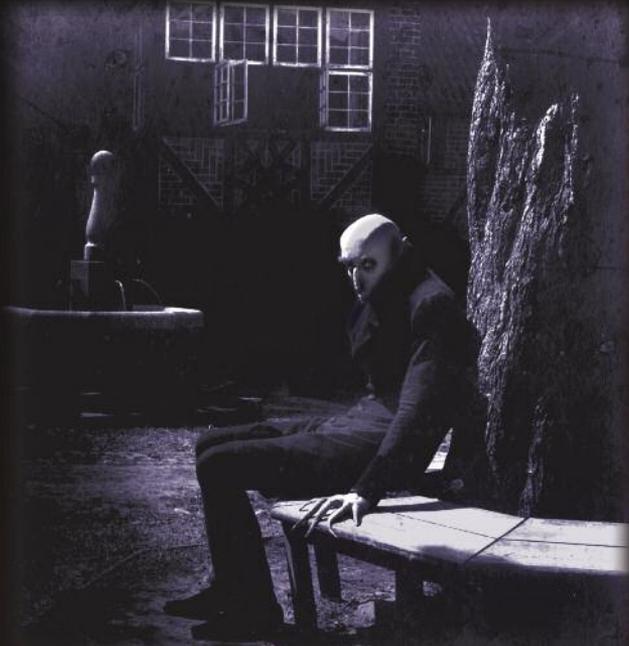




Photo provided by Filmmuseum Berlin / Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek

Brigitte Helm as "The False Maria" from *Metropolis*.

Rudolf Klein-Rogge as Rotwang from *Metropolis*.



Director Fritz Lang

Photo provided by Filmmuseum Berlin / Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek

Pabst were the dominating creative forces of the German silent cinema. The former comic actor turned director Lubitsch (b.1892), who specialized in sophisticated comedies, left Germany early for Hollywood and became Paramount Studio's leading producer until his untimely death in 1947. His films include timeless classics like "Trouble in Paradise" (1932), "Ninotchka" (1939), "To Be or Not to Be" (1942) and "Heaven Can Wait" (1943).

G.W. Pabst (1885-1967) usually tackled pessimistic and melodramatic subjects, among his famous films were "Joyless Streets"(1925) featuring a young Greta Garbo, "Pandora's Box" (1928) and "Diary of a Lost Girl" (1929) starring the enigmatic roaring '20s 'It Girl' Louise Brooks (1906-1980).

F. W. Murnau was born in 1889 as Friedrich Wilhelm Plumpe in Bielefeld, Germany. After he attended the University of Heidelberg and studied art history, he adapted the name 'Murnau' from a small town in Germany. He was a combat pilot during World War I and directed his first film in 1919. He had a soft spot in his heart for the fantastic; one of his first features, "Der Januskopf"(1920) was an unauthorized adaptation of Stevenson's "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde." The film starring Conrad Veidt is now considered lost.

His next excursion into the realms of the supernatural is also his most famous: "Nosferatu - Eine Symphonie des Grauens" (1922). A loose adaptation of Bram Stoker's novel "Dracula," screenwriter Hendrik Galeen changed the names and places to avoid royalty payments. Real estate broker Hutter (Gustav von Wangenheim) travels to Transylvania to ink a deal with the mysterious Count Orlock (Max Schreck). The nobleman purchases a dilapidated town house in Wisborg. At night Orlock pays his guest an unwelcome visit to drink his blood. Trapped and terrified, Hutter can't prevent the Count from traveling on a ship to Wisborg. Together with the abandoned ship the pestilence also enters the city. Orlock chooses Ellen (Greta Schröder), Hutter's wife to be his first victim; but she sacrifices herself by sojourning him until the break of dawn. The sunlight put an end to the vampire's existence; the pestilence died with him.

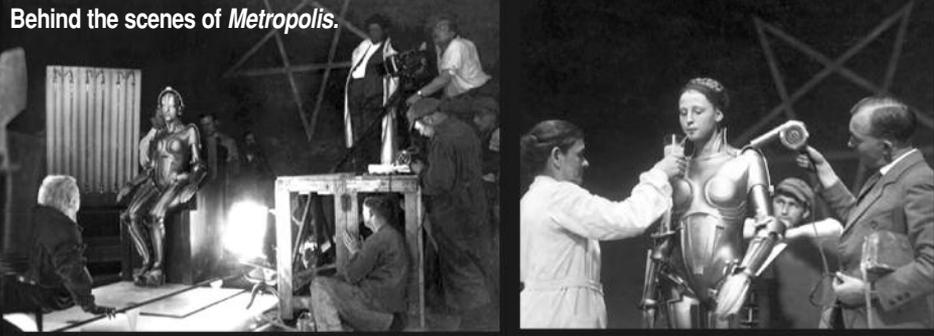
The Producer and Art Director Albin Grau (b. 1894) allowed Murnau to take the movie beyond the boundaries of the studio stage. As a student of Aleister Crowley and member of the Fraternitas Saturni,

Rarely seen money prop used for *Metropolis*.



Photo provided by Filmmuseum Berlin / Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek

Behind the scenes of *Metropolis*.





Faust



Murnau's Faust

Grau was also able to infuse Nosferatu with hermetic and mystical undertones. For example, the cryptic contract that Count Orlock and Knock exchanged was decorated with occult and alchemic symbols. Grau was also a strong influence on Orlock's rat-like and emaciated appearance. Murnau uses nature not only as scenery, but also as a reflection of the spiritual constitution and the mood of the characters. He allegedly shot the parts showing Transylvania on location in Slovakia. Nosferatu's castle is Orava Castle in northern Slovakia, and other locations were the High Tatras and the Váh River around Streno Castle. Murnau defined the look of the horror film for the years to come; his powerful images are still reused by filmmakers today. Max Schreck (1879-1936) was a renowned stage actor working for Max Reinhardt. He appeared in nearly 50 films, but it is his performance as the bald, bat-eared, rodent-like Orlock that remains his finest hour, and remains as one of the most frightening characters ever filmed. As a side note: his name Schreck is also the German word for fright / terror. Alas, Stoker's widow Florence was not amused and struck a little terror of her own when she learned of the blatant copyright infringement and sued Prana Film. Her plea was successful; all remaining copies of the films were ordered to be destroyed. Fortunately, some survived and decades after the initial release, the film is now restored to its original cut.

There was no such luck attached to "Nosferatu" for the producers; Prana Film filed for bankruptcy soon after the trial. The sudden death of Max Schreck in 1936 is still surrounded by mystery - rumor has it he was involved in the resistance movement against Hitler and was murdered by the Gestapo. Albin Grau was killed in October 1942 at the concentration camp Buchenwald in Thuringia, Germany. F. W. Murnau died in a tragic car accident in Santa Monica, California in 1931 at the age of 42.

Murnau's next cinematic milestone was "The Last Laugh" (1925), written by Carl Mayer. The doorman (Emil Jannings) of a Grand Hotel loses his job, as he is considered too old and infirm. He is retained to take care of the restrooms and tries to hide this fact from his friends and family. To his shame, he is accidentally discovered. A happy ending of a sudden inheritance was attached to guarantee a better box-office reception. The film introduced for the first time the

subjective point of view camera and had no title cards at all. His last film made in Germany before leaving for Hollywood was "Faust" (1927), a lavish retelling of the old German folktale and inspired by J.W. Goethe's famous stage play. Again, he delivered a visually and dramatic masterpiece, full of apocalyptic and allegorical images. After the international success of "The Last Laugh" he received a "carte blanche" from the Universum Film AG (UFA), resulting in a special effects laden extravaganza, controlling every aspect of the production. Heaven and Hell waging for the soul of one man and with him for the destiny of mankind. The aged scientist Faust (Gösta Ekman) is seduced by Mephistopheles (Emil Jannings) selling his soul to regain his youth. The now unleashed plagues are ravaging the land, leaving death and destruction on their path. But finally Faust's love and sacrifice for Gretchen (Camilla Horn) conquers all and banishes the hounds of hell back to eternal darkness. Murnau creates a succession of dreamscapes, plunged in dark mysticism rather than the rationalism of the source material.

Austrian director Fritz Lang (1890-1976) began his film career in 1919. Lang had his first box office success in 1921 with "Der Muede Tod/Destiny." The solemn fantasy, co-written by his wife Thea von Harbou (1888-1954), tells the story of a young woman trying to save her lover from the presence of Death. Weary of killing, Death tells her three stories set in exotic locales like ancient China, Venice, and the Orient, just to illustrate whatever she does is inevitable. His strong visual style emerged here for the first time, with heavy influences of the romantic and fantasy art of Arnold Böcklin. The clever use of special effects like a flying carpet ride impressed Hollywood, and Douglas Fairbanks bought the American rights to the film, but only to delay its general American release while he copied the effects for his own "The Thief of Baghdad" (1924). Lang's next feature "Dr. Mabuse - Der Spieler/Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler" was inspired by the post war depression and inflation: A criminal mastermind called Doctor Mabuse (Rudolf Klein-Rogge) uses disguises, fake identities, hypnotism and blackmail in his efforts to obtain world domination. But, when finally caught he turns out to be just a raving maniac. After the lost war, the desire for a renovation of Germany's smashed national identity resulted in the UFA production of "Die Nibelungen -

Fritz Lang's Metropolis.



Fritz Lang's Die Nibelungen Part 1: Siegfrieds Tod





The Man Who Laughs: Conrad Veidt

Gwynplaine and Dea (Mary Philbin)

Gwynplaine and his dog

Siegfrieds Tod / Kriemhilds Rache"(1923/24). Based on the German folk tale of Siegfried, who slayed the dragon Fafnir and obtaining a magic hood and the Hort (a treasure) from the dwarf Alberich. Siegfried approaches Gunter, King of Worms, courting for his beautiful sister Kriemhild. Gunther request his help to win Brunhild, queen of Isenland. The magic hood that makes Siegfried invisible proves to be most useful. Courtier Hagen von Tronje fears the rising power of Siegfried and kills him with the help of his unsuspecting wife Kriemhild. Heartbroken, she seeks a gruesome revenge. Directed by Lang and again written by von Harbou, the film contains striking visuals that defined the look of so many Fantasy films to come, like "Conan the Barbarian"(1980) and "Legend"(1985). The innovative use of special effects is remarkable, even the life-sized hand operating dragon remains impressive to this day.

January 10, 1927, one of the most influential movies ever made premiered at the Ufa-Palast am Zoo theatre: Fritz Lang's visionary epic "Metropolis". It's the tale of a towering city of the future, kept alive by vast armies of workers deep beneath the surface. Freder (Gustav Fröhlich), the only son of Metropolis ruler Johann Fredersen (Alfred Abel) discovers through the gentle young girl Maria (Brigitte Helm) how the people suffer to ensure his lavish lifestyle. His father realizes the influence that the outspoken Maria has on the workers, worrying that this could put an untimely end to his reign. He hires the mad scientist Rotwang (Rudolf Klein-Rogge) to replace her with a robot doppelganger. The robot suborns the workers to revolt, to give Fredersen a reason to enslave them forever. Their plot fails and Freder races against time to save both the city and Maria. The story nowadays seems a bit naive and confusing, mainly due to the constant editing efforts of the producers to downsize the pictures original running time of 150 minutes. The movie cost five million Reichsmark, was hated fiercely by the critics and ended being a box office disaster. Regardless of its setbacks, the film's concepts and images, created by Art Directors Erich Kettelhut, Karl Vollbrecht and Otto Hunte, still haunt the Science-Fiction cinema. Nearly every cinematic version of the future descends from the vision of Metropolis. The skyscrapers of "Blade Runner", "Star Wars: Attack of the Clones", "Alphaville", "Dark City", "The Fifth Element", and Tim Burton's "Batman" all borrow from Fritz Lang's and Thea von Harbou's brainchild. Even James Whale,

Director of Universal's "Frankenstein" (1931), modeled Henry Frankenstein and his laboratory of bubbling liquids and electric sparks after Metropolis's own mad scientist Rotwang. Behind the camera was Karl Freund who later directed "The Mummy" (1931) and "Mad Love"(1933) in Hollywood. On display at the museum is a recreation of the Robot Maria, together with Karl Freund's 'unshackled camera', trick photography templates by Art Director Erich Kettelhut and the Maquettes of the "Seven Deadly Sins" by Walter Schultze-Mittendorf.

Interstellar travel was the next topic Murnau tackled with the 1928 feature "Die Frau im Mond" (The Woman in the Moon). With Rocket pioneers Hermann Oberth and Willy Ley consulting, he put a still believable journey to the moon on the silver screen. Lang even invented the 'countdown' as a story device to increase the suspense for the rocket's take off. His last efforts before immigrating to Hollywood in 1934 were "M" (1931), his first sound feature starring Peter Lorre as a child murderer and the sequel "Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse/The testament of Dr. Mabuse" (1932) to his own silent predecessor.

The set designer/director Paul Leni (1885-1929) also left early for Hollywood, his "Waxworks"(1924) impressed Carl Laemmle of Universal immensely. His first feature "The Cat and the Canary"(1927) was the archetypal haunted house thriller infused with comedy. Greedy relatives meet in an old house to listen the last will and testament of an eccentric millionaire, but get killed one by one by the mysterious, hideously ugly 'Canary'. The stylish production influenced many films of the '30s like James Whale's "The Old Dark House." One of his last film features before his death was Universal's "The Man Who Laughs" (1928) starring Conrad Veidt and Mary Philbin. Veidt's character Gwynplaine has a permanent smile carved on his face by gypsies, in revenge for his father's treachery to the King of France. The disfigured child is adopted by a travelling showman and becomes a sideshow attraction. He falls in love with the blind Dea. The king dies, Gwynplaine get back his privileges, but the courts evil jester tries to corrupt him, but the lovers escape. Universal Studio's makeup genius Jack Pierce created the permanent grin of the title character and Veidt's stand-out performance made the tears visible through his etched-on laughter. A legend says that Gwynplaine inspired the look of Batman's archenemy the Joker.

The sound era all but put an end to the easy international distribution of

John Barrymore as Mr. Hyde



Lon Chaney, London After Midnight.



German films. Much worse, the rise to power of Adolf Hitler forced many of Germany's creative artists to immigrate to America. Their talents shaped the Hollywood films of the '30s and '40s, like German directors Fritz Lang, Kurt and Robert Siodmak, Wilhelm "William" Dieterle, Detlef "Douglas" Sirk, photographer/director Karl Freund, composers Erich W. Korngold, Franz Waxman, Max Steiner, actors like Peter Lorre, Conrad Veidt and Marlene Dietrich, to name but a few. The permanent exhibition of the Filmmuseum shows how the Paul Kohner Agency in Los Angeles turned into a center for aid and negotiation for exiles. It clients included Curt Bois, Bertolt Brecht, Robert Siodmak, Joe May, Max Ophüls, Billy Wilder, and many others. The exhibited materials document their successes and failures, hopes and despair.

Of Monsters, Phantoms and Hunchbacks - Silent Horrors in America

In America, the movies were considered more an entertainment for the masses than an art form. Comedies and Dramas dominated the Nickelodeons with emphasis on broad humor and violent slapstick. Films like "Caligari" were popular in the big cities but at the countryside they were considered less than entertaining. Fantasy or Horror movies were few and far between, but those that came from the U.S. were quite impressive....

One of the first movies that dealt with the topic of horror was Thomas Edison's 1910 version of "Frankenstein". This movie was said to be missing for several decades, until a film collector recently made a copy of it accessible to the public. Charles Ogle gives the monster an imaginative creation. A similarly dressed puppet was set on fire and filmed backwards to create the illusion of a creature growing out of the ashes. Otherwise, the film is just a straightforward theatre piece like many movies of its time.

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde was already a much-filmed story even before the first worthy version hit the silver screen in 1920. As directed by John S. Robertson, beloved, box-office proven actor John Barrymore (1882-1942) was convincing in the dual title role of the scientist and the degenerated human spider. Without the use of elaborate special effects, Barrymore made his transformation believable through grimacing and a minor change of his hairdo. The story took some plot points from Oscar Wilde's "Picture of Dorian Gray," but also added an erotic edge to the tale, which was reused in many remakes to follow. The Doctor's young fiancée from the upper class on the bright side and the working class girl as Hyde's victim on the dark side of life. The erotic enticing of the dark side causes the final splitting of Jekyll's personality. The suppressed sex drive hidden behind the bourgeois facade finally breaks free with all the usual bad consequences.

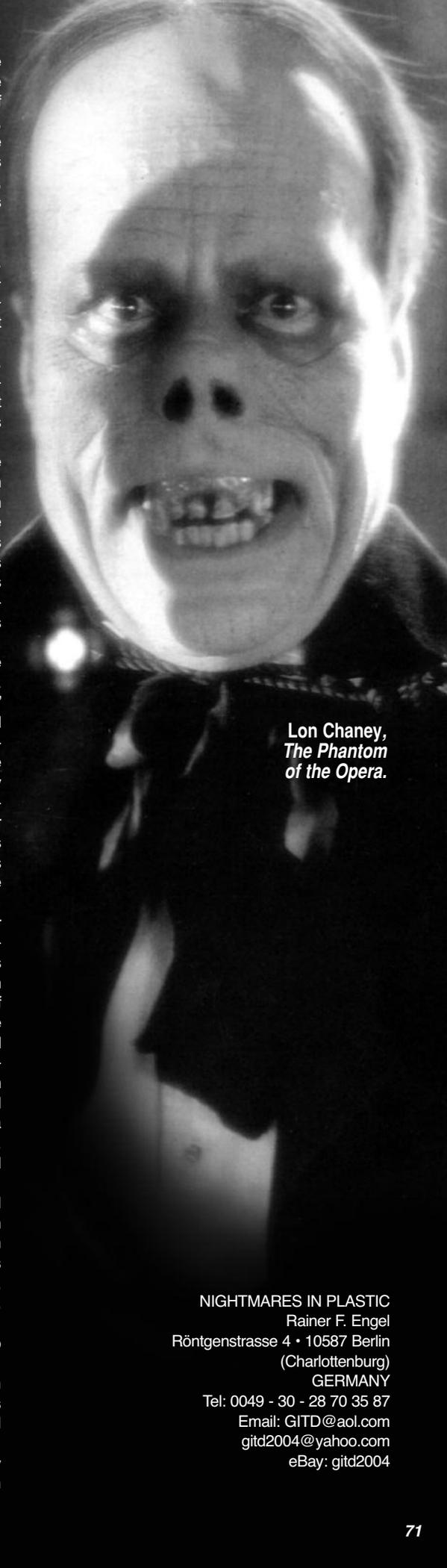
Only one actor, Lon Chaney, "The Man of a Thousand Faces" (1883-1930) dominated the American horror film of the silent era. He began movie acting in 1912 after a struggling stage career. The son of deaf mutes, he first made his mark with macabre character parts like "The Unholy Three" (1919) or "The Penalty" (1921). In latter film he played a legless crook that holds the criminal underworld of San Francisco in his iron grip; but it was the performance of the misshapen Quasimodo in the first filming of Victor Hugo's novel "Notre Dame de Paris"(1923) that launched him to major stardom. In "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" he played the deformed bell ringer who saves the beautiful Gypsy Esmeralda from the evil intentions of Jehan. He also created the impressive makeup for this part, following Hugo's description closely. A 50 pound hump made of rubber prevented him from standing or walking erect. The disgusting fake teeth he wore also acted as a device that thwarted the closing of his mouth. The movie was a major success and paved the way to his next great horror performance. His ability to communicate through pantomime/sign language due to his upbringing designated him for more villainous, bizarre and pathetic parts.

Erik, the dungeon dwelling madman also known as "The Phantom of the Opera" (1927) was another acting and makeup tour de force. Chaney turned himself into a living skull, with only greasepaint, morticians wax and a nose device made of wire that sometimes caused serious bleeding. The production was troubled from the very beginning. Director Rupert Julian and his Star didn't see eye to eye artistically with each other and refused to communicate directly. A third person had to intermediate, mainly director of photography Charles van Enger. He was also responsible for the spectacular early color sequences like the opera ball and the appearance of Chaney as 'Red Death'. The film was a major production, and much money was spent, but the first test screening was disastrous! Universal hired Western film director Edward Sedgwick to redo some of the scenes and add some 'frontier justice' like the final chase in the streets of Paris. After the adjustments of editing and additional scenes, it was a runaway success all over the world. Universal Studio even did a sound version of the film a few years later with added Opera sequences. Unfortunately, most of the common available versions are based on that butchered edition, so none can actually tell how the film looked in 1925. But, the unmasking sequence is still an unmatched moment of screen terror.

His next straight horror outing was Tod Browning's "London after Midnight." Chaney played the dual role of the Scotland Yard inspector Berke and the sinister vampire, the 'Man with the Beaver Hat'. With the help of actors dressed as vampires the clever inspector outsmarts a murderer and brings him to justice. More a crime drama than a supernatural horror flick, Chaney's snarling vampire is another early icon of the horror film. The last copy was destroyed in a fire at a MGM storage vault, and the movie is now considered lost, but there are always rumors that it might resurface one day, but it might be only an urban legend...

Hollywood was shaken by the advent of sound technology; many film careers ended abruptly due to a dramatic lack of vocal talent. Chaney made the transition trouble free, but after his first 'Talkie' in 1930, a remake of "The Unholy Three," he died suddenly from lung cancer. The silent cinema died with him. Chaney's legacy was refueled and kept alive through the '60s and '70s by Forry Ackerman's "Famous Monsters of Filmland" magazine. Chaney's adaptability and creative genius again captivated a whole new generation.

If you ever travel to Berlin, take your time and visit the Film Museum Berlin, it's open Tuesday to Sunday 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., Thursday 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. but is closed on Mondays. Located in the heart of Berlin at the Filmhaus (Sony Center), Potsdamer Strasse 2 in 10785 Berlin.



**Lon Chaney,
The Phantom
of the Opera.**

NIGHTMARES IN PLASTIC
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