

## REVIEW

**Lighting Over Weimar:  
The Semiotics of  
Light and Shadows:  
Modern Visual Arts  
and Weimar Cinema  
by Piotr Sadowski**

By Tony Williams

**Keywords** Fritz Lang, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, *The Student of Prague*, *The Golem*, *Die Niebelungen*, *The Haunted Screen*, *Vampyr*

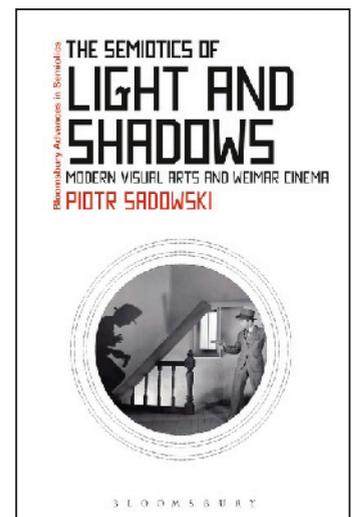
Reviews

It seems like an aeon ago that semiotics burst upon the academic scene, when it promised to be both a radical and scientific way of analysing film, as opposed to supposedly impressionistic criticism (which Robin Wood personified as a Darth Vader villain of the journal *Screen*). But even though it was over 40 years ago, which seems like more than the time-line for the making of the Beatles's *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967), the excitement over the appearance of this discourse now appears as far remote from us as the pre-historic Hyperborean times of Robert E. Howard's Conan the Barbarian. I can recall one moment outside the National Film Theatre Bookshop in its old location when one customer agonized whether the narrative structure of a particular film could be defined by either Christian Metz's 'paradigm' or 'syntagm' (leading not to Alain Fournier's *Le Grande Meaulnes* (1913), but to the 'le grande syntagmatique') so much so that I feared the traumatized individual would soon seek oblivion in the nearby Thames and his body discovered in the murky waters, to recall the opening scene in Charles Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–65).

Such, such were the days but they were far from being '[b]liss it was in that dawn to be alive', as William Wordsworth once greeted the French Revolution in his *Prelude* (Wordsworth 1979). For those sceptical towards semiotics' claims for salvation often cast into the outer darkness by mandarin-inclined devotees then and later when new claims for cinematic salvation appeared with the advent of new guru 'gods and monsters', such as Derrida, Foucault, Lacan and Arthur Kroker in following years. Semiotics then was hard core learning as that historical double issue of *Screen* 'Cinema Semiotics and the Work of Christian Metz' revealed.<sup>1</sup> While H.

P. Lovecraft's *Necronomicon* had the benefit of Abdul Alhazred's translation, semiotic scholars such as Metz, Stephen Heath, Julia Kristeva and Tzvetan Todorov attempted to cast their deliberately obscurantist semiotic magic but had little success in bringing about their version of a film studies 'New World Order'. Then Peter Wollen's *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (1972) was the 'flavour of the month', but times change and the claims for semiotics as an interpretative tool are, thankfully, much more modest today. Whatever happened to those past practitioners of *Screen*'s version of a 'magical mystery tour', such as Colin McCabe and Stephen Heath? Like John Ford's Colonel Owen Thursday in *Fort Apache* (1948), they have managed to vanish into the mists of history but we 'dirty-shirted men (and women) in blue' manage to soldier on and 'fight the good fight' in whatever way we think fit.

It was with trepidation that I opened the first page of this book written by a lecturer in humanities at Dublin Business School, Ireland, with three of the four blurbs supplied by colleagues in the same location. Belonging to a series titled *Bloomsbury Advances in Semiotics*, including





titles such as *A Buddhist Theory of Semiotics* (2013), *Semiotics of Drink and Drinking* (2012) (written not by *The Quiet Man*'s Michaleen O'Grady Flynn?), and *The Semiotics of Che Guevara* (2014), the book initially made me yearn for the equivalent of rescue by the Seventh Cavalry when Bear Manor Media Press books would arrive for relief and review. However, despite my concerns, I was presently surprised by this book and can recommend it not as a study in hard-core semiotics but as an accessible visual analysis of lighting techniques in key examples of Weimar Cinema and F. W. Murnau's two Hollywood films. Following an introduction, the opening three chapters offer an accessible and straightforward introduction to the semiotic associations of shadow imagery and stress factors of indexes and icons in a comprehensible manner far removed from the *Screen* heyday of early theoretical hard core

semiotics. References to past and recent scholarship with familiar names, such as David Bordwell and Ernst Gombrich, and relevant examples from painting and early photography characterize these sections. But for Sadowski cinema appears as the most recent and realistic example of what he terms the iconic-indexical media.

In film the semiotic functions of light and shadows include not just the very composition of the image but also the dynamic participation in the unfolding of a story. It was in cinema that cast and attached shadows eventually came into their own not only as purely formal but also as dramatic and symbolic narrative elements, similar to the ancient shadow plays. (61)

This is a straightforward demonstration of a thesis that will be applied to various examples of Weimar Cinema the author selects with relevant screen captures throughout the book, as pertinent examples from Fritz Lang's *Mabuse* films and *Spies* (1928) reveal (73–83). Chapters 1–3 outline the principles that will be used in the later chapters that concentrate on visual analysis of relevant elements in each film. The first three chapters demonstrate the importance of shadow imagery in films belonging to the Expressionist and New Objectivity realms of Weimar Cinema. Chapter 4, 'Light and Shadows in Early Cinema', and the following in-depth chapters 'Expressionist Light and Shadows in Weimar Cinema' and 'Shadows in the Cinema' demonstrate the thesis in visual close reading with references stimulating the reader to follow up the information supplied.

*The Student of Prague* (1913) and *The Golem* (1920), both featuring Paul Wegener, receive detailed treatment in terms of location choice and set design within the studio. As Wegener himself states in an interview introducing the latter film,

it is not Prague that my friend the architect [Hans] Poelzig has erected. Rather, it is a poem of a city [...] a dream, an architectural paraphrase of the golem theme. These alleys and squares should not call to mind anything real; they should create the

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atmosphere in which the golem breathes. (130)

Sadowski later humorously refers to the golem as '[t]he Rabbi's RoboCop' (132).

As well as familiar films, such as *Nosferatu* (1922), the book contains an excellent description of Lang's *The Nibelungs* (*Die Nibelungen*, 1924) (141–50) in terms of set design and location (133–41) as well as occult associations of *Nosferatu*'s production company (134). Tinting strategies used in *The Nibelungs* also receive relevant critical scrutiny concerning Lang's intentions in using this contemporary device at the time (147). Sadowski also notes something that would be familiar for those who have viewed a diverse number of German expressionist films, Lotte Eisner's *The Haunted Screen* (1952); his frequent referencing to it and her other works that have endured throughout the decades is also welcome.

There are probably as many different cinematic Expressionisms as there are films and directors, just as every Expressionist painter offered his own individual version, some more radical than others, of a departure from centuries-old tradition of realism in art...Expressionism was indeed just play, *Spielerei*, in Dr. Mabuse's dismissive remark about the elusiveness and pre-tentiousness of contemporary artistic debates. (158)

Following an excellent analysis of Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Vampyr* (1932), the next chapter deals with the New Objectivity style for the modern city in films, such as *The Street* (*Die Strasse*, 1923), *The Joyless Street* (1925), *The Love of Jeanne Ney* (1927), *Berlin: Symphony of a Metrop-*

*olis* (1927) and *M* (1931). With Murnau's *The Last Laugh* (1925) representing the Expressionist-New Objectivity style along generational and emotional lines as well as in the juxtaposition of style and *mise en scène* (202). Yet, Pabst's *The Joyless Street* could also exhibit features of stylistic transition between Expressionism and New Objectivity in many of its scenes (203) as well as *Metropolis*, with its transition between Romantic Expressionism and modernist New Objectivity (216). The chapter appropriately ends with a still of the closing shot of Pabst's *The Threepenny Opera* (1931), showing a crowd of beggars walking into darkness as if foreshadowing that political other shadow world that would soon descend on Germany.

This book is an interesting work and an accomplished achievement, especially in allowing a coherent, understandable text to speak for itself. The appropriate visual analysis makes its case succinctly without relying on deliberate mystification that accompanied the early phases of semiotics. Despite the introductory chapters' concentration on shadow imagery and semiotic terms, the concepts are presented in an accessible manner that should present no difficulty to readers unfamiliar with the general theoretical approach of this series. But the value of the book is in its treatment of the diverse nature of Weimar Cinema with excellent use of visual shots to illustrate the arguments so well that the book could really exist without any reference to semiotic concepts at all. That is what makes it both universal and valuable to readers from different backgrounds. It also something than can be applied to other examples outside of its historical realm of analysis. When watching 'The Wild Hunt' episode of Nigel Kneale's acclaimed BBC TV serial *Quatermass and the Pit* (1958–59) I noticed the conjunc-

tion of the huge shadow of the possessed Sladden on the right of the screen dominating the crouching figures of Captain Potter and his men, before the real-life figure of Sladden runs past them. This raised an interesting index association in my mind originating from the findings of this book. Since the director Rudolph Cartier was a refugee from Hitler and tried to insert expressionist techniques into the BBC TV plays he directed, this style brought a really interesting connection to my mind in terms of how Sadowski's thesis may also be applied to other areas.

*The Semiotics of Light and Shadows: Modern Visual Arts and Weimar Cinema* by Piotr Sadowski (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

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### Contributor's details

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Tony Williams is professor and area head of film studies in the Department of English, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. He has authored *James Jones: The Limits of Eternity* (Roman & Littlefield, 2016), co-edited with Esther C. M. Yau, *Hong Kong Neo-Noir* (Edinburgh University Press, 2017) and is a contributing editor to *Film International*.

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### Note

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See *Screen*, volume 14, Spring-Summer, 1973.

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