A Culture of Light: Cinema and Technology in 1920s Germany. By Frances Guerin. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005. 360 pp. $75.00 cloth; $25.00 paper.

In *A Culture of Light: Cinema and Technology in 1920s Germany* Frances Gurerin addresses what she sees as a "gap" in "film history" relating to "the role of light and lighting in the cinema" (xiv, xiii). According to Guerin, "in the ever-expanding field of film history, few have continued to investigate the consequences of the relationship between film and light in its various forms" (xiv). Guerin chooses to focus on light and lighting because she believes it sets 1920s German film apart from contemporary examples in other European countries and the United States. Light and lighting in German film was, she claims, "new" and "uniquely filmic" (xvii). Although the text cannot make a case for its claim that lighting sets 1920s German film apart from filmic examples in other parts of the world, as a focused study of light and lighting in 1920s German film, *A Culture of Light* augments current scholarship in film history. The book highlights one element in relation to technology and the modernist turn; it provides an effective intertextual reading of German films of the period. And it examines filmic history from a unique angle. Guerin substantiates her views through careful readings of representative films from the teens through the 1920s that illustrate a movement from a national to an international approach to modernity.

Guerin sees her work as an addition to works like Siegfried Kracauer's *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of German Film* and Thomas Elsaesser's *Weimar Cinema and After*, contending that the

align German film history with "the political and economic instability of the Weimar Republic [and couple this with] a dependence on the *Sonderweg* model of early-twentieth-century German history" (xxiii). Instead, Guerin seeks to interrogate the means of production, both industrial and everyday, and focus specifically on "the aesthetic and historical context of light and lighting" (xxvi). Her shift is successful and effective, but only within the parameters of her limited focus.

Guerin grounds her readings of differing approaches to light and lighting in German film with an exploration of the effects of electrification on German life, art and cinema. In chapter one she walks us through international movements in art and architecture that resulted from electrification in a modern age. Her conclusion diverges from that of Kracauer and Walter Benjamin, who "believe that the technologically produced image in and of itself possesses the capacity to stage historical consciousness" (47). Instead, Guerin argues that her study "demonstrates that modernity is as vexed for the films as it is for Kracauer….It is the nature and implication of this vexation that the films … conceive anew" (47). To prove this, Guerin explores five differing ways German cinema uses light and lighting. Chapter 2 sums up the German cinema before World War I with emphasis on the importance of light. Chapter 3, "Legends of Light and Shadow: The Mythical Past in *Algol* and *Schatten*," explores how these two films "ask their viewers to question further the experience of complex processes of modernization" (108). Guerin asserts that "*Algol* uses light and lighting compositionally and thematically to put forward its narrative on the potential destruction of a technologically generated world" (107). *Schatten*, on the other hand, "uses light and lighting to speculate on its own definition within this world, and, by extension, that of the film medium more generally….[It] marshals its recourse to the past in order to articulate the confused boundaries between illusion and reality once technological processes of representation are set in motion" (107). Modernity is both acclaimed and questioned in these two films, and Guerin effectively contextualizes the films in relation to modernity and technological development.

Chapter 4, "The Spell of Light: Cinema as Modern Magic in *Faust, Der Golem, Siegfried,* and *Metropolis*" looks at films that go beyond using lighting "to compose the image, structure the narrative, and articulate thematic concerns" (136). Although these films differ in many ways, Guerin argues that they all "foreground light and lighting in their representations of the cinema as a form of modern magic. Similarly, they all conceive of the cinema as altering existing notions of time and/or history" (148), and "represent the concrete changes brought about by technological representation" (152). Modernity and representations of modernity in these films parallel one another because light and lighting are used in spectacular ways that enhance and foreground the technology—light and lighting—that makes

magic possible.

Chapter 5, "Reformations of Space through Light in *Der Strasse, Jenseits der Strasse,* and *Am Rande der Welt*" adds the dimension of space to the focus on time and history. In these films, when reading through Guerin's focused lens, "artificial light is manipulated to meet the dual purpose of creating the spaces of the screen and representing formations of space in the historical world" (155). In chapter 6, "Dazzled by the Profusion of Lights: Technological Entertainment in *Variete* and *Sylvester*," Guerin suggests that "through striking moments of light, … [the films] self-consciously contribute to and, simultaneously, analyze the modern entertainment industry that flourished in pre-World War II Germany" (194). In the films "the spectacular moments of stylistic articulation in light add a dimension of excitement and attraction already manifest in… the sporting game, the variety show, the fairground, and the modern street celebration" (194). This chapter especially meets Guerin's goal to make the means of production—both industrial and everyday—more transparent. If read alongside other studies of German film in the period, *A Culture of Light* is a welcome addition to film history.

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