

A CRITICAL FILMOGRAPHY OF GERMAN CINEMA 1895–1945

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*Der Student von Prag*

The Student of Prague

Germany, 1913, 85', b+w

*Dir* Stellan Rye (1880-1914) *Scr* Stellan Rye, Hanns Heinz Ewers, Paul Wegener  
*Act* Paul Wegener (Balduin), John Gottowt (Scapinelli), Grete Berger (Margit),  
Lyda Salmonova (Lyduschka)

*The Student of Prague*, arguably the most momentous production preceding the 'golden age' of German cinema during the 1920s, marked a major film- and cultural-historical watershed. One of the earliest films to leverage the camera, and film technology more generally, as means of expression in their own right (as opposed to 'passive' recording devices), *The Student of Prague* indicated a radical shift in the conception of the cinematic medium. The film brought to the screen a central motif of nineteenth-century fantastic literature, namely the figuration of the uncanny doppelganger as the embodiment of anxieties associated with the disintegration of a unified 'self' in a rapidly modernising world. In representing fears of psychic and social fragmentation and relating them to filmic reproduction, *The Student of Prague* scrutinises the uncertain status of modern subjectivity and acknowledges the cinematic medium as part of that very predicament.

Set in 1820, *The Student of Prague* tells the story of Balduin, a poor student who is distressed over his precarious financial situation. A charlatan named Scapinelli offers him a fortune in exchange for one item from Balduin's modest home. Hoping to gain the affections of his beloved, the rich countess Margit, Balduin falls for Scapinelli's ruse. While certain that he possesses nothing of material worth, Balduin soon discovers in horror the true object of Scapinelli's desire: his mirror image. Having accepted Scapinelli's offer, Balduin is forced to look on helplessly as his reflection (referred to as 'the Other') literally steps out of the mirror frame and follows its new master. Quickly recovering from this eerie

episode, Balduin appears oblivious to the full implications of this loss. With his newfound wealth, he enjoys the luxurious lifestyle of high society Prague and actively courts Margit in spite of her arranged engagement to Baron Waldis-Schwarzenberg. Balduin's advances not only provoke the Baron's jealousy, but also that of the gypsy-girl Lyduschka, who holds an unrequited torch for Balduin. Lyduschka stalks Balduin and Margit, eventually stealing from Margit's bedroom evidence of the lovers' nocturnal rendez-vous in the Jewish cemetery. Lyduschka summarily passes this information along to Waldis, thus provoking a confrontation that ultimately leads to the Baron's death.

Throughout the film, and with increasing frequency, Balduin is confronted with the threatening appearance of his lost mirror image. The 'Other' interferes in his unfolding relationship with Margit and, despite Balduin's word of honour, kills Waldis during the duel, which ruins Balduin's reputation. At the film's climax, ghostly apparitions of the 'Other' chase a frantic Balduin through the deserted streets of Prague. In utmost despair, Balduin resolves to take his own life. Yet the 'Other' continues his gruelling harassment, provoking Balduin to shoot him. As the gun smoke fades away, the 'Other' is finally gone. Overjoyed, Balduin notices the recovery of his mirror reflection, only to collapse moments later, fatally wounded. Triumphant, Scapinelli appears and tears up their contract over Balduin's corpse. The film's last shot shows the 'Other' sitting with two ravens on Balduin's grave, ferociously staring into the distance.

*The Student of Prague* was the result of the close collaboration of four eminent figures of the German cultural scene: theatre star Paul Wegener, best-selling horror author Hanns Heinz Ewers, camera pioneer Guido Seeber and Danish director Stellan Rye, whose tragic death on the Western Front only one year later terminated his promising career. Asserting that cinematography—more so than narrative or *mise en scène*—was the new medium's primary means of expression, the filmmakers sought to craft a genuinely *cinematic* artwork. As Paul Wegener programmatically declared, 'film's actual poet must be the camera'.<sup>1</sup> To this end, the filmmakers chose subject matter that could only be realised on the basis of film technology. Without the aid of cinematic special effects, the protagonist's face-to-face encounters with his uncanny double would not have been feasible.

The figuration of the doppelgänger, the embodiment of a menacing 'other self', had been a favourite motif of fantastic literature since the early nineteenth

century. In fact, the plot of *The Student of Prague* could be seen as an ingenious distillation of various masterworks of fantastic literature concerned with the doppelgänger, loosely borrowing motifs from sources such as Chamisso's *Peter Schlemihl*, Poe's *William Wilson*, E.T.A. Hoffmann's *The Devil's Elixir* and *The Story of the Lost Reflection* and de Musset's *December Night*. Although the doppelgänger illusion had been very popular since the earliest days of cinema and figured prominently in many early trick films such the works of Georges Méliès, *The Student of Prague* was one of the first films to portray the double as a threatening figure. The immense significance of *The Student of Prague* lies in the fact that here anxieties relating to modern subjectivity were simultaneously and explicitly identified with and expressed by technologically reproduced images.

Balduin's antagonistic mirror reflection is easily recognisable as a metaphor for film itself, which Walter Benjamin has described as 'portable mirror reflection'. Cinema's doubling of external reality is perpetuated by the countless examples of formal 'mirroring' in *The Student of Prague*, i.e., instances in which narrative or visual elements are repeated in more or less modified form. In its treatment of the motif of doubling at all textual and conceptual levels, *The Student of Prague* achieves an extraordinary artistic unity. One of cinema's first attempts at profoundly reflecting its own nature, the film's *formal* rendering of modern disintegration and its relation to technical reproduction is conspicuously coherent. When reading the threatening doppelgänger as cinema's own representation of itself, the film's final shot (of the 'Other' sitting on Balduin's grave) conveys an eerie perspective on the nature of the cinematic medium: the hero ultimately does not survive the encounter with his technologically (re)produced self, but his cinematic replica proves immortal.

Katharina Loew

1. Paul Wegener, 'Die künstlerischen Möglichkeiten des Films (1916),' in Kai Möller, ed., *Paul Wegener: Sein Leben und seine Rollen. Ein Buch von ihm und über ihn* (Hamburg: Rowohlt Verlag, 1954), 110.