

ABSOLUTE RELATIVITY
WEIMAR CINEMA AND THE CRISIS OF HISTORICISM
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Is there a logic of history? Is there, beyond all the casual and incalculable elements of the separate events, something that we may call a metaphysical structure of historic humanity, something that is essentially independent of the outward forms – social, spiritual and political – which we see so clearly?¹

Posed at the outset of Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (1918), these ontological questions gained a particular urgency during a period of acute crisis and change. As German intellectuals witnessed a cataclysmic and illogical succession of early 20th century events, including world war, revolution, and the dissolution of empire, they reexamined the philosophical premises of traditional historiography and historical thought. Whereas German Idealism had upheld a basic optimism regarding the directionality and purposiveness of the historical process, Weimar intellectual currents betrayed disillusionment with the course of history, as well as skepticism of history's status as the site of logos and meaning.

Speculations on the ontology of history during the Weimar era were accompanied by epistemological inquiries into the very foundations of historical understanding. In contradistinction to natural law theory, with its appeal to the atemporal and universal aspects of human nature, 19th century German historicism had emphasized the historicity and uniqueness of all sociocultural phenomena and values. As historicist thinkers considered the conditions of the possibility of historical knowledge, however, they recognized the threat posed by historicism to objective cognition. The ensuing "crisis of historicism," anticipated by figures as early as Friedrich Nietzsche and Jacob Burckhardt, was first widely diagnosed in the postwar years, when intellectuals acknowledged the aporia of relativism that entailed from reflexive historical thinking. This crisis generated significant developments in Weimar intellectual history, including philosophical anthropology, existential phenomenology, and the sociology of knowledge, and it also induced the conservative attitudes that plagued the Weimar period and beyond.

My dissertation contends that the crisis of historical thought provided a key context for pioneering and influential works of Weimar cinema. I argue that films of the Weimar period registered and responded to contemporaneous metahistorical debates, offering aesthetic answers to ontological and epistemological questions of the philosophy of history. In my analysis, the films' extraordinary innovations in aesthetic and narrative form are associable not only with technological advances and sociopolitical ruptures, but also with concurrent efforts to theorize history in an age of "absolute relativity." Many of Weimar cinema's defining formal and stylistic features (e.g. non-linear

narratives, expressionist *mise en scène*) can thus be interpreted as figurations of metahistorical issues, including the structure and teleology of history and the possibility of objective perception. Furthermore, numerous films of the period developed strategies to break with historicist thinking altogether, whether in the non-referentiality of avant-garde abstraction or in the alternative temporal frameworks of nature, religion, and myth.

More broadly, my dissertation intervenes in the extensive literature within Cinema and Media Studies on the relationship between film and history. Challenging film theory of the 1970s and 1980s, which presumed a basic uniformity and historical continuity in cinematic style and spectatorship, the “historical turn” of the past decades has prompted greater scholarly attention to variables and changes in modes of technology, perception, and experience. In my view, while film historiography has henceforth emphasized the *historicity* of moving images, from their conditions of production to their contexts of reception, it has all too often left the very *concept of history* underexamined and insufficiently historicized. I hope to propose a more reflexive model of historiography that accounts for shifts and ruptures in conceptions and understandings of history, from the historical moment of a film’s emergence to that of present-day interpretation. Moreover, I suggest that filmic texts gain new resonances when placed in constellation with contemporaneous intellectual debates – debates no less relevant and unresolved today than in the period of their initiation.

The Weimar period presents a particularly compelling case not only as the context in which a specific, distinguished tradition of historical thinking entered a phase of acute, widely diagnosed crisis. During the Weimar years, theorists also began to explore the nexus of history and photographic media and to contemplate the status and vocation of film in the historical process. Whereas philosophical pessimists such as Spengler identified cinema as one among many symptoms of irrevocable degeneracy in modern civilization, progressive cultural critics like Siegfried Kracauer attributed to film the singular historic task of gesturing towards the very provisionality of the current social order. Regardless of theorists’ intellectual orientation toward cinema and an emergent mass culture, their frequent allusions to film in historical-philosophical debates reveal the medium’s salient function as an indicator of the course that modernity was taking, and even as a signal of the paths which could yet be taken.

When juxtaposed against the actual trajectory of 20th century German history, however, the utopian possibilities evoked by Weimar intellectuals become overlaid with a strong sense of pathos. Scholars continue to dispute which historiographical tropes and hermeneutical models are best suited to the Weimar Republic and its cinema, criticizing the teleological, monolithic, and reductionist aspects of earlier accounts. Among the aims of my dissertation is to redirect focus to the Weimar period’s own active, eloquent debates on the course and meaning of history, as well as to highlight the multiplicity of paths that were in fact later taken. The catastrophic events that followed the Weimar years are nonetheless indisputable, and – for those whose lives were cut short – such a project assumes a necessarily anamnestic function. Not least, then, I hope to serve the memory of those to whom Karl Popper dedicated *The Poverty of Historicism* (1944–45): victims of the totalitarian belief in “Inexorable Laws of Historical Destiny.”²

1 Oswald Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, C.H. Beck, München 1923 (eng. ed. *The Decline of the West*, Vantage Books, New York 2006, p. 3).

2 Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, Taylor & Francis, London 2002.