3. The Interweaving of World and Self

Transformations of Mood in Expressionist and Kammerspiel Film

The Mediation of a Dog’s World

Franz Marc’s ‘The White Dog (Dog before the World)’ from 1912 looks like the aesthetic complement to the Uexküll-inspired diorama that would be shown at New York’s Museum of Natural History some thirty years later. The painting shows a dog at an angle that allows us to see part of the dog’s face, despite the fact that this is an almost complete back view. We see the dog seeing, but perceive this act from the outside—we ourselves are not part of the connection between the dog and its environment. ‘Is there for an artist an idea more mysterious than [imagining] how nature might be reflected in the eye of an animal? How does a horse see the world or an eagle, a deer or a dog?’ Marc asks in notes preceding the painting. ‘From now on, we have to unlearn to relate animals and plants to us, and to present in art our relationship to them […] Every thing in the world has its forms, its formula, which we cannot grope with our plump hands, but which we can rather grasp to the degree to which we are artistically gifted.’ The task of an artist in getting to know, and trying to represent, animal being, perception, and Umwelten is, in contrast to the task of the scientist, not one of experimentally inferring perceptual abilities, but rather one of intuiting, empathizing, in a process that seeks to transcend human perception. ‘(I seek to increase my) sensitivity for the organic rhythm of all things, [a pantheistic feeling-into] (I seek to pantheistically feel myself into) the trembling and running of the blood in nature, in the trees, in the animals in the air.’ The resulting painting is supposed to present the forest or the horse ‘as they really are,’ as they ‘themselves feel’ by avoiding looking at the world with our human eye.

While the painting of Nipper set into motion a feedback loop of gazes—a reading of the image is only successful once the observer has dislodged herself from the dog duped by the gramophone (Chapter 2)—Einfühlung (‘empathy, feeling-into’) into the dog in Marc’s painting is key to understanding and

1 Marc, ‘Aufzeichnungen auf Blättern in Quart (Winter 1911/12)’, 99 (translation mine).
2 Marc, ‘Aufzeichnungen auf Bogen in Folio (1912-13)’, 113 (translation mine).
4 Marc, ‘Aufzeichnungen auf Bogen in Folio (1912-13)’, 112.
unlocking the painting for us. We are insufficiently equipped if we do not grasp the object of the dog’s attention. There is a double projection from beholder of the painting to beholding dog to dog’s world. That is why we see this dog not as a complete Rückenfigur (‘figure seen from behind’) turned away from us, but rather still see the dog’s gaze. The real object in Marc’s painting, then, is the dog’s being as it is expressed in the interplay of its body, its gaze, its attitude, and its Umwelt. Yet we can still place the painting in the long lineage of images that combine a view of nature with the self-reflexivity of a Rückenfigur from the paintings showing painters by Jan Vermeer or Jan van Eyck to Velasquez, Caspar David Friedrich, and Gustav Carus. A Rückenfigur such as Caspar David Friedrich’s Wanderer above the Sea of Fog combines perception and reflection in its mediation of our own gaze; nature, in turn, becomes visible as a construction, since it is the exterior world as seen by someone, as connected to an interior world, as something that is always already an image. The painting allows us to participate in the loneliness and intimate attitude of an opaque figure, while we are simultaneously kept at a distance. For Hartmut Böhme, this reflexivity of perception accounts for ‘the melancholia of the image’ in general: the reflexivity of seeing is connected to ‘the longing for unmediated coincidence of I and World, which we might see, but cannot have, no less be’.

5 Hartmut Böhme, ‘Rückenfiguren bei Caspar David Friedrich’, 56.
Yet instead of depicting man’s eccentric positionality (Helmuth Plessner), Marc’s painting forces us to engage with the dog because it holds the key to the simultaneously interior and exterior world surrounding it. We see it seeing, but only understand its vision by relating the exterior world back to it.

For art historian Adolf Behne, one of Marc’s earliest and most vocal supporters, Uexküll’s work in biology is a direct complement to Expressionist art—indeed, Behne calls Uexküll himself ‘Expressionist,’ even though Uexküll himself responded to Behne’s ascription with harsh words concerning Expressionist art. At least until Uexküll’s more nationalist and conservative essays appeared in the late 1910s, Behne maintained that surely, Uexküll had not seen good Expressionist art yet; he might just be rejecting it on the basis of the ‘half-new, decorative’ art of Brücke painters such as Ludwig Kirchner or Erich Heckl, rather than the painters associated with the Blaue Reiter or others similar to them in style, including Franz Marc, Chagall, Paul Klee, and Oskar Kokoschka. These latter artists, Behne maintains, create according to the same organic laws Uexküll describes for the creative force of organisms; their works—“spiritual organisms”—are not ‘made,’ they rather ‘become’ and ‘grow.’ ‘Uexküll’s insights,’ Behne proclaims, ‘allow us to tear down the wall between art and life, to connect art to life, yes, to identify it with life.’ As living beings imbue everything in their Umwelt with life in the act of perception, so do the new artists turn away from artistic renderings of the ‘concrete’ (das Gegenständliche), since they understand the concrete as itself already the result of perception. Instead, they seek to approximate life by transcending the limited position of their own subjective Merkwelt—the world according to their individual senses. Life, for Uexküll, encompasses two unequal worlds, the perception world (Merkwelt) and the effect world (Wirkwelt). While we are limited to our subjective view, life simultaneously stands outside of it: it encompasses the genetically-driven coloration of the wings of the eyed hawk moth, which protects the animal from predators, but it also encompasses the way the wing-image appears to various birds who flee from any eye-like appearance. Artistic creation, for Behne, can approximate the dovetailing of perceptual and effect worlds into one another. ‘Franz Marc’s animals! Shouldn’t Uexküll be able to comprehend them first of all when he writes these sentences: “The essence of an animal is not the form, but rather the transformation, not the structure, but rather the process of life. The animal is a mere event!”’

6 See Plessner, Stufen des Organischen.
8 Ibid., 700.
9 Ibid., 704.
In this chapter, I seek to explore the emergence of a new aesthetic—what I call *Stimmung* aesthetics—in cinema and related art discourses; one that, like Marc’s painting, seeks to present the interweaving of world and self, including other selves that would be inaccessible without a mediating *Stimmung* or mood. More specifically, I argue that the vitalist biological conceptualization of the relationship between organism and environment explored in the last chapter finds an aesthetic expression in *Stimmung*, a word encompassing mood, attunement, and tonality that entered aesthetic discourse in the late eighteenth century. The *Rückenfigur* itself is an aesthetic motif tied to the entrance of *Stimmung* into aesthetic discourse via Caspar David Friedrich’s friend Carl Gustav Carus. Yet where the Romantics understood *Stimmung* to be the attunement to an objective, shared situation, for later vitalist writers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Hugo von Hofmannsthal, the term denominated primarily subjective moods that are unstable, decentered, and dependent upon external circumstances, including the perception and voluntary and involuntary recollection of these circumstances.

This latter, vitalist understanding of *Stimmung* encompasses several experiential registers that became central to film theory and practice. First, *Stimmung* allows us to grasp the entwinement of the spectators’ own temporality and situatedness with the temporality and (world) view that unfold in a film. Second, it can also illuminate the relationship between individual spectator and collective audience, that mysterious co-presence in the theater and the co-experience of the film. Most important for my project, however, is the capacity of *Stimmung* to describe and illuminate stylistic and formal aspects of films themselves—a grasp of *mise en scène* that already includes experience and effect (or affect) in its articulation.10

To contextualize my discussion of film and *Stimmung*, I begin by outlining the Romantic invocation of *Stimmung*, from Kant to Friedrich and Carus, before then contrasting this early use of the term with Nietzsche’s and Hofmannsthal’s ‘affective’ use of the term, on the one hand, and Alois Rieg’s and Georg Simmel’s reflections on the relationship of *Stimmung* and the observer, on the other hand. I argue that the *Stimmung* aesthetics developed by these writers, and in the cinema and painting of the early twentieth century, can only be understood when it is brought into connection with life-scientific models of subject-environment interaction. In the nineteenth century, the rise of milieu theory was concomitant not only with, say, Émile

10 Robert Sinnerbrink has written an illuminating essay on the importance of mood for film analysis. See Sinnerbrink, ‘Stimmung’.
Zola’s ‘naturalism,’ which held that individuals are ‘determined’ by their milieu, but it also enabled a much more indeterminate understanding of external Stimmungen that take hold of individuals, and which is expressed in the literature of Adalbert Stifter, Gottfried Keller, and Theodor Fontane.

The rise of Expressionism in art and subsequently in film, however, presented a turning point in the history of Stimmung aesthetics, enabling a new way of thinking about Stimmung and environment, one in which the individual is not determined by her external surroundings, but rather struggles with ‘problems’ proposed by that environment. To explore how Expressionism reorients Stimmung aesthetics, this chapter focuses on various films from the Expressionist period in German cinema, in particular The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari, Robert Wiene, 1920) and Shattered (Scherben, Lupu Pick, 1921). Not coincidentally, Stimmung became important for the film-critical and aesthetic discourse of the time as well, and Béla Balázs makes extensive use of the term in his discussion of Expressionist, Impressionist, and Kammerspiel (‘chamber play’) film, for example, as do Rudolf Kurtz and Lotte Eisner in their books on Expressionist cinema. Focusing especially on Balázs’ arguments, I argue that Balázs helps us to see how Caligari’s mise en scène effectively creates a determinist aesthetic, but the Kammerspiel films—despite the return to ‘naturalist’ motifs in these films—in fact reframe and mobilize the subject-environment interaction by means of their use of closer shot lengths and an increasing mobilization of the camera, and hence develop a Stimmung aesthetic that proposes an open relationship between an individual and her surroundings.

This chapter thus has three primary goals. First, it demonstrates an important link between the vitalism discussed in earlier chapters and the concept of Stimmung. Second, the chapter explains why the concept of Stimmung was of interest to early film commentators: namely, it enabled early film critics to describe moods as well as processes of resonance, attunement, and animation in cinema and on the film screen, and to do so by discussing cinematic style in a way that did not subordinate form to plot elements or questions of photographic representation. Stimmung, to return to the discussion of Walter Benjamin in Chapter 2, describes the aesthetic quality of the ‘medium of perception’ and the contacts and correspondences it enables. Third, and finally, focusing on Balázs’ use of the term gives us greater insight into why recent critics have found the historical genre category of German Expressionism problematic, and also helps us to understand better the dialectic between Expressionist films and later chamber play films that relied on differing understandings of how an environment ‘determines’ characters.
A Brief Aesthetic History of Stimmung

As David Wellbery has shown in his enlightening history of the term, the use of the word *Stimmung* combines nuances that set it somewhat apart from related English terms, such as mood, atmosphere, or attunement.\(^\text{11}\) *Stimmung* is both subjective and objective (it can be ascribed to a person or a landscape, for example), internal and external, communicating and communicable, and it carries a strong musical sense that connects it to tune, voice, and harmony. *Stimmung* as an aesthetic concept captures the sense of mood as well as processes of resonance, attunement, and animation between living beings and their environment, and there is thus no precise translation of the term into English. Wellbery also argues that *Stimmung* became a concept or term at a particular historical point—the late eighteenth century—when the subject had lost its secure and predetermined place in the world, and the world and its order became subject to change; that is, the relationship between subject and world needs to be negotiated again and again. The concept of *Stimmung* thus supplants the idea of a pre-stabilized world harmony (as in, for example, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz’s philosophy). There is the possibility of harmony (in the sense of an attunement) between subject and world, but this harmony only means attunement of subject and world to a random (*beliebige*) and temporary, not an absolute, value. In that sense, *Stimmung* is often connected to longing (*Sehnsucht*), because it allows for a connection with a larger whole—environment, nature, community—while still lacking absolute determination.

Immanuel Kant made an explicit connection between the concept of *Stimmung* and aesthetic theory. In his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant addresses the attunement between self and world when considering the fact that judgments of beauty, while based on subjective grounds, still contain a reference to universally validity. How do subjective judgment and universal validity cohere? If reason is what connects us as individuals to a community and the world at large, how can this connection be achieved when we are dealing with beauty, that is, a judgment made beyond reason? The ‘pleasure’ that is bound up with aesthetic judgment grows out of the subject’s reflexive understanding that its own ‘subjective condition’ at the moment of aesthetic experience amounts to something ‘universally communicable’ (*allgemein mitteilungsfähig*). This communicability is pre-conceptual, pre-conscious; it must be located in our ‘mental state’ (*Gemütszustand*). This mental state is characterized by a free play of the faculties of cognition (*Erkenntniskräfte*), namely imagination and

\(^{11}\) Wellbery, ‘Stimmung’.
understanding (*Einbildungskraft und Verstand*), which somehow ‘zusammen-stimmen’ (‘harmonize’, fit/tune together). A specific presentation (*Vorstellung*) brings the faculties of cognition into a *Stimmung* that is proportionate to this representation: because of this link between our cognition and presentation, our judgments of beauty can be subjective yet general, even though they are not based on concepts.\(^1\)

Thomas Pfau summarizes this process as follows:

The ‘proportionate accord’ (*proportionierte Stimmung*) of the faculties of cognition, Kant argues, constitutes both the cause and the substance of the aesthetic-reflective judgment (§ 9, 54). At its most general, all cognition (*Erkenntnis*) can thus be characterized as a way of being ‘attuned’ to discrete phenomena, such that their contemplation will gradually ‘determine’ (*bestimmen*) the subject via its affective experience of a ‘concord’ (*Übereinstimmung*) or ‘conformity’ (*Zusammenstimmung*) that connects an (empirical) appearance to the (transcendental) form in which the subject’s sensory and discursive faculties relate to one another.\(^3\)

Pfau’s analysis of this passage highlights the fact that for Kant, feeling, or affect, holds a privileged position both for cognition and for an ethical being-in-the-world. The attunement to phenomena is already the attempt to comprehend and judge the world; it is not simply pre-cognitive, but a substantive and necessary part of the process of cognition. At the same time, Kant’s use of the term *Stimmung* signals how these feelings are always already connected to an awareness of their communicability and sharedness; aesthetic experience thus appears as the nexus of self and imagination with community and livable reality (as projection). Much later, Martin Heidegger would deepen this logic, asserting that wherever we are, a *Stimmung* is already there and encompasses us; hence, *Stimmung* cannot be an event in the soul, but rather determines the conditions of our being-together: ‘It is clear that attunements are not something merely at hand. They themselves are precisely a fundamental manner and fundamental way of being, indeed of being-there [Da-sein], and this always directly includes being with one another [Miteinandersein].’\(^4\) In both Kant’s and Heidegger’s (otherwise quite different) uses of the concept of *Stimmung*, an inquiry into the conditions and tonalities of *Stimmungen* implies an ethical dimension.

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\(^3\) Thomas Pfau, *Romantic Moods*, 34.

As both Kant and Heidegger suggest, though in different ways, *Stimmung* always concerns mediation, whether this is the mediation between imagination and reason, between self and representations, or between self and others. This mediating role remains central in others’ use of the term: in Schiller’s *Aesthetic Education*, it is the mediating moment between sensation and thought that suspends the determining force of either domain; in Hegel’s *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik* it is the lyrical mediation between subjectivity and the outside world. In most eighteenth- and nineteenth-century accounts of *Stimmung*, no matter whether the focus is on the interior/subjective or exterior/objective, this mediating moment arises reactively, passively; it comes forth without a will or clearly identifiable agent. Particularly in its nineteenth-century use in literary texts (for example, in the writings of Goethe, Adalbert Stifter, and Gottfried Keller), *Stimmung* designates a whole that encompasses people and their environment. Yet this is not an organic, predetermined, or teleological whole; rather, this whole is the result of a precarious network of indeterminable, unwilled relations. *Stimmung*, in other words, is a vitality of relations, of the in-between, possessing people and things, possessed by none, and requiring sensitivity to both internal and external voices.

Perhaps because the history and aesthetic valence of the term *Stimmung* has been a topic of interest primarily to literary scholars in German studies, the fact that this concept has an inherent temporal dimension and is almost always connected to movement has often been ignored or deemphasized.

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16 For example, Anna-Katharina Gisbertz, ed., *Stimmung*; Hans-Georg von Arburg and Sergej Rickenbacher, eds., *Concordia discors*; Pfau, *Romantic Moods*. Recently, several cognitive theorists—most notably Noël Carroll, Greg M. Smith, and Carl Plantinga—have sought to integrate ‘mood’ into cognitive film theory and theory of art at large. But because they understand mood functionally and as something that is neuro-scientifically verifiable (and in this sense dislodged from aesthetic-historical uses and transformations, and beyond etymological and semantic considerations), their account only aims to describe the important role mood—in contradistinction from emotions or affects—plays in film *reception*. The use of the English term ‘mood’ further means that, in contrast to *Stimmung*, they do not think about subjective (human) mood and environmental atmosphere together. To them, the question of transference of mood from one entity (say, a film) to another (a spectator) is a ‘mystery’ onto which they aim to shed light. Smith, for example, maintains that mood is film’s primary way of communicating. Films, for him, extend an ‘invitation to feel’ rather than make people feel. In contrast to more short-lived emotions, sustaining ‘mood cues’ serves to ‘orient’ us and pave the way for emotions proper. To this end, Plantinga invented the term ‘art moods’ to distinguish the mood of a film—as the affective character of a film—from the human mood that a film may evoke. Such an invocation of mood as a critical category fails to grasp the complex interaction between cinematic mood...
Given that this aspect of Stimmung is one that made it especially suitable for early-twentieth-century discussions of moving images, it is worth stressing this aspect here. Just as tuning an instrument is connected to the vibration of strings, for example, Stimmung for the poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe is a vibration in nature that connects things. The Romanticist philosopher Gottlieb Fichte, in particular, emphasizes the role of movement in the communication of a Stimmung in art:

The enthusiastic artist expresses the Stimmung of his soul in a mobile body, and the movement, the gait, the flow of his characters are the expression of the inner vibrations of his soul. This movement is supposed to produce the same Stimmung in us that was in him; he lent his soul to the dead matter, so that it may transfer this soul to us [...] those characters are the mediators between him and us, like the air is a mediator between our ear and an instrument’s string. This inner Stimmung of the artist is the spirit of his product; and the arbitrary characters, by means of which he expresses them, are the body or the letter of this spirit.17

For Fichte, in contrast to Kant, Stimmung ‘is not the condition of possibility of communication, but rather that which is supposed to be communicated in art’, as Wellbery succinctly puts it.18 Yet Fichte still distinguishes between Stimmung and its mediation: Stimmung is internal only and refers to the movement of the artist’s soul, which can be transferred to others’ souls by means of a different medium (in the case of the vibration of string instruments, for example, this would be air). Attunement is thus the product of the mediation of Stimmung as a mood or tonality.

Stimmung itself became a medium in nineteenth-century art theory and practice, whereby it was increasingly understood to encompass inner life and life outside oneself. In contrast to the letter (Buchstab), which Fichte conceived as the independent mediator of an inner Stimmung, a medium such

and the spectator, namely the capacity of a film to envelop the spectator with a mood that is as complex and intense as moods found in directly experienced environments. It also fails to answer a question that scholars of melodrama have been asking for decades, namely: why would we willingly subject ourselves to a film that affects our mood negatively? Because cognitivist film theory maintains that our reception of films is always goal-oriented, it ultimately does not allow for Kant’s ‘free play’ of the faculties of cognition or for disinterested pleasure, both of which are central elements of film spectatorship. See Noël Carroll, ‘Art and Mood’; Greg M. Smith, Film Structure and the Emotion System; and Carl Plantinga, ‘Art Moods and Human Moods in Narrative Cinema’.

18 Wellbery, ‘Stimmung’, 715 (translation mine).
as landscape painting can express a *Stimmung* contained in that landscape, which then can influence the beholder’s soul. For Carl Gustav Carus, a painter, doctor, and philosopher who was close to Caspar David Friedrich, the main task of landscape painting was the ‘(re)presentation of a certain *Stimmung* of inner life (*Gemüthlebens*) (sense) by means of the imitation (*Nachbildung*) of a corresponding *Stimmung* of natural life (truth)’. This correspondence has its origin in the fact that for Carus, sensations (*Empfindungen*) emerge from a sense of the self as part of a larger whole, in contrast to the individualizing tendency of ideas (*Vorstellungen*). As sensing beings, we are part of nature, because the same life pulses through us; a life that expresses itself through the states of growth, chaos, organization, equilibrium, decline, decay, and death; the manifold *Stimmungen* can be attributed to various combinations of these states. Only the free, unbiased mind will be able to be tuned by, to attune to the *Stimmung* of landscapes, while the biased (*befangen*) mind, which is already tuned by an inner mood or agitation, might transfer this inner agitation to what it perceives. A sick mind might be affected wrongly by things—be depressed by a spring morning, for example. Attunement for Carus might go both ways, but *should* only go from environment to observer; ideally, the observer should be empty, unprejudiced, calm, and even-keeled.

Two decisive late nineteenth-century shifts in the sense of *Stimmung* helped set the stage for its subsequent adoption by early critics and theorists of film. The first shift was the introduction of historicity into an understanding of the relationship between *Stimmungen* and art: that is, the idea that art-*Stimmungen* play different roles in different periods. This shift is evident in Alois Riegl’s early twentieth-century considerations of *Stimmung* and modern art. For him, quietude and a distanced view (‘Ruhe und Fernsicht’) enable *Stimmung* to come forth, while anything close that stimulates the senses of touch, including the perception of fast or close movement, throws us into the pressure of existence as fight. What distinguishes Riegl’s invocation of *Stimmung* from that of Carus, however, is his introduction of the term as a historically determined approach to art. The end goal of all art, Riegl surmises, is harmony, a relief from the fight for existence; rather than a metaphysical harmony that would allow for insight based on an attunement to the larger forces, Riegl’s harmony is functional and simply allows for a reprieve. The kind of art that would grant a relief from existential pressure, however, is dependent upon the historical context of that which constitutes the most pressuring fight: for the primitives, man against man, each for

themselves, resulted in the fetish as protection; in antiquity, the strongest against the weaker resulted in admiration of the strong and beautiful body that is equally god and human; in medieval times, moral and spiritual purity against sin resulted in art focusing on the face and gesture as expressions of such purity; and in modernity, the conflict between the dissecting knowledge of the natural sciences and belief resulted in ‘Stimmungskunst’ (Stimmung art) that represents nature as a chain of causalities.

The second key shift, which we see in the work of life-philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, is the position that Stimmungen completely determine the individual: that is, rather than Stimmungen serving as a means for the faculty of reason, as in Kant, the subject is instead the outcome of competing Stimmungen. With Riegl’s sober analysis of why Stimmungskunst pleases and appeases us, Stimmung became dislodged from any immediate and absolute epistemic value. Such a disconnection between Stimmung and knowledge also informed nineteenth-century vitalist and life-philosophical discourses, where it was further tied to the qualities of life that determine the perceiving individual. With surprising wit and insight, in 1864, the young Friedrich Nietzsche analyzed, in an essay entitled ‘On Moods,’ how the mental state is determined by conflicts between old thoughts and new impressions, and ‘Stimmung’ simply names the current state of the conflict.

Let us admit it: I am writing about moods, insofar as I am right now in a certain mood; and it is fortunate that I am just in the mood for describing moods. Today I played Liszt’s Consolations many times over, and now I feel how its tones have penetrated my being and continue, spiritualized, to resonate within me. I recently underwent a painful experience that had to do with a parting or a not parting, and now I notice how this feeling and those tones have fused together, and I see that the music would not have appealed to me had I not just had this experience. So the soul strives to attract what is like it, and the current mass of feelings squeezes like a lemon the new events that impinge upon the heart, but always in such a way that only a part of what is new fuses with what is old, and a residue is left over which is not yet able to find anything related to it in the household of the soul, and thus lodges here alone, quite often to the displeasure of the older residents with whom it often comes into conflict. But look! Here comes a friend, there a book is opening, a girl passes by. Listen! Music! Already new guests are streaming in from all sides into the house that stands open to all, and the one who was just now standing alone finds many noble relatives.21

21 Friedrich Nietzsche, ‘On Moods (1864),’ 5-6.
The soul is influenced—pushed, attacked, confirmed, elevated—by impressions that can stand in a relationship of confluence or contrast with its current state. To the musical image of a string in the soul that vibrates and resonates with a related external event, Nietzsche adds an additional material element: even where there is no resonance, since we are matter among matter, external events still put pressure on the soul. Against the *Stimmung* art that appeases the fight of existence, Nietzsche celebrates *Stimmung* as subjective experience of the confrontation between self and world. Rather than understanding *Stimmung* as simply a continuous, contingent change, Nietzsche values *Stimmungen* because in the encounter between self and world, the moods change and grow, become simultaneously deeper and higher, since the amassing of experiences in the self allows for more intense encounters with the world. As such, the change of *Stimmungen* rises above the changes in nature, since the latter is determined by eternal sameness. In his short text on moods, Nietzsche ends by demonstrating the power of the moody soul over nature by invoking a thunderstorm: ‘And I implore a thunderstorm; does the tolling of the bell not attract the lightning? Now, you approaching thunderstorm, clarify, purify, blow fragrances of rain into my dull nature; welcome, at last, welcome!’ In art, nature attunes to the soul, and the voice of the creative soul now addresses the self magnified, as instantiation from the world: ‘Be cleansed!’ ‘Hope!’ ‘Become new!’

**Turn-of-the-Century *Stimmung* and Cinema: Georg Simmel and Hugo von Hofmannsthal**

During the first few decades of cinema, vitalist writers turned to the interface of self and world with a curiosity fueled by the readiness to let the borders of the self dissolve in the onslaught of manifold *Stimmungen*, stimuli, and impulses. Knowledge and experience, it seemed, were not achieved internally after a reflection on external events, but rather at the seam of inside and outside, on the skin, in the evocations of a word, sound, rhythm, line. Without postulating a relationship of cause and

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22  ‘Dear moods, I salute you, marvellous variations of a tempestuous soul, as manifold as nature itself, but more magnificent than nature, since you eternally transcend yourselves and strive eternally upwards, whereas the plant still exhales the same fragrance it did on the day of creation. I no longer love as I loved some weeks ago; I am no longer this moment in the mood I was in as I began to write.’ Nietzsche, ‘On Moods (1864)’, 8.

23  Ibid., 9-10.
effect, I see the development of technological media in the nineteenth century—in particular, photography, the gramophone, and cinema—as a direct companion of a notion of *Stimmung* that sought new configurations of self and world, dissolving not only the contours and coordinates of the self, but also its environment. These media allowed for new experiences of temporality characterized by achronology and simultaneity, and new experiences of the body based on a separation of immediate sensual and spatio-temporal connections (the disembodied voice that is suddenly found to carry a body with it and fill a room, for example). These experiences also informed Georg Simmel’s and Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s use of *Stimmung*, and it is through these authors that the term also influenced early texts on cinema.

Simmel, like Nietzsche, worked out how *Stimmung* mediates between nature and human being precisely because an original unity is lost. He did so by invoking landscape, writing: ‘By nature we mean the infinite interconnectedness of objects, the uninterrupted creation and destruction of forms, the flowing unity of an event that finds expression in the continuity of temporal and spatial existence.’24 Nature is spatially whole, all-encompassing; temporally, it is eternal and uninterrupted, and natural life is interwoven, characterized by permanent change. The idea of landscape is itself already the signature of an attempt at a unity of a second order, one that derives its coherence from human perception and comprehension (and, we could add, thus also one that bespeaks the loss of the original harmony that allowed human beings to understand themselves as part of the cosmos): ‘a self-contained perception intuited as a self-sufficient unity, which is nevertheless intermeshed with an infinite expansiveness and a continual flux’.25 In Simmel’s text, the dynamic interplay of soul and world that for Nietzsche characterized the ‘moody’ self becomes a dynamic that is played out in aestheticized and quasi-objectified nature itself, as a fluctuation between a human-given form and the borderlessness of transcendent nature (a non-nature-bound aesthetic object such as a painting would present such a fluctuation in a different way, namely as one between aesthetic form and the creator’s vitality that remains connected to it).

For Simmel, this dualism of form and life characterizes culture more generally. Simmel views any cultural product, including ‘civil laws and constitutions, works of art, religion, science, technology’, as artifacts that

25 Ibid., 22.
are produced by the ‘creative dynamism of life’ and, since they have form and life is formless, ‘provide it with forms of expression and actualization’ by absorbing life’s flow.

But a peculiar quality of these products of the life process is that from the first moment of their existence they have fixed forms of their own, set apart from the febrile rhythm of life itself, its waxing and waning, its constant renewal, its continual divisions and reunifications. They are vessels both for the creative life, which however immediately departs from them, and for the life which subsequently enters them, but which after a while they can no longer encompass. They have their own logic and laws, their own significance and resilience arising from a certain degree of detachment and independence vis-à-vis the spiritual dynamism which gave them life. At the moment of their establishment they are, perhaps, well-matched to life, but as life continues its evolution, they tend to become inflexible and remote from life, indeed hostile to it.  

Landscapes, for Simmel, are a form given to nature by life as it manifests itself in us. A ‘form drive’ (Formtrieb) is inherent to life, and an artwork constitutes an object that is a now self-sufficient and independent product of this drive, the result of a kind of crystallization. The landscape is an in-between object: it is the result of our vital drive to form, but it has not ossified into a fixed, stand-alone object. For Simmel, Stimmung is that which carries the new unity of the elements that make up the landscape. The intuitive unity of what we call landscape; its Stimmung; and the Stimmung into which it moves us—this is one indivisible act that transcends the subject-object dichotomy and unites perception and feeling. The new, man-made unity of a landscape and Stimmung as a feeling are both located in the interaction of our individuality and the specificity of the surroundings we perceive. Stimmung is thus part of the very act of vital creation of a form (i.e., landscape), it is inscribed in that form; since the form is itself

26 Simmel, ‘The Conflict of Modern Culture’, 75-76.
27 Simmel is simultaneously drawing on and distancing himself from Friedrich Schiller here, without naming him directly. In ‘On the Aesthetic Education of Man’, Schiller distinguishes between two basic drives: a ‘sensual drive’ and a ‘form drive’, whereby the latter strives toward a distance from the feeling body, harmony and permanence to secure man’s identity through the changes over time. Friedrich Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man.
28 The basis for Heidegger’s understanding of Stimmung is not that dissimilar: because Stimmung puts us in touch with the world and highlights how we are part of the fabric of the world, we can gain an understanding of the conditions of Dasein. See Heidegger, The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics.
made by a person based on that which she actually finds before herself, both form and Stimmung are simultaneously subjective and objective.

For Simmel, Stimmung encompasses the aesthetic and emotional dimension of the encounter between individual and environment, an encounter in which neither exists autonomously for the duration of the perception of the landscape. Simmel’s approach to landscape thus also allows us to think about the viewing of an image, a moving image, since his definition of landscape describes nothing other than the process of turning a view into a mental image; a view that is ‘made,’ that is delineated by a stable frame and determined by certain spatial relations between things and by certain qualities (light, color, etc.). Like the landscape, the moving image is an in-between object, a form on the edge of formlessness, a form threatening to dissolve back into the flow of life at any moment. With a landscape, its instability results from the fact that it is defined by a purely perceptual frame; it does not exist outside of our perception, unless we recreate it in an image. Moving images have a set frame and perspective, but have reconstituted natural movement which defies a determinate form; instead, the image assimilates, or reintegrates, seamlessly back into the flow of life. While landscapes maintain a connection to the flow of life via perception as vital act, moving images maintain this connection via the properties of the new medium of cinematography itself.

Most early reflections on cinematography, that is, texts about the potential, danger, and possibilities of the new medium, focus on either the new world that cinema opens up—a world that lacks sound, color, gravity, fate, and anthropocentrism, but also promises a new awareness of the body and nature, expanded senses, and overall nerve stimulation—or on the experience of watching moving pictures in a movie theater. Stimmung is usually not a central term in these texts to describe the effect of film images or the relationship between spectator and image, presumably because the colloquial use of Stimmung referred back to its mid-nineteenth century definition of a captured, but removed and reflecting observer who finds himself vis-à-vis an image, rather than enmeshed in it. Authors and critics thus explicitly turned against the spatiotemporal coordinates of Stimmung in Carus’ or Riegl’s sense and focused on how the motion picture upset those aesthetic attitudes. They described the vertiginous temporality, the loss of cohesion, direction, and causality; the tearing at the nerves, the lust and sensationalism, the pure, sensual, and non-sensical spectacle. While for Riegl, Stimmungskunst was a reprieve or counterbalance to the pressure of modern life, early film reviewers (at least those who were not fighting cinema on moral and cultural grounds)
celebrated the ability of film to reflect back to them the reality of modern life, in particular its speed, amorphousness, possibilities, and imbrication with technology.29

Yet *Stimmung* still provided an important aesthetic structure for these critics, and it did so in two ways upon which I shall expand below. Descriptions of the effect of cinema were often closely related to the modern subjective permutations of *Stimmung* (i.e., in its sense of an individual mood) by Nietzsche and fin-de-siècle Viennese writers such as Hugo von Hofmannsthal or Fritz Mauthner, for whom *Stimmung* was fleeting, contradictory, and in its connection of self and world, current and past experiences a companion of a decentered, unstable self.30

Hofmannsthal, Mauthner and other fellow travelers found their medium—language—to be lifeless and distant from actual experience; they thus attempted to define and carve out a space for poetic words to touch life *despite* language.31 *Stimmung* in its modern, Nietzschean understanding describes that space, especially when it is turned against its more colloquial, holistic use. In the brief text ‘Poetry and Life’ (*Poesie und Leben*), Hofmannsthal rejected the common use of *Stimmung* (that is, *Stimmung* as something that can be objectively described and ascribed to texts and paintings) to define, in one long, winding sentence, the essence of poetry as *Stimmung*—the latter now understood as a subjective state of being.

I don’t know if, among all that tiresome chatter about individuality, style, attitude, *Stimmung* and so forth, there has not been a loss of awareness of the fact that the material of poetry is words, that a poem is a weightless weave of words which, by way of their order, their sound and their content; by connecting the memory of visible things and the memory of audible things with an element of movement; elicit a precisely

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29 These reviews generally read like an illustration of Walter Benjamin’s argument about the loss of aura with media such as photography and film—an argument that reframes Riegl’s discussion of *Stimmung*. For Benjamin on aura, see Benjamin, ‘Little History of Photography’, 518-19; Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art’, 103-05, 112. On the distinction between aura and *Stimmung*, see Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, 233; and Dirk Niefanger, *Produktiver Historismus*, 52.

30 Another group of film critics, among them Hermann Häfker and Herbert Tannenbaum, turn to external *Stimmungen* (i.e., in the sense of the mood or atmosphere of a landscape) to discuss a new aesthetic of nature and landscape connected to movement that film has ushered in. See Helmut H. Diederichs, ‘Frühgeschichte deutscher Filmtheorie’; Häfker, *Kino und Kunst*; and Herbert Tannenbaum, *Der Filmtheoretiker Herbert Tannenbaum*.

circumscribed, dreamily clear, fleeting condition of the soul we call *Stimmung*.\(^{32}\)

As is typical of Hofmannsthal, he used contradictions to outline the qualities of this state—‘dreamily clear’—that highlight how its quality eludes the grasp of words. *Stimmung* designates this quality of words beyond any objective ascription: it is a weave without weight, so what matters is the interweaving, not what the weave could carry—what matters is the medium, not the message. This interweaving includes subjective associations, both sensual and intellectual, evoked by the words’ rhythm, sound, appearance, and content. Important for us is the role of movement: the material qualities of words in poetry resonate with our embodied feelings and memories. There is a ripple that poetry can send through the atmosphere and through our fibers, and this ripple, like a weaver’s shuttle, connects the memories of visible and audible phenomena nudged by poetry into a fleeting texture.

This weave is diametrically opposed to those holistic understandings of the world that are associated with vitalism more generally, namely the idea that there is an overarching unity to an individual living being and its connection to the cosmos. Instead, this weave is a tenuous connection that claims no unification or completeness; in contrast to the holistic claim that the sum is greater than the parts, *Stimmung* for Hofmannsthal and fellow travelers replaces the illusion of holism, unity, and coherence with a decentered, temporary connection. This is one way of reading Hofmannsthal’s ‘Letter of Lord Chandos’ from 1902, even though in this watershed text of the so-called ‘language crisis’ among fin-de-siècle Viennese writers, Hofmannsthal never discusses *Stimmung* directly. In the form of a letter to Francis Bacon, Lord Chandos chronicles his development from poet to someone unable to grasp anything coherently, either in language or in thought. In the days of his belief in poetry and in his ability to understand and convey both himself and the world, Chandos writes that he, ‘in a state of continuous intoxication, conceived the whole of existence as one great unit: the spiritual and physical worlds seemed to form no contrast’. In everything he ‘felt the presence of Nature . . . and in all expressions of Nature I felt myself’. Both physical and spiritual experiences were the same: ‘neither was superior to the other, whether in dreamlike celestial quality or in physical intensity—and thus it prevailed through the whole expanse of

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life in all directions; everywhere I was in the centre of it, never suspecting mere appearance'.

Yet in being unable to view things from a distance and put them into perspective, Chandos experiences the loss of determining relationships—both his self and objects disintegrate. Increasingly, he becomes unable to use words; first, concepts such as 'soul' or 'body,' and soon any abstract words and verbal judgments. The mediation of perception by a magnifying glass becomes indicative of this disintegration:

As once, through a magnifying glass, I had seen a piece of skin on my little finger look like a field full of holes and furrows, so I now perceived human beings and their actions. I no longer succeeded in comprehending them with the simplifying eye of habit. For me everything disintegrated into parts, those parts again into parts; no longer would anything let itself be encompassed by one idea. Single words floated round me; they congealed into eyes which stared at me and into which I was forced to stare back—whirlpools which gave me vertigo and, reeling incessantly, led into the void.

What Chandos describes as a disorienting loss—the floating of words signals that all firm coordinates have indeed been lost—reappears in early film theory a few years later in often exhilarating terms, when vaudeville programs and distraction were seen as a marker of modernity and mass culture. For Chandos, the crisis is set off by mediated vision and results in the transformation of words into eyes with a commanding gaze—an image very similar to Alfred Döblin’s description, seven years later, of the movie screen as a ‘white eye’ that spellbinds the masses with its ‘fixed stare’.

This loss of a sense of self, however, becomes for Chandos the precondition for a new sensitivity to things, views, and thoughts. Stephanie Harris has argued that what I would call ‘found images’ in the Chandos letter correspond very closely to the images Hofmannsthal conjured up in his essay on cinema, ‘The Substitute for Dreams’ (1921). In this essay, Hofmannsthal describes cinema’s moving images as an antidote to words, about which the masses have become wary and distrustful. In the Chandos letter, Chandos mentions ‘a pitcher’ half-filled with water, ‘a harrow abandoned in a field, a

34 Ibid., 134–35.
35 See Kracauer, ‘Cult of Distraction’.
dog in the sun, a neglected cemetery, a cripple, a peasant’s hut—all these can become the vessel of my revelation’.37 The film essay turns to similar images to describe how the effect of the moving images resembles the daydreams of children: ‘a dark corner, a breath of wind, the face of an animal or the shuffle of a stranger’s steps . . . the dark space behind the cellar steps, an old keg in the yard half-filled with rainwater’.38 But the case against language as a transparent, conceptual vehicle in the Chandos letter takes a social-critical turn in the essay on film written almost twenty years later. In an argument prefiguring Siegfried Kracauer’s and Walter Benjamin’s critique of film, Hofmannsthal connects the language crisis to comprehensive processes of rationalization undermining language, processes extending in particular to the living and working conditions of the urban masses. People’s heads are ‘empty;’ landscapes, houses, factory routines, administration, all reduce life to a ‘number.’ What is missing are ‘strong images that condense the essence of life’.39 For Hofmannsthal, the movie theater resembles dreams in its provision of images connected to ‘the only true power’ there is, and these dream-like images that come to the audience from without, but then take with them the entire person, down into its very depths, provide the only true antidote to any external power, whether capitalist, political, or social, as these latter are powers that rely on words and numbers.

While neither the Chandos letter nor ‘Substitute for Dreams’ mention Stimmung, they are nevertheless closely connected to Hofmannsthal’s understanding of the term. Stimmung grasps the potential of poetry, but even more so of art forms such as dance, theater, or film, to stir the essence of life, and to do so with images, sounds, gestures, movements, and rhythms that awaken something deep inside us that nothing else can stir. Film ‘offers beautiful beings, transparent gestures, and expressions and looks from which the soul as such bursts forth’.40 The spectator/dreamer is stirred in her entirety—not as a whole person, but rather in everything that her sensing, thinking, dreaming self has collected over her lifetime, consciously and, even more importantly, unconsciously. Hofmannsthal’s indebtedness to Sigmund Freud’s Dreams, which was published just two years prior to his film text, is most apparent here.41 From every dream, including those we cannot recall, ‘there remains within us a certain something, a quiet

39 Ibid., 384 (translation modified).
40 Ibid., 386.
41 See Harris, Mediating Modernity, 72-75; and Hanno Loewy, Béla Balázs, 290-98.
but decisive coloration of affect (Färbung der Affekte)—a Stimmung. Hofmannsthal’s thoughts on cinema prefigure not only Kracauer’s and Benjamin’s ideas (their awareness of film’s social-critical relevance, as well as the former’s notion of photography as go-for-broke game of history and the latter’s notion of the optical-unconscious), but also resonate with Béla Balázs’ The Visible Man, one of the earliest comprehensive attempts at an aesthetic theory of the medium film.

Balázs, Kammerspielfilm, and Expressionism

The Romantic and early modernist history of Stimmung that I have outlined above puts us in a position to understand better the appearance of this term in debates on ‘German’ cinema in the 1920s. In this period, German cinema had begun to distinguish itself on the basis of a kind of Stimmung film aesthetics, though most critics used the term ‘Stimmung’ in its more conventional form, as synonymous with atmosphere. The invocation of a distinct, sophisticated German cinema occurred originally in the context of the Autorenfilm around 1913/14, films that employed famous writers (Gerhart Hauptmann, Arthur Schnitzler, Hugo von Hofmannsthal) and well-known theater actors, and told stories inspired by literary and folk motifs. As Thomas Elsaesser and Dietrich Scheunemann convincingly argue, Autorenfilm, Expressionist cinema, and Kammerspiel film—those intimate psychological dramas that mostly play out in petit-bourgeois parlors and are related to Max Reinhardt’s theater experiments in intimate spectator-stage relations at his Kammerspiele theater in Berlin—are linked on the basis of not only their cultural and international market ambitions, but also similar motifs and visual strategies. All three groups of films rely on Romantic stories that are often set in the past and feature supernatural and/or gothic elements. At the same time, style and plot are driven by

43 Kracauer’s notion of a ‘last image’ that he develops in his essay on ‘Photography’ resonates particularly with Hofmannsthal’s symbol that flashes up from the depths of inner life: ‘As the eyes read from the flickering film the thousand-sided picture of life, the whole of this subterranean vegetation, down to the darkest regions of its roots, joins in the stirring movement . . . Before this dark view from the depths of being, the symbol appears like a flash: the sensual image of spiritual truth beyond the reach of ratio.’ Hofmannsthal, ‘The Substitute for Dreams’, 386. On Kracauer’s essay, see Chapter 4.
technical innovations in film, most often by innovative cameramen such as Guido Seeber or Karl Freund, as Katharina Loew has demonstrated in her work on early German cinema’s ‘technoromanticism.’

By reconsidering films from the early 1920s that are generally described as Expressionist or Kammerspiel films in terms of the way Stimmung operates in these films, my work participates in the critical reassessment of these stylistic attributions by recent scholarship. The very idea and definition of an Expressionist cinema, as well as the question what films could be categorized as in this group, has come under scrutiny by German film scholars such as Elsaesser, Scheunemann, and Thomas Koebner. How can one dissociate Weimar cinema from Expressionist cinema? What makes a film Expressionist; is it the story and its narrative construction (as in, for example, From Morn to Midnight [Von morgens bis mitternachts, Karlheinz Martin, 1920], which is based on an Expressionist drama and maintains the source’s structure)? Is it the style, in particular the set design, lighting, and camerawork? Or might Expressionist ideas translated to film result in a creature bearing very little resemblance to Expressionist literature or painting? Lotte Eisner’s The Haunted Screen (published in France in 1952, in Germany in 1955, and in the US in 1969) and Siegfried Kracauer’s From Caligari to Hitler from 1947, long constituted the canonical texts on Expressionist cinema and determined our understanding of these films. As authors who were both part of the film world they described, their account has a symptomatic quality, as Elsaesser asserts: ‘If, as their different arguments imply, the German nation is haunted by its cinema screen, and the films are haunted by German history, then their books are themselves haunted by the history that came after the films.’

While Expressionist cinema is still a favorite example of a distinct, coherent style bound up with national history in film studies textbooks and survey classes, this cinema’s stylistic coherence, its symptomatic quality, and relevance for German history, but also the stylistic elements themselves have spread out and diversified, at times to a degree that the object itself seems to dissolve.

My focus on Stimmung as a critical category is part of this revisionist view of early Weimar cinema. While the term was important in Eisner’s Haunted Screen, it was also central to texts contemporary with the films themselves, most notably Balázs’ Visible Man and Rudolf Kurtz’s Expressionismus und

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45 See Loew, ‘The Spirit of Technology: Early German Thinking about Film’.
47 Elsaesser, Weimar Cinema and After, 3-4.
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Film, which was published in 1926. Stimmung was an important category to describe the stylistic innovations that made films such as The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, Shattered or Nosferatu (F.W. Murnau, 1921) exciting for critics, filmmakers, and other artists. Balázs distinguishes the Kammerspiel film from Caligari by means of Stimmung, and in his writings, the social relevance of Stimmung aesthetics comes to the fore because it is intimately tied to social-scientific understandings of milieu. Kurtz—in a rhetorical gesture similar to Hofmannsthal’s in ‘Poetry and Life’—invokes a new meaning of Stimmung to simultaneously define Expressionist film and set it off from earlier (impressionist, psychological) Stimmungskunst.48

Balázs attributes to film the power to impart to everything—faces, objects, gestures, landscapes—a physiognomy; that is, a symbolic expressivity that transcends anything we could perceive under normal conditions. Balázs takes inspiration for his claims from both von Goethe and Lavater’s Physiognomic Fragments.49 He quotes Goethe: ‘The things surrounding a person do not simply impinge on him; he also reacts to them, and, while letting himself be modified, he modifies his surroundings.’ Arguing that we need to go beyond a simplistic distinction of nature and culture, interiority and exteriority, Balázs contends that everything we see in film is expressive: ‘everything external testifies to an internal reality’.50 The scenes Hofmannsthal lists in the Chandos letter and in ‘Substitute for Dreams’ are typical examples of images that film can provide with a ‘face’, according to Balázs. Furthermore, Balázs’ account of the limitations of normal perception—which is characterized by habit, prejudice, generalization, and conceptualization—is related to the impoverishment that for the ‘language crisis’ authors had also befallen language. Whereas Hofmannsthal believed that film could activate all unconscious thoughts, feelings and sensations

48 The critical and innovative edge Stimmung receives in these texts can also put Eisner’s reference in context: ‘In any German film, the preoccupation with rendering Stimmung (“mood”) by suggesting the “vibrations of the soul” is linked to the use of light. In fact, this Stimmung hovers around objects as well as people: it is a “metaphysical” accord, a mystical and singular harmony amid the chaos of things, a kind of sorrowful nostalgia which, for the German, is mixed with well-being.’ Lotte H. Eisner, The Haunted Screen, 199. The definition of a national Stimmung and the metaphysical aspects of Stimmung are part of Eisner’s explanatory pattern of a national stylistic tradition originating in Romanticism, even though in the 1920s, the term had achieved more modern connotations.

49 Balázs thus steps into a long tradition of physiognomic thought in Germany, a tradition that includes Lavater, Goethe, Carus, and many mostly conservative thinkers with racist or eugenic leanings, such as Oswald Spengler and Ludwig Klages. See Richard T. Gray, About Face. See also Erica Carter’s discussion of Balázs’ references to Goethe in Balázs, Early Film Theory, xxvii.

50 Balázs, Early Film Theory, 29.
in spectators (and was hence akin to dreams, in that film reached down to the ‘darkest region of the roots’ where myths originate), for Balázs, film could unlock unseen, unknown views (and thus knowledge) that seem to transcend the boundaries of human being-in-the-world.\footnote{Hofmannsthal, ‘The Substitute for Dreams’, 386.} By theorizing film perception as able to activate forgotten or unknown aspects of being-human (and thus effectively transgressing the human), Balázs’ film theory returns us to Marc’s and Uexküll’s attempt to glimpse a world beyond that given to our regular human being-in-the-world.

Whereas Marc’s paintings seek to connect to animals and animal worlds intuitively and empathically, and whereas Marc understands Umwelt as a feeling and vision, Balázs believes in a more invasive penetration of perception by the camera:

> Our normal situation is that we perceive the objects around us only vaguely, paying heed to them only through the fog of habitual generalizations and schematic conceptions. We look out mainly for the possible benefits they could bring or the damage they might inflict—to observe them in themselves happens rarely, if ever. Now when the cameraman cranks up his projector he penetrates the foggy cataract that obscures our vision, and we suddenly find ourselves confronted with an unaccustomed, mysterious, unnatural image of nature. We sometimes feel at this point that we have eavesdropped on a profound, sacred mystery, a hidden life that frequently possesses the secret charm of the forbidden.\footnote{Balázs, Early Film Theory, 60-61.}

The ‘profound, sacred mystery’ and ‘hidden life’ of which Balázs speaks is a world of which we, as human beings, are not part. Film provides us with the possibility ‘to see what things are like when we are not present’.\footnote{Stanley Cavell later made this idea an important aspect of his film philosophy in Stanley Cavell, The World Viewed.} In order to describe the mediation of this mysterious image of nature, Balázs makes recourse to \textit{Stimmung}: ‘Such images of nature always contain a very special mood [Stimmung]. And it is this mood the camera most wishes to capture.’\footnote{Balázs, Early Film Theory, 61; emphasis Balázs’.} \textit{Stimmung} describes the relationship between spectator, image, and camera: an image of nature that is not directly witnessed, but only relayed to us by a camera, contains a profound mystery that manifests itself as \textit{Stimmung}. \textit{Stimmung}, as something we sense and to which we attune

52 Balázs, Early Film Theory, 60-61.
53 Stanley Cavell later made this idea an important aspect of his film philosophy in Stanley Cavell, The World Viewed.
54 Balázs, Early Film Theory, 61; emphasis Balázs’.
ourselves, is the true medium between us and this mystery. The camera makes these images visible, but it can only seek to ‘capture’ the Stimmung of that of which it provides an image—that is, the Stimmung is not solely created by the camera.

This attempt to represent Stimmung extends beyond individual moving images to narrative cinema as a whole. A film succeeds in capturing Stimmungen if it is able to make use of the natural expressivity all things and places possess—their physiognomic quality which lends them symbolic meaning. This meaning is a Stimmung that emanates from the expressive object and interacts with the Stimmungen of the other objects, characters, and the background. Balázs makes recourse to musical metaphors to express this: ‘The sounds of an object ring out whether he will or not, and he must turn them into meaningful music or else they will degenerate into a confusing babble of sound.’ Balázs thus completely refutes the idea that the documentary qualities of photography and film consist of a ‘factual-objective’ mode of representation; representation in a film is always ‘physiognomically significant’.55

By understanding Stimmung to be synonymous with the expression, essence, or physiognomy of something, Balázs’ definition of the term is not unlike Hofmannsthal’s. This is probably not a coincidence, since Balázs had relocated to Vienna in 1920 and in all likelihood was familiar with Hofmannsthal’s work even prior to leaving Hungary.56 In a text on the capabilities of Max Reinhardt, the grand German theater director who also tried his hand in film and who created the first chamber play theater in Berlin in 1907, Hofmannsthal uses Stimmung to describe the expressivity of skilled, and skillfully directed, acting: ‘Indeed, above every thing, every event there floats a something that wants to present itself, so to speak, and which separates itself from this thing—floating above it—in order to crown and complete the thing’s existence’. This ‘something’ is Stimmung, he says, itself a ‘floating and ambiguous word’. The more sensitive the observing human being, ‘the more distinct and manifold the transparent shadow of this Stimmung for him will lie on moments and encounters, places and instants—a Stimmung in which the true essence of individual things seems to float above them’. For Hofmannsthal, ‘[t]he thousand nuances of Stimmung’—when the latter

55 Ibid., 56 (translation modified).
56 On Balázs’ first years in Vienna and parallels with Hofmannsthal (in particular their notion of the dream), see also Loewy, Béla Balázs, 260 ff.
‘is brought to life’—then become a means to create a ‘true atmosphere of life [Lebensatmosphäre]’.

Both Balázs and Hofmannsthal understand Stimmung as something transcendent, even as it is also intimately tied to the ‘texture’ of cinematic elements or the ‘weave of words’ that bring it forth. Stimmung is not itself life; it is brought to life by artistic elements—in film by mise en scène in particular, as well as by cinematography and montage—and in turn creates a dense atmosphere in art that gives the latter life. Both authors define ‘atmosphere’ as dependent upon, and evoked by, the suggestive expressiveness of Stimmung. Atmosphere, Balázs writes, ‘is the air and the aroma that pervade every work of art, and that lend distinctiveness to a medium and a world.’ Stimmung creates atmosphere, for its resonances are the medium of films’ ‘living atmosphere, the dense, aromatic fluidity they possess of a living life’. Atmosphere is ‘the soul’ of the whole, an immanent meaning that is nevertheless opaque and ungraspable. In order to capture this soul, a director has to create an image that captures that aspect of a landscape, milieu, event, or person that is most expressive—its ‘eyes’, in Balázs’ words.

Balázs explored the temporal and spatial conditions of Stimmung in film to work out the stylistic differences between Expressionist, Impressionist, and Kammerspiel films. How Stimmung works in these films—which is also how these films express meaning—not only throws into relief the particularities of the respective films’ aesthetics, but also the implicit notion of subject-environment interaction in mise en scène, shot lengths, montage patterns, and camerawork.

In Balázs’ Visible Man, Stimmung is an important reference in order to distinguish stylistic elements from Expressionism, naturalism, and New Objectivity in film, and to describe how these elements combine with the technological and aesthetic possibilities of film to forge a new register of images. The images in these films probe definitions of background, milieu, and environment by means of their mise en scène, in particular the shot length and the ensuing compositions. Balázs correlates the aesthetics of Expressionist films, the Kammerspiel film, and Impressionist films with different renderings of the environment: how the latter is constituted,

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58 ‘For a film text consists of its texture, of that language of images in which every group, every gesture, every perspective, every lighting set-up has the task of conveying the poetic mood and beauty that are normally to be discovered in the words of an author.’ Balázs, Early Film Theory, 18-19. On the ‘weave of words’, see quote above from Hofmannsthal, ‘Poesie und Leben’.

59 Balázs, Early Film Theory, 22.

60 Ibid., 44.
how it shapes the creatures in it, and how it may be shaped by subjects in turn. Each conception of environment that emerges is tied to a specific shot length and *mise en scène*: Expressionist films thrive on full shots, *Kammerspiel* films come into their own in mid-range shots, and Impressionist films occasion Balázs’ interest in the work done in close-up shots. Of these shot lengths, Balázs’ thoughts on the close-up are certainly the best-known, not only because he himself describes close-ups as ‘film’s true terrain’, but also because many other film theorists shared this assessment, from contemporaries of Balázs, including Jean Epstein and Walter Benjamin, to Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Aumont.61 While the close-up is also instrumental for Balázs’ thoughts on *Stimmung*, Balázs’ comments on Expressionist and *Kammerspiel* films reveal the interaction of *Stimmung* aesthetics and concrete social, political, and scientific conceptions of milieu. It is thus important to consider his discussion of all three shot lengths, and their connections to *Stimmung* and milieu, for these discussions reveal an unexpected aesthetic-political problem at the heart of Expressionist film and *Kammerspiel* film. While we commonly associate *Kammerspiel* film’s psychologized plots with a return to naturalism, and we associate Expressionist cinema with a drive toward abstraction that counters naturalism, these films’ *Stimmung* aesthetics undercuts these literary, theatrical, and painterly correlations by changing the relationship between spectator, characters, and milieu. Together with Balázs’ description of Impressionist films, his discussion of these film styles reveals how *Stimmung* in film becomes a film aesthetic category in its own right. This new film aesthetic category retains links to earlier discussions of *Stimmung* in art history and literature, but the aesthetics of the moving image and the different address and situation of the spectator change how *Stimmung* is produced and how it mediates between spectator and image.

Following Balázs’ account of *Stimmung* requires us, though, to understand how his description of shot lengths differs significantly from today’s terminology. When we speak of close-ups, medium shots or long shots, we use the human body as a stable frame of reference. Balázs used a different terminology; he talks about ‘Premierplan’ (foreground shots or close ups) and ‘Sekundärplan’, second plane, long and medium long shots that capture the midfield, that which is in between foreground and background, proximity and distance. These terms seem to have been quite common when he was writing, and they highlight a conception of the visual field in the frame

that differs from our terminology as well. The following classification of shots by Robert Kümmerlen, published 1930 in *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* (‘Journal for Aesthetics and Art History’), throws some light on Balázs’ references to shot lengths:

We distinguish: 1. the group of full shots or long shots (*Totale*), in which the space, which records all those circumstances that are of relevance for the pantomime, is always the greatest. The individual elements of the space or the image are, independent from one another, subordinate to the general impression of the total space. Movement also adds efficiently to the total characteristic of the space. 2. The second-plane shots (*Sekundärplan*) or so-called intermediary images are images of relation (*Beziehungsbilder*), which are relatively dependent and only receive their full spatial value from other spatial framings. These presentations have the purpose of heightening spatiality; the second-plane shot is the truly ‘space-creating’ presentation in film. The 3rd group is generally conceived of as the most characteristic for film, here the images are generally completely ‘detached’ from space. It is the group of close-ups, which lift a certain detail-image out of the film-whole and which direct our gaze to a solo performance that stands out qualitatively.62

This categorization highlights the fact that shot lengths were not necessarily determined relative to the human figure, but rather relative to the space of action, as well as relative to the preceding and following shots. For this reason, full shots depend on the size of the space of action—which in indoor shots, is generally a room, such as a small living room, but may also be a grand hall, and can become much larger outdoors—while *Sekundärplan* shots are even more difficult to discern. They are those shots that show only part of the plane of action, and they are ‘in between’: size-wise, in between close-up and total image, and also cut in between full shots of the place of action and detail shots. Balázs seems to understand the notion of *Beziehungsbilder* (‘images of relation’) in two ways. They relate other shots, especially close-ups and full shots, to one another (and themselves need to be integrated carefully into shot sequences for ‘visual linkage’), but even more importantly, they relate characters to their environment.63

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do, but focus on the relation of a character to this milieu (or, in the case of shots of objects, the role of a thing in/for a milieu).

Balázs ascribes to Expressionist film an aesthetic that mostly relies on full shots that show the entirety of the milieu: ‘Expressionism […] provides the total image of a milieu, but stylizes it into an expressive physiognomy rather than leaving it to the viewer to imbue the scene with his own momentary mood (Stimmung)’.64 This claim helps us to make sense of the fact that the most important register of images in Expressionist films such as Caligari, Genuine (which Robert Wiene directed in 1920, shortly after Caligari) or From Morn to Midnight shows an entire room or street. The elements of the environment—that ‘total image of a milieu’—dominate our understanding of the expressive content in these images. The use of the terms milieu and Stimmung in this sentence denote a particular connection between Expressionist aesthetic and environment. ‘Milieu’ defines the relationship of the environment to the character; ‘physiognomy’ describes the cinematic expression of what is visible on the screen, whether character, object, or environment; and Stimmung describes the complex interaction between spectator and image. Expressionist stylization, in other words, provides the milieu with a physiognomy, but does not leave any options to the viewer’s imagination. Rather, the spectator is drawn into, and submits to, the image’s rendering of the environment. Yet a problem concerning the relationship between Expressionist stylization of the image and the spectator also becomes apparent in Balazs’ comment: the Expressionist stylization runs the risk of excluding the spectator in its totalizing effect.

Some of the most famous shots from that most iconic Expressionist film, The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, illustrate both this formative, totalizing effect on the spectator and the force the milieu exerts on the characters. In many shots, supported by a static camera that renders the setting absolute, the character will literally ‘click into place’ over the course of his movements through the setting. Take, for example, Cesare’s (Conrad Veidt’s) approach to the sleeping Jane in order to murder her, although he then decides to kidnap her instead. The view of the street is framed by black, round shapes that intrude into the image, focusing our gaze on the illuminated spot of street and house wall. The shapes simultaneously imitate a realist equivalent—tree branches thick with leaves—and have the suggestive appearance of phantoms leaning in to the image, observing the crime about to be committed. However, they also provide a mold for the movements and expressive gestures of the actor. Veidt’s black silhouette glides along

64 Ibid., 51.
the wall with similar organic movements that are seemingly dictated by the diagonal composition of the wall. Once inside Jane’s bedroom, the two dark, dagger-like shapes protruding down from the top of the frame indicate the danger Jane is in, while they simultaneously, like arrows, draw our attention to Cesare. When Cesare lifts his dagger to murder Jane, the bright blade of his dagger appears as an exact copy of the black dagger-like shapes in the background. After he has decided instead to kidnap Jane, and then leaves her behind as he is pursued, Cesare enters a shot dominated by the silhouettes of abstract, dead trees against a white background. Once in the frame, he lifts his arms in a powerless and exhausted dramatic gesture before falling to his death.

In their discussion of the compositional qualities of ‘Expressionist films’ (which they define rather broadly), David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson highlight that in Expressionist films, the setting is an active, expressive, ‘living’ component of the film, which allows the actors to interact with the environment in new ways, not least by becoming graphic elements. Bordwell and Thompson cite Conrad Veidt in this context: ‘If the decor has been conceived as having the same spiritual state as that which governs the character’s mentality, the actor will find in that decora [sic] valuable aid in

Fig. 3.2.a–d: Cesare’s approach of the sleeping Jane and his flight in The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (Robert Wiene, 1921).
composing and living his part. He will blend himself into the represented milieu, and both of them will move in the same rhythm.\textsuperscript{65} Similarly, Kracauer praised both Conradt Veidt’s and Werner Krauss’ acting abilities: ‘Werner Krauss as Caligari had the appearance of a phantom magician himself weaving the lines and shades through which he paced, and when Conrad Veidt’s Cesare prowled along a wall, it was as if the wall had exuded him.’\textsuperscript{66}

The turn to \textit{Stimmung} in film criticism and theory in conjunction with Expressionist films seems to be directly connected to the stylistic quality of the films. Graphically as well as materially, the image is conceived as one expressive unity. While the setting attains an expressive face, the actors can appear flattened and abstract, blending into their environment. \textit{Stimmung} encompasses the ability of the images to express with all of their elements. This is quite reminiscent of nineteenth-century landscape paintings and Carus’ description of these paintings as representing ‘a certain \textit{Stimmung} of inner life (\textit{Gemüthlebens}) (sense) by means of the imitation (\textit{Nachbildung}) of a corresponding \textit{Stimmung} of natural life (truth).’\textsuperscript{67} Expressionist films are different, however, in that their images do not depend upon an absolute distinction between non-human and human, inner and outer life—distinctions upon which the motif of the \textit{Rückenfigur} still insisted, even as it put these terms into play. The film image grants everything in it the same vitality and potential for expression; there are no qualitative differences between characters, objects, and environments. Veidt’s and Kracauer’s comments express the way in which \textit{Caligari} made use of this qualitative sameness by having the actors assimilate to the décor.

There is, however, an aesthetic wager associated with Expressionist films such as \textit{Caligari}. For Balázs, Expressionism in film is, to some extent, film’s natural terrain—not only because of film’s ability to control and stylize environments, but also because film can give equal expressive value to characters, things, and landscapes. He claims that ‘no director today can still tolerate a lifeless background, a neutral milieu; instead, he attempts to animate the entire screen with the same mood [\textit{Stimmung}] that animates the faces of his actors.’\textsuperscript{68} However, many Expressionist films—which were, after all, also consciously marketed as German Expressionist stylizations for an international market—precisely do not provide the object world

\textsuperscript{65} Conrad Veidt, ‘Faut-il supprimer les sous-titres?’, quoted after David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, \textit{Film History}, 92. This conception of milieu also connects quite well to some remarks in reviews of the film, for example the criticism that the characters did not fit into the setting.

\textsuperscript{66} Kracauer, \textit{From Caligari to Hitler}, 69-70.

\textsuperscript{67} Carus, \textit{Neun Briefe über Landschaftsmalerei}, 41.

\textsuperscript{68} Balázs, \textit{Early Film Theory}, 47.
with ‘the living naturalness of the human sphere’, as Balázs claims to be true for Caligari. Instead, their stylization is formal, external, or ‘decorative’, as Balázs says: the films’ effect becomes ‘ornamental, a consistent, constant style that has lost the character of spontaneous expression’.

While he does not name specific films, Expressionist films such as Genuine or From Morn to Midnight both come to mind. Stylization can ossify the background, which thereby loses its expressive qualities. In the case of both living expression (physiognomy) and dead expression (decorative stylization), the aesthetic stylization of the milieu into an expressive ‘face’ prevents the spectator from imbuing the scene with his or her own mood. There is thus a tension, an imbalance in the relationship between spectator and image in these long shots in Expressionist cinema. Stimmung pervades the entire image and reaches out to the spectator as well, whose personal Stimmung will not find a place in the expressivity or faciality of the image as a whole. If an Expressionist film image attains a living expression, the spectator must engage with, and attune herself to, the polyphonic Stimmung of the film and becomes unable to engage in a dialogic exchange of moods with the film. If the image has congealed into a decorative, dead formalist mode of Expressionist film, it has become completely determinist, and the spectator is, as in the case of the characters in the film itself, subjected to the formative force of the film as a milieu.

Balazs sees shots like the ones from Caligari described above as avoiding dead decoration, but—as shots in an Expressionist film—they still balance on a narrow ridge between determinism and open expression. These shots also highlight the fact that in Expressionist film aesthetics, definitions of Stimmung and milieu are mutually dependent. Although we generally associate Expressionism with an externalization of internal conflicts, and thus with a projection of the soul out into the surrounding space, in the reception or experience of these films, due to the stylization of the setting over other formal elements (acting, camerawork, editing), the image’s dynamic is one of a determining milieu. This determinist effect of ‘typical’ Expressionist films in the wake of Caligari—Genuine, From Morn to Midnight, to name but a few—might not be stylistically faithful to the spirit of Expressionism, but they rather return, in their aesthetic effect, to a determinist milieu aesthetic we associate with naturalism. In order to explain this further, I briefly turn to the permutations of understanding of ‘milieu’ and then explore how these map onto the films Balázs discusses.
Particularly in the Marxist discourse of the early twentieth century, milieu referred to determining environmental conditions, including social, political, psychological, biological, or climatic influences. Originally, milieu—the French word for ‘middle’—denoted a place located in the middle. Beginning in the Renaissance, milieu was used in the sense of an intermediary, that is, something that mediated between two poles. Milieu is thus closely related to medium, especially when the focus is on a relation rather than a location. As the term milieu migrated from physics to biology (and finally to sociology), it became conjoined with life: it is that on which organic life depends, including not only surrounding fluid or air, but also all external circumstances. For Jean Baptiste Lamarck, for example, writing in the early nineteenth century, the milieu is a dynamic, ever-changing entity, yet ‘[t]he life and the milieu that is unaware of it are two asynchronous series of events.’ The movement of life is thus ignored, unregistered by the milieu, which remains indifferent to it. Auguste Comte, by contrast, stressed the harmony of milieu and life, since the former protected and benefitted the latter. Subsequent sociological, medical, and literary appropriations of the term by Hyppolite Taine, Claude Bernard, and Emile Zola took a sharp mechanist turn and denied agency to life. Taine, for example, focused on the power and mindlessness of the milieu that has produced man. For him, milieu is completely severed from the perceptions and actions of life, untouched by it. The living being is molded by the forces the milieu exerts on it, and these forces are mechanical and static in nature.

Caligari and subsequent Expressionist films are certainly ‘milieu films’ in that they place an extraordinary emphasis on the setting, which supports, guides, or even determines the action and creates the atmosphere. Yet they are not dialogic in their presentation of the milieu qua setting: the environment of the characters might reflect their (or ‘an’) inner disposition, but the aesthetic effect is a determinist one—the characters cannot but act and move in the way their environment prescribes. To some extent, their actions are reduced to ‘behavior’, with the latter term understood as determined by instincts. This even seems to be true of the famous sequence in which Dr Caligari is haunted by his obsession with the historic figure of Caligari, such that on a path in the woods, he is suddenly physically threatened by the sentence ‘Du musst Caligari werden (“You have to become Caligari”)’, which appears repeatedly, letter by letter, amid the abstract, barren tree

70 For the French history of the term, see Spitzer, ‘Milieu and Ambiance’. The development of meanings in English in German is quite similar; see J. Feldhoff, ‘Milieu’, 1393-95.
silhouettes and the black sky, in bright, superimposed lettering. While the scene is certainly an externalization of Caligari’s state of mind, the depiction visualizes his psychological state as a threatening, commanding milieu that confronts the tortured individual with an imperative he cannot escape—the precise understanding of milieu as mechanist and determinist that we find in late nineteenth-century scientific texts and in naturalist novels and plays.

The Kammerspiel Film: Naturalist Plots and Progressive Aesthetics

The Expressionist film married commerce and mass appeal with an artistic sensibility that derived its impulses from styles in painting that had been avant-garde a decade previously. As a consequence of this difficult alliance, the Stimmung effect and a corresponding understanding of milieu gained a totalizing, determining effect. In this context, we should read Balázs’ comments on ‘the recent tendency, visible in the latest films, to make
expressive use of the middle-ground shot’ (the ‘shots of relation’ according to Kümmerlein’s classification), as a description of a counter-strategy. Even though Balázs does not say so explicitly, we can assume that he is referring to Kammerspielfilme here; those films by Lupu Pick, Leopold Jessner, and Murnau that are characterized by an intimate setting, naturalistic acting, and a stripped-down plot that focuses on its characters’ psychologies. These films’ middle-ground or second-plane shots show the whole figure only in their immediate environment, rather than the environment at large. By doing so, they avoid the totalization and determinism of the Expressionist films and instead bring variable, specific relations between characters, and between characters, environments and things, into view. Balázs puts this as follows:

[The second-plane shot] shows only the characters’ immediate surroundings, and by drawing the image frame in more tightly it enables a human being to illuminate the image, as it were, with the emanation of his soul. The milieu becomes the visible ‘aura’ of the human being, his physiognomy expands beyond the contours of his own body. The human play of gestures and expressions continues to prevail over that of objects and his facial expressions will interpret the expression of objects. For, in the final analysis, it is only human beings that matter. And the ‘facial expressions’ [Mienen] of objects become significant only in so far as they relate to the human being.72

By restricting the view of the environment to that which immediately surrounds a character, something happens to the expressivity of these surroundings. Instead of showing the wider milieu as an independent agent with its own expression, everything becomes tinged by the expression of the character at the center of the shot. As a consequence, nothing can be seen or interpreted on its own terms anymore, but everything must be interpreted in its relationship to the human being at the center.

This discussion of the middle-ground shot seems to run counter to the most frequently discussed trend in 1920s film theory, namely, that of highlighting the non-anthropocentric qualities of cinema and its ability to alienate our vision and understanding of the human being, not least because characters no longer appear as privileged in the image. (This is a theme that emerges in the work of Jean Epstein, Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and even Balázs himself.) The term ‘aura’ in the quote above highlights this

72 Balázs, *Early Film Theory*, 51 (translation modified).
difference. Aura for Balázs is a human quality; he does not use the term to describe the quality of objects or landscapes. Neither does aura for him seem to be a category subject to historical change or dependent upon its form of mediation. In all of these respects, Balázs’ notion of aura therefore differs significantly from Benjamin’s use of the term. Erica Carter thus describes Balázs’ aesthetic as anthropomorphic (and not anthropocentric, an important difference). Because of the anthropomorphic scale of the long shot, the milieu is transformed into a character’s aura.

Balázs’ description might seem conservative, a retreat into a humanism somewhat at odds with his poetics of the close-up. However, the focus of his description lies much more on the animating forces of the image than on the human center of these forces. In contrast to the decorative and static conception of milieu in Expressionist films, in the Kammerspiel films the whole image resonates expressively. The shot length in combination with the realist mise en scène grants an expressiveness, akin to a face, to objects. Their individual expression is not suppressed or dominated by the character in the image, but rather enters into a dynamic relationship with the character, such that this expression partakes in a human drama. As a consequence, the Kammerspiel aesthetic and its second-plane shots produce a delicate resonance between the Stimmung of the film—the expressive interplay of things and characters in the image—and the Stimmung of the spectator. They thus correspond to, even evoke, a conception of milieu that runs counter to the determinist milieu of the nineteenth century and instead seems to be based on a more open dynamic of calling and responding.

Shattered, a 1921 film by Lupu Pick with a screenplay by Carl Mayer, is generally credited as one of the first Kammerspiel films, and it provides some examples of the image dynamics suggested by Balázs. The film describes five days in the lives of a railway worker (played by Werner Krauß), his wife, and his daughter. Their daily routine is interrupted by a visit from a railway inspector. The young inspector rapes the daughter, the mother dies while praying outside in the snow, and when the father finally finds out the truth, he kills the inspector. The film—which, no doubt in part because of limited circulation and availability, has not received much critical attention—possesses a haunting quality. The plot takes place over the course of a short period in one single locale and is shot in concise, rhythmic images that emphasize the relentless unfurling of the tragedy. With the exception of titles that announce the beginning of a new day and the final confession ‘I am a murderer,’ the film does away with intertitles. In many ways, Shattered

73  See Ibid., xxvi.
is reminiscent of Gerhart Hauptmann’s *Lineman Thiel (Bahnwärter Thiel)*, a masterpiece of naturalist playwriting. In *Lineman Thiel*, a quiet railway worker tending to a lonely railway outpost in the woods kills his domineering wife and their baby, after his son from a previous marriage is killed by a train as a consequence of his wife’s inattention.

The first minutes of the film focus on the dreary family routines, and the film keeps returning to the same shot setups of the inside of the house, the front door, and the tracks, to introduce the individual characters’ everyday movements and tasks. In the first shot, with the camera mounted on the front of a train, we look down at the rapidly moving tracks underneath. Slowly, the camera pans up and reveals a lonely, hilly winter landscape and a small station house in the distance. The following shots are extremely concise vignettes that depict the small family's life. We see the front door and part of a window, with a railing alongside the front doorsteps in the foreground. The door opens and the wife steps outside, an apron around her waist and a large laundry basket in her hand, warily checking the weather, with her gaze directed toward the sky and the horizon as the wind moves her hair, before she descends the stairs and exits the frame. The following shot looks out toward the yard: white sheets hang on clotheslines and sway in the wind in front of a rickety picket fence; in the background, we see a snowy field, the dark silhouettes of a forest and a line of mountains in the distance, all emphasizing the family’s spatial isolation and the hostile weather. On the right, the stark legs of an electrical line pylon stand out against the sky and indicate the proximity of the train tracks. The wife enters the shot and begins to pull the sheets off the clotheslines as the wind continues to tear at them (Fig. 3.4).

On the surface, this shot fits the bill of the (seemingly) naturalist story. It depicts the confining milieu of this family, and in particular the life of the railwayman’s wife, out in the middle of nowhere, in the shadow of the loud, smoky, faceless trains rushing past, battling everyday life in isolation. The laundry, one might say, determines her life. Yet even though the laundry, the fence, and the other elements of the image bear markers of a determining milieu, the aesthetic impression of the image is not determinist; rather—and in contrast to Expressionist film images—the image is open and dependent upon the feelings of a spectator. Composition, movement, and montage rhythm all contribute to images that seek to connect to our body and senses. The shot above makes visible how the laundry is beckoning; we see the image of the fluttering sheets as what they mean to her. Rather than visualizing the milieu as a formative force bearing on the character, we see the environment as her world, as how objects appears
to her, what they say to her. Two important factors help Lupu Pick achieve this effect: first, a *mise en scène* in which the character enters the frame only after the setting is established, such that we initially only experience our affective relationship to the moving image; and second, movement: the wind literally animates the sheets and gives them their calling-character. As a consequence, we see various forces and force fields that we can relate to as well: the wind tearing at the sheets, the precarious homestead defending itself against both an overbearing, determining technology (the railway) and cold, uncivilized nature, the coldness affecting the shuddering wife’s body, and her struggle to grab hold of the sheets and tear them off the clotheslines. Even though this landscape, and everyday tasks such as doing laundry, determine the railwayman’s wife’s existence and are thus legible as milieu, the images themselves reach out to and demand comprehensive understanding from a sensing, thinking, and feeling spectator. Meaning in these images is only generated in the process of the spectator’s embodied participation in the images.

The relationship between milieu and character that we experience in images such as this corresponds to a much more contemporary conception
of milieu. When Balázs indicates that the total expressive stylization and determinist Stimmung of the Expressionist film might have had its day, we could thus conceivably connect this claim to the paradigm shift in conceptions of milieu as outlined above, too; namely, a movement away from static conceptions of milieu, and towards more dynamic ideas of subject-environment interaction. Beginning in the late 1910s, new dynamic models for milieu-life interaction emerged. A new generation of biologists such as Kurt Goldstein, Jakob von Uexküll, and Frederik J.J. Buytendijk developed theories of a dynamic and mutually constituting relationship between organisms and environments (as I discussed in detail in the previous chapter). According to these paradigms, as Georges Canguilhem put it, the milieu poses a problem and often ‘proposes’ but never imposes a solution; the solution can only be found by the living being, through the activity of living in the world.\(^{74}\) Over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the term milieu thus lost its denotation of a concrete place and instead described the force field, the interrelations between an individual and her surroundings (the medium).\(^{75}\) What characterizes in particular Uexküll’s work on environment as individual Umwelt is the idea that the milieu is subjective, a world shaped by the living being (see the discussion of Uexküll in Chapter 2). The shots of a character in her environment are not simply anthropomorphic or anthropocentric in the sense that they return to an old-fashioned, anti-revolutionary humanism; rather, they partake in a new understanding of life in its environment, and the ability of film not only to make visible a living attitude, a living impulse, but also how this impulse is reflected in and constitutes the meaning of the milieu.

Lotte Eisner also picked up the terms Umwelt and Stimmung in both The Haunted Screen and her book on Murnau, and linked them to Carl Mayer and his cinematic scriptwriting.\(^{76}\) She cited director Lupu Pick, who said about Mayer’s script for their following collaboration, the film Sylvester (1924): ‘The composition of this moving picture seems to me novel because it encloses the action within a limited framework, giving a major role to the Umwelt without involving it in the action proper, which would

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\(^{74}\) Canguilhem, ‘The Living and Its Milieu’, 17.

\(^{75}\) It is also in this context that one should understand Balázs’ references to Goethe’s scientific thoughts. See Balázs, Early Film Theory, 29, where he quotes Goethe on physiognomics: “The things surrounding a person, do not simply impinge on him; he also reacts to them, and, while letting himself be modified, he modifies his surroundings.” However, the references to Goethe also make clear that for Goethe, the distinction of living being, and man in particular, and environment are clearly drawn, as they generally are in nineteenth-century landscape painting.

\(^{76}\) Lotte H. Eisner, Murnau.
be banal. The Umwelt must constitute the base and symphonic background of a particular destiny, and thus become the emblem of a principal idea.77 Contemporary reviewers of Shattered, in particular the scriptwriter and film critic Willy Haas, described this effect of the role of the environment as it was captured by Pick’s camera, namely a universal animation as a result of the interconnection of the characters and their milieu—that is, the world presented—that swept the spectator along as well.

This simplicity – all this would hardly be tenable as a drama . . . . But incredibly stronger than in drama are, in my opinion, the unity, the flowing feel, the rhythm, the stanza, the verse, the refrain, the trembling melody in the air, the dullness of the earth, daily life, the tragedy of the times, the bell toll of eternal sameness and the mystery of strange elements within this sameness. This film can show a railroad track of eternal length. And the railroad worker who walks, walks, walks along it . . . endlessly: for the span of a human life—it is tangible. The camera walks with him—endlessly. This can never be expressed on the stage: a symbol of life barred to theater.78

The vitality with which Haas credits Scherben is the result of the spatiotemporal dynamism of the image due to mise en scène, camerawork, and montage (see Fig. 3.5). Haas’ language reveals how the rhythmicization of the image expands the film’s elements beyond the confines of the screen into the spatiotemporality of the spectator (‘melody in the air’, ‘daily life’, ‘tragedy of the times’, ‘eternal sameness’, ‘eternal length’, ‘tangible [man fühlt es]’, ‘endlessly’). The spectator grasps not only the story told, but also the larger social, cultural and natural environment (including the forces of the milieu on the railwayman) on the basis of an attunement to the Stimmung that unfolds in the film over time. The film’s Stimmung aesthetics allows for the ‘feeling’ of the complex subject-environment dynamic implicit in the film and implicating the spectator. It thus becomes a more effective vehicle for conveying both the forces of the milieu and the inner turmoil and projections of the characters. Affective, sensorial cues combine with the sensible.

77 Eisner, The Haunted Screen, 186. Eisner is citing from Lupu Pick’s foreword to Carl Mayer’s script for Sylvester, which was published separately. See Carl Mayer, Sylvester: Ein Lichtspiel, 10-11. In an illuminating essay on Mayer’s script for Sylvester, Hermann Kappelhoff makes the case—supported by contemporary film critics such as Herbert Jhering and Willy Haas—that the film to some extent did not quite live up to the role Mayer had assigned to the environment. See Hermann Kappelhoff, ‘Literarische Recherchen am kinematografischen Bild’, 177.
78 Willy Haas, ‘Scherben’.
aspects of story and content and allow the spectator to enter and engage with the cinematic image while still retaining freedom of judgment.²⁹

A film such as Shattered uses a new mode of Stimmung aesthetics to depict the interrelations among the working-class family, society (in the form of the inspector as well as the business and leisure travelers on the train, who witness the family drama as spectacle from the windows of their compartment), nature, and technology. This mode of Stimmung aesthetics is determined by disturbances, interventions, and dialogic contrasts; Stimmung never encompasses a whole, since it requires an image that is open to the spectator’s senses and thoughts (the ‘open image’ would become important in the post-war cine-vitalist discourse, as I show in Chapter 4). It is thus in stark contrast to understandings of Stimmung that presume

²⁹ Haas’ film review also highlights the similarity between the effect of a film such as Shattered and Richter’s abstract Rhythm films, as discussed in Chapter 1, since the rhythm and musicality of mise en scène and montage are important carriers of affect in this film. Einfühlung is central to the Stimmung aesthetics under discussion here.
a holistic congruence of inner disposition and environment, such as that of Carus, but also some more recent definitions. Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht, for example, recently advocated for *Stimmung* as a reading practice that foregrounds the prosodic element of literary texts and focuses on presence rather than representation; atmosphere, tone, and rhythm rather than plot and interpretation, thus allowing for a merging of historical and aesthetic experience. For Gumbrecht, the capacity of literary texts to ‘surround’ and ‘envelop’ us with a *Stimmung* fulfills a need in times characterized by technological mediation to experience the thickness of material presence.80 *Stimmung* for him is a ‘warm’ concept; it envelops us like a coat.

Against this concept of *Stimmung* and mediation, I insist on the crucial role of the conditions of particular forms of mediation. In the case of film, this means technological mediation and film’s capacity to reflect on technological conditions. A film’s *mise en scène* and cinematography interweave not only nature and dramatic narrative with somatic affection, a texture we could describe by means of the traditional use of *Stimmung*, but they also interweave cinema’s own technological conditions, so that the technological medium becomes the place where *nature* becomes empowered to speak of rationalization, technology, and the modern condition in a language that addresses the reasonable subject as much as the embodied subject.

A film such as *Shattered* can teach us about the mood, attunement, and subject-environment dynamics exactly because it reflects the conditions of its technological making—an achievement that also makes this film much more than simply a film version of a naturalist play. When the father, mother, and daughter sit down for dinner at the table, the camera suddenly pans to the right, and with the help of an iris mask, focuses our attention on a Morse telegraph receiver that then comes into view. A sudden cutaway shows powerlines against the sky, and with the help of a special effect, we see one of the lines illuminated, transmitting short and long signals. The following shot shows a close-up of the telegraph at work, all parts moving and spitting out a received message. Whereas films such as Karl Grune’s *The Street* (*Die Straße*, 1924) set up an opposition of bourgeois parlor and alluring metropolitan street life, with the window as gateway, in *Shattered*, technology and modernity have already pervaded this living room. Mother and daughter continue to eat their soup as the father eventually gets up to read the telegram (Fig. 3.6). The conditions of his line of work have already torn apart the coherent fabric with which *Biedermeier* culture was woven;

The father sleeps on the sofa and his rhythm is determined by train schedules that require him to get up night and day.

The *mise en scène* (in particular, the setting and lighting), camera position, and, increasingly, the camera movement—in shots such as the one described above—change the role of *Stimmung* in the *Kammerspiel* film. In *Shattered*, *Stimmung* signifies the dynamic exchange between the relationships within the image and the relationship the spectator establishes to the image. The mobility of the image and the rhythm of changing views ensure that *Stimmung* retains the ephemeral character that Hofmannsthal and Nietzsche had already described. The moments in which a *Stimmung* formulates itself are nevertheless accompanied by a flash of instant cognition [*Erkenntnis*]—constellations and relations of which we are part, and which are, in a film such as *Shattered*, seared by moments of photographic realism, be it laundry sheets fluttering in the wind or branches hitting the illuminated windows at night. This dynamic returns us, in fact, to the one we witness in Franz Marc’s *White Dog*—a painting that seeks to expand cognition and feeling by interlocking the observer’s feeling-into the dog with the dog’s feeling-into its environment.
The development of Marc’s painting style, in fact, foreshadowed the development of *Stimmung* aesthetics from the early *Kammerspiel* films onward. In subsequent paintings, Marc increasingly dissolved the boundaries between animal and environment, and animal vision and modes of perception. His later paintings, such as ‘Picture with Cattle’ (*Bild mit Rind*, 1913), ‘Lying Bull’ (*Liegender Stier*, 1913), or ‘Abstract Forms II’ (*Abstrakte Formen* II, 1914) abandoned distinct divisions between animal body and background; animal sensation seems to spread across the entire canvas and not be bound to particular senses, and brushstroke and paint have become more visible.81 A similar dissolution takes place with the progression of *Kammerspiel* films and the increasing use of camera movement. *Shattered* already features some rudimentary camera movement that does not have a purely subservient function—that is, keeping the characters in view—but rather becomes a narrative agent in its own right. *Sylvester* is famous for its use of a camera moving along a busy street at night, connecting various spaces, and Murnau would ‘unshackle’ the camera even further in the late *Kammerspiel* film *The Last Laugh* (1924) and the subsequent *Faust* (1926). The breakdown of immobile standpoints and stable frames in these films, and the discursive activity of a camera engaging with spectator and image in its own right, turns the Rückenfigur of Friedrich’s paintings into a virtual, mobile agent (that is, the camera) who invites us to engage with the world presented to us in film under conditions of absolute mediation. ‘The human being will become visible again’, was Balázs’ prognosis in 1924. Yet it increasingly seemed as though the human being could only become visible in a medium, and by means of an aesthetic, that increasingly blurred the boundaries between the human, technology, and other forms of being.

81 I thank Kimberly Smith for making me aware of the relationship between animal vision and abstraction in Franz Marc’s paintings of 1913 and 1914. See Kimberly A. Smith, ‘Becoming Human / Becoming Animal’.