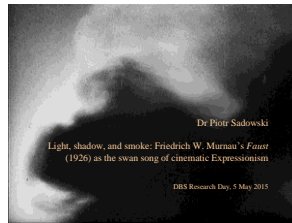


Light, shadow, and smoke: Friedrich W. Murnau's *Faust* (1926) as the swan song of cinematic Expressionism



The celebrated German film director of the silent era, Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, had already secured a contract in Hollywood when in 1926 he made his last German film, *Faust*. Intended as a loose adaptation of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's play, Murnau's film was also designed to showcase two of Germany's most famous cultural exports at the time: the country's Romantic legacy and cinematic Expressionism. By mid-1920s, however, the Expressionist style in cinema—launched in 1920 by the ground-breaking *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*—had already become a largely spent artistic force. The characteristically Expressionist distortions of space, the *chiaroscuro* lighting, the atmosphere of terror, and the preoccupation with insanity and supernaturalism were being gradually replaced by the more contemporary and realistic style known as the New Objectivity, of which Murnau's own urban drama *The Last Laugh* from 1924 is an early example. In *Faust* the Expressionist style was revived no doubt to suit the Romantic and Gothic themes of Goethe's play, but it also offered an opportunity to experiment with new visual aesthetics, in which the atmospheric play of light and shadow was uniquely combined with an expressive and dramatic use of smoke, fog, mists and clouds. Smoke and fog are manifestations of the air—a ubiquitous but normally invisible element—which in Murnau's film becomes part of visual composition, dramatically linked with supernatural presence, metaphysical evil, terror, and human tragedy. Murnau's smoky Expressionism applied to Goethe's morality tale remains one of the most aesthetically impressive features of the director's last German film.



Right from the start billowing, formless dark clouds that almost look like abstract animation introduce the viewer into a cosmic confrontation between the forces of good and evil.



A shaft of light penetrates the cloudy darkness and dazzles an almost puppet-like figure of the horned and winged Satan (played by Emil Jannings)—all black except for fiercely gleaming eyes. Abstract darkness quickly assumes an anthropomorphic form and so does brightness:



—out of the cosmic light emerges Satan’s counterpart, the white winged angel of Christian folklore, who accuses his enemy of bringing war, plague and famine to mankind. In this way light and darkness do not just assume stylistic and dramatic significance; they become part of the story’s metaphysical and theological dimension. The cosmic confrontation between good and evil is summed up in a characteristic Murnau composition (seen in the image), with the dark silhouette below in the foreground, and a bright figure diagonally above in the background. The tonal contrast creates deep dramatic space by increasing the distance between the devil and the angel. The angel’s elevated position both emphasizes his comparative importance in the larger scheme of things and anticipates his ultimate victory in the cosmic moral battle. In other words, light high up will triumph, while darkness down below will be defeated. The

contrast between light and darkness is also enhanced by the fact that unlike Murnau's earlier films *Faust* dispenses entirely with tinting, that is, dyeing the cinematic image in monochrome: yellow, blue, green and so on. The latest digital restoration of *Faust* by the Murnau Foundation presents the cosmic battle for Faust's soul in superbly panchromatic, silky black-and-white imagery, a perfect vehicle both for the symbolic tonal contrasts and for the smoky Expressionism as the film's dominant style.

A transition from the celestial-metaphysical to the earthly-practical sphere takes the form of a cloud of bright smoke billowing against a dark background.



As the smoke clears we see the old Faust (played by the young Swedish actor Gösta Ekman after an excellent make-up job) holding a large book and lecturing to his disciples in a darkened room *à la* Rembrandt, illuminated only by the light emanating from a bright globe, a model of the cosmos, placed in the middle of the room. The second brightest object in this scene is the figure of Faust himself, the mediator of divine knowledge, while his disciples remain in ignorant semi-darkness or as complete shadows.



Above the skyline of a medieval town dimly lit by the full moon the night clouds appear to be unmoving, but the streaks of smoke rising from the chimneys animate the studio model and provide another formal link with the unfolding smoke-filled cosmic drama. In fact dark or bright smoke seems to be everywhere in the early part of the film, both in Faust's study, in the streets of the plague-stricken town, and high up in the supernatural world where smoke seems inseparable from Satan's presence.



The sets are suffused with clouds of smoke, dark or bright, with fog, or at least with barely visible mist. To achieve this smoky effect Murnau reportedly instructed the studio workers to burn strips of unwanted nitrate film and waft the fumes towards the action. Billowing smoke on its own is also used as a transition device, to separate the scenes, like the plain black screen used in films from later periods.

The smoky Expressionism of the plague sequence culminates in one of the most memorable images of Weimar cinema:



—the gigantic figure of Satan hovering over and dwarfing the idyllic small town, his enormous black wings slowly covering the sky and eclipsing the sun, casting a large shadow that gradually moves across the rooftops. The streaks of bright smoke rising from the chimneys—a sign of peaceful domesticity—are entirely smothered by thick clouds of soot emanating from Satan’s belly and infecting the town with pestilence. Soon everything is engulfed with almost complete death-like darkness. During the filming of this famous shot the actor Emil Jannings had to stand for several hours on a metal grid above the model of the town, while his dark cloak was blown aloft by powerful electric fans and clouds of soot were pumped out from beneath his feet. Apparently neither Jannings nor the technicians were amused. Only Murnau, pleased with the effect, seemed unperturbed by the dirt and discomfort. After the shoot he simply discarded his blackened overall and mildly rebuked the grumblers by saying, “If it’s too much for you, don’t bother to come”.

The plague was added to the Faust story by the scriptwriter Hans Kyser to give Faust a clear and unselfish moral reason for involving Satan: Faust contacts the evil powers to

save the people, whereas in the classic dramatic versions of the story by Christopher Marlowe and Goethe Faust is seeking supernatural knowledge for vaguely intellectual and even hedonistic reasons. Besides, the plague and its effects offer more opportunities for cinematic expression than abstract intellectual debates. In the film the sudden arrival of the plague causes panic in the town now filled with dirty smoke blown around by a strong wind. To make the smoke look realistic and not just symbolic, its cause, natural or supernatural, is often indicated: the black soot emitted by Satan, or the smoke rising from numerous bonfires, fire places, and torches carried by hooded attendants who remove the corpses of the plague victims. The directional, low-key lighting creates a rapidly changing and pulsating pattern of dynamic *chiaroscuro* effects as a reflection of spreading panic, chaos, and hysteria.



A fervent call to “repent, fast and pray!” is redoubled by shadows of the cross and the preacher’s dramatically raised hand. The ubiquitous smoke is a constant reminder of the plague which, as was always suspected, was carried by air and wind.



A link between the dark smoke, the plague, and the evil powers is finally driven home by an image of Satan’s black gigantic face superimposed on the nocturnal sky over the devastated town.

Depressed by his powerlessness to save the people Faust burns his now useless books, creating yet more smoke and dust in the process.



The only book that the old sage saves from combustion is a hefty tome on necromancy, half burned and smoky as Faust pulls it from the fire.



The fateful instructions on how to conjure up the Spirit of Darkness contained therein direct Faust to a Romantic moon-lit landscape covered with dark, contorted, barren trees wrapped in slowly moving mist.



The Romantic landscape soon turns into a fantastic and a magical one, after Faust draws a circle of fire to invoke the evil spirit. The three riders of the Apocalypse appear chasing across the night sky. Other manifestations of demonic presence include a sudden gust of powerful wind, flashes of lightning zigzagging across the dark sky, and a fall of a shining comet that crashes onto the earth with a fiery explosion.



Out of the flames emerges a figure of Mephistopheles (Emil Jannings again) dressed modestly as a pedlar (or a holy man) in dark clothes, sitting in semi-shadow with only his eyes gleaming spookily. Smoke is again associated with this unassuming Prince of Darkness:



—as he unfolds the Devil’s contract before the astounded Faust, the smoke rising from the page gradually reveals the lettering with its message of renouncing God and accepting Satan as the ruler of the world.

The newly acquired demonic powers nonetheless prove futile in Faust’s attempt to save more plague victims.



The cross held by one of the sick seems to emit a light of its own, casting a shadow on Faust’s hand and holding it back. Tainted by black magic, Faust cannot now touch the cross itself but only its insubstantial shadowy emanation.

Faust’s failure to cure his people proves to be one of the turning points in the film. The superstitious folk suddenly lose all their faith in the old sage and attempt to stone him. The outcast Faust finds escape in Mephisto-assisted time and space travel which takes him, now rejuvenated, far out into the outside world in search of pleasures. The magical transformation of old Faust into a young man (also played by Gösta Ekman) requires yet more fire and smoke, which are clearly Satan’s elements.



As Mephisto blows into the furnace, puffing himself up like a balloon, Faust’s cavernous study suddenly turns into an inside of an alchemist’s kiln, with Mephisto visibly delighted to bathe in his fiery element.



The night flight on Mefisto's cape takes Faust and his devilish companion across a cloudy sky to Italy. As Faust and Mephisto prepare for landing at the palace of the Duchess of Parma during lavish night-time festivities, what we see again is smoke produced by firework displays and torch lights. At the heart of Renaissance Italy young Faust is clearly determined to make up for his lost years and to live it up a bit. Carried away by lust Faust abducts the beautiful duchess, while Mephisto conveniently kills the duke.



When in a more contemplative mood, Faust is found sitting still pondering the meaning of life amidst wild mountains at night, surrounded by clouds of billowing grey fog. Except for the swirling puffs of mist the picture is static, reminding one also of the Romantic landscapes painted by Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840), especially of his famous *The Wanderer above the Sea of Clouds*.



To banish his melancholy Faust remembers the idyllic village of his youth, which is where he orders Mephisto to take him now. The fog quickly thickens and darkens, providing a transition to the second half of the film which focuses on the tragic love story of Faust and Gretchen.



The Gretchen story is stylistically different: it takes place mostly during the day, and the only play of light and shadow is Impressionistic rather than Expressionistic, as when



the sun pours in through cottage windows to create dappled patterns of light on the walls. Otherwise sharp visual contrasts are avoided, and the full panchromatic greyscale seems to leave little to the imagination. While earlier darkness and smoke conveyed a sense of doom and death, now the brightness of the Gretchen sequence connotes life, youth, purity and innocence. In contrast to the plague sequence the air is clear, transparent, and wholesome. The transition into the Gretchen story thus separates the Expressionist drama of the plague from the Impressionist melodrama of doomed love—a shift supported by a stylistic change from the “smoky” nocturnal *chiaroscuro* of the first part to the brightly lit small-town idyll of the second part. Both stylistically and thematically therefore the two parts of *Faust* look really like two different films.