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## 20 The Golem (1920): An Expressionist Treatment

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*Der Golem: Wie er in die Welt kam*  
(The Golem: How he came into the world)

Credits:

Produced by: Universum-Film-Aktiengesellschaft (Ufa)  
Directed by: Paul Wegener, with Henrik Galeen and Carl Boese  
Scenario by: Henrik Galeen, adapted from Gustav Meyrink  
Camera Operators: Karl Freund, Guido Seeber  
Designed by: Hans Poelzig  
Costumes by: Rochus Gliese

Cast:

Rabbi Low	Albert Steinruck
The Golem	Paul Wegener
Miriam	Lydia Salmonova
Famulus	Ernst Deutsch
Rabbi Jehuda	Hans Sturm
Tempeldiener	Max Kronert
Emperor Luhois	Otto Gebuhr
Florian	Lothar Muthel
Rose girl	Greta Schroder

The Plot:

Reading in the stars that the Jews will be expelled, Rabbi Low creates an automaton called the Golem to help defend the Jews in their plight. Leading the Golem to the Emperor, Rabbi Low forces the Emperor to rescind the expulsion. A new crisis, however, soon develops. Miriam, the rabbi's daughter, in love with Knight Florian is discovered by her suitor Famulus, who sets the Golem upon Knight Florian. The Golem becomes sensate and desires Miriam himself. He goes beserk, killing people and destroying property. By chance an innocent child, unafraid of the Golem, removes the star from his chest rendering the Golem inert. She has saved humanity.

When the film posters of *The Golem* went up in Germany of 1920, the film producers, UFA, could count on an audience which had some notion of the Golem legend.<sup>1</sup> There had already been two film versions by the same film director, Paul Wegener: *Der Golem* (1914) and *Der Golem und die Tanzerin* (1917). In 1908, Max Reinhardt's theater, performed Arthur Holitscher's drama, *Der Golem*, and in another theater, the Golem lumbered about in Johannes Hess's *Der Rabbiner von Prag* (1914). But the most famous treatment of the motif was Gustav Meyrink's novel, *Der Golem* (1915), which continues even today to enjoy an occult success.<sup>2</sup> The producers were taking advantage of a public enthralled with the supernatural, the intensely dramatic, and the ecstatic, as well as the violence, exoticism, the grotesque, and *kitsch*. These predispositions provided the incentive for the UFA horror films in which homunculi, mandrakes, golems and other variants of artificial men lurch about with such "natural" man-monsters as vampires and werewolves.

The Golem is the Jewish contribution to *automata*. It differs from the mechanistic structures (Talos of Hephaestus, E.T.A. Hoffmann's Olympia, or Capek's robot) in that its method of creation depends on ritual and magical intervention. In the traditional Jewish legend, to create a Golem, a learned rabbi molds earth or clay into the shape of a human being. Then, at the completion of an esoteric rite, the rabbi applies a magical Hebrew word to its body and it miraculously comes to life. Beginning as a tame, mute servant of the creator, the Golem inevitably provokes a crisis due to its physical prowess. To make it inert, the rabbi removes the magic formula and the Golem returns to dust. The German film audience in 1920 vaguely knew the contours of this motif and expected a *nouveau frisson* when the lights went out.

As the credits and cast were flashing by, the "informed" reader and viewer would notice that many of the names reappeared from earlier stage and film productions of similar genre.<sup>3</sup>

Paul Wegener, according to Lotte Eisner, denied having an intention of making an expressionist film. Begging the question, she blames Poelzig's sets for the "misinterpretation" of the film as expressionist.

By the very nature of the Golem motif, artistic representation in whatever mode excludes a purely mimetic imitation. In *The Golem*, film, the most mimetic of artistic modes, reveals its ability to compete with the written narrative in the genre of fantasy. Each non-mimetic shot is composed for visual wonderment (the fantastic image) and for maximum evocatory intensity. This "cinematic lyricism," coined by Wegener (Eisner: 33) permits the visualization of the "inner world" of man, the state of his soul, a dream sequence or science fiction. The Golem motif in Wegener's film not only re-works the legend but infuses the film — on both the visual and diegetic planes — with expressionist *angst*, isolation, and desperation even as it offers a possible solution.

The film quickly ushers the viewer into the world of fate and misfortune. The stars that frame the first shots and the final one, metonymically symbolize the world governed by astrology, a world where free will seems banished and man is the plaything of the gods. This is the world of cosmic catastrophe so dear to the Expressionists. The encircling of the linear narrative, the Golem legend, by the stars underscored the entrapping fatalistic cosmos. The starry frame, however, cues the viewer to the legendary or non-mimetic world he is to observe, in which the viewer, superior to the fated victim, is ultimately led to recognize his free will. An important binary relationship is immediately established which dominates the entire film: the zodiac world is to the world of men in the film as the film's worldview of fate is to the audience of free willed viewers.

The magic circle of fate, metonymically realized by the star imagery, structures the world view of the film. If it surrounds the narrative action and denies man freedom inside the film, it also places the linear narrative structure in contradiction to the encircling imprisonment. The *denouement* of the plotline leading back into the stars returns the narrative to the initial position. The eternal return negates the uniqueness of the events which are ever repeatable.

Significantly, the film provides a possible solution to the eternal return. With the frame of stars equating fate as the macrocosmic circle, the narrative with its binary symmetry provides two microcosmic circles inside the narrative at crucial events: the birth of the Golem, and the death of the Golem. The birth necessitates black magic, the conjuring of Astaroth, a demon, from inside a magic circle. This central scene, a spectacle to the eye, reveals Rabbi Low as intercessor in the metaphysical world — an unnatural world for men and the source of his continued victimization — in order to obtain the magic force to be placed on the star on the Golem's chest. The death of the Golem is preceded by the only "natural" scene in the film, the daylight scene where children dance in a perfect circle of communal happiness. As the Golem approaches, one innocent child saves mankind by naively removing the lifegiving star from the Golem's chest. The innocent act fuses the microcircle of "white magic," communal *agape*, with the macrocircle of astrology represented by the stars by returning the Golem's Star of David to the firmament.

The clay circle on the Golem's chest reflects not only the macrocircle of fate but Rabbi Low's circle of black magic. The "Star of David" placed upon the Golem's circle completes the black magic rite when Rabbi Low turns the telluric matter of the clay star into an animating spirit through the intervention of metaphysical forces. The "Star of David" on the Golem is to the stars as the Golem's circle is to the macrocircle of fate. The continued presence of the animating star on the Golem represents the presence of occult forces upon man and man's desperate effort to appease fate by tampering with its powers. Yet, the innocent hand which removes the star proffers the hope of redemption from the oppressor of fate.

When the "Star of David," at the end of the film, returns to the constellations above, the film concludes with a question: must this fated cycle rebegin or can we expect salvation heralded by the "Star of David" transmuted into the Star of Bethlehem? Linearity means escape from the circle of fate and salvation permits history through the Christological option. The audience is left with an ambiguous ending which places it in a position to choose.<sup>4</sup> These two images, then, one concrete, the star, a metonymy of fate, and the other, abstract, the circle, the metaphor of fate, together maintain a constant — if not oppressive — role as representatives of the supernatural which impinge on man either as personage or as passive viewer. The images integrate this fatalistic world into the narrative process.

The film's narrative is double plotted like a Renaissance English play and maintains the binary intent of opposing the supernatural with the natural. The Golem legend occupies the foregrounded plotline, but in clear counterpoint a love story functions in the background to heighten the legend and its meaning. The Golem motif can be divided into basic events or motifemes which structure the legend and permit variants in the agglomerates of the motifemes. The four central events are: 1. birth, 2. service, 3. catastrophic crisis, and 4. death. Wegener's consciousness of these elements can be seen in the title of the script he published in 1921, *Der Golem, wie er in die Welt kam, erdacht und ins Werk gesetzt* (The Golem, how he came into this world, was conceived and used).<sup>5</sup> Wegener's original use of the material does not rest with his creating his own film adaptation, but in organizing the context of immanent disaster, a world in disjunction, in order to speed and infuse the events with urgency and meaning.

Against the supernatural and indeed unnatural material of the Golem, a weak love plot develops involving Miriam and Knight Florian, the intent of which is to pose the universality of love and its naturalness. Unfortunately Miriam seems to be the *Doppelgänger* of Shylock's Jessica and Knight Florian, an uncivil *petit marquis*, both unable to evoke any sympathy. Rosenfeld aptly called the subplot *kitsch*.<sup>6</sup> But it points to the "popular" dimension of the film in which Wegener attempts to play off love against the supernatural and human barbarity. The subplot also prepares the holy innocent who tenders love to the beserk Golem at the

*denouement*. The knitting of the two plots under the motif of crisis occurs when Famulus, jealous of Knight Florian's success with Miriam, transgresses by reviving the Golem. By seeking unnatural means to combat an enemy for mere personal gain, Famulus brings new disaster upon the Jews and mankind.

Chaos is at the heart of both plots. Cosmic misfortune rains down political disaster and emotional disjuncture. The Golem, as personification of chaos, stands at the juncture of these plotlines. In the first part of the film, dealing with the political encounter between Jews and Christians, the viewer observes the Golem as an instrument of Rabbi Low's will. In the second part of the film, treating love and its configurations, the Golem emerges as the central protagonist. These two functions of the Golem reveal the general fusion of two strands of the Golem material.

The societal or political conflict begins with the imperial decree expelling the Jews. Although Kracauer is correct in insisting that Rabbi Low performs the only free willed and rational act in this universe of fate by creating a Golem, Wegener presents Rabbi Low in the ambivalent light of necromancer and prestidigitator.<sup>7</sup> The emperor, blinded by his secular power may have erred in expelling the Jews, but Rabbi Low's use of black magic transgresses his spiritual powers. Both men are in a state of hubris and the Golem as chaos becomes an agent of nemesis for both of them. Wegener *et al.* manipulate the viewer from having any empathy with the Jews in the film. All visual expressionist distorting effects — the crooked gables, the tortured gothic arches, dark shadows and bizarre costumes — symbolically echo the cosmic catastrophe of the Jews, intensify the oppressive atmosphere of doom and present the ghetto as exotic though stifling and ultimately dehumanizing. The Jews are depicted in broad caricatural strokes that seemingly draw on popular antisemitic stereotypes: they appear foreign, unruly, indulging in odd rites and clinging to their separateness in the dank ghetto. The camera, tilting down, presents the Jewish masses in terms of a *tachiste* vision that provides a Gothic apocalyptic coloring, but, more importantly, metamorphoses the ghetto inhabitants into earthly representatives of the netherworld.

In contrast, the world of the court with all its pomp and vanity breathes life and joy. The play of heavy shadows and brooding chiaroscuro of the ghetto yields to lightness: foregrounded ghetto walls and crippled arches give way to balanced architectural forms; narrow twisted lines of walls and stairs are swept away into palatial expanses. An exuberant Renaissance scene unfolds: dancing, splendid gowns, bright faces in the Rose Festival paeon to life. Flowers bedeck the heads — the only intrusion of nature — as portents of goodness and naturalness. From this happy world, Knight Florian rides off for a love adventure with the rose of life — and seduction — gripped in his teeth like an icon for his name. These same flowers will circle the heads of blond children at the *denouement*. The flower circles, like haloes, allude to a happy destiny in contrast with the yellow circles patched on the Jews' chests as the mark of cursed fate.

The viewer, if not sympathetic, can more easily identify with the court's world. The visual expressionist techniques of heavy distortion, which disfigure the ghetto, vanish in the court scenes. Into this soft world, the Jew as necromancer advances and with his conjurations like those of Moses before Pharaoh, brings destruction to the court while blackmailing the Emperor into rescinding the decree. The Golem as blind Samson fulfills his role as servant and defender of the Jews by blocking the doors as the banquet hall collapses. In the power struggle between secular overbearingness and spiritual distortion, the Jews unfairly exploit their demonic powers. The Golem is the mishapen Jewish arm against the flower of knighthood. Expressionist distortion is ironically used by Wegener to represent negativity.

The love subplot of Miriam and Florian, paralleling the political plotline, continues the Jewish-Christian encounter. Love, the abstraction, appears as a positive instinct within this gloomy world. But in the particular, can this view consider the love relation of the Christian Florian with the Jewess Miriam — within the context of an expulsion — as a normal, positive relationship? Can the love relationship serve merely as a plotting device to provoke the jealous Famulus, a new creation of Wegener *et al.* in the motif, as pivot to reawaken the Golem?

Hidden in the Florian-Miriam tie is the negation of the "unnatural" separateness of the Jew. Even before the evil decree is read, Rabbi Low objects to his daughter eyeing Florian. Besides shaming Rabbi Low by her behavior, Miriam threatens the principle of Jewish separateness by her "natural" passion for the handsome Gentile. Wegener skillfully exploits the generational conflict of father and daughter — a strong element in the contemporary expressionist theater as Sokel has noted. The restrictiveness of the father and his rabbinic world view is contrasted with the liberating power of love heralded by the Christian vision in the person of Florian. Bathed in warm, bright lighting, splendidly garbed, modishly coifed, Knight Florian, according to *pastorale* convention, can proceed to his "natural" right/rite of seduction. Miriam, insofar as she yields to her "natural" inclinations, is shielded from appearing morally compromised in spite of knowing about the expulsion decree. The sympathies of the film director are entirely on the side of the "lovers."

Famulus, garbed in black, the associate of Rabbi Low's necromancy, appears as the interfering, jealous suitor in this typical love triangle. Although he is the "legal" suitor, Famulus becomes the nasty opponent of "true love" in the film. Subsumed in this plot is the superiority of "natural" Christian love (*eros*, *philos*, and *agape*) to "unnatural" Jewish law. Famulus further sullies himself by resorting to the illegal secular use of the Golem to defend his "legal" rights — an act both unchivalric and by extension, unchristian.

The reappearance of the Golem from inertness — unique in the Golem motif literature — complicates the love triangle and adds the element of Grand Guignol: a monster in love! Holitscher can claim credit for





this plot invention.<sup>8</sup> Wegener *et al.* refocus the neo-romantic yearnings for emotional fulfillment from the throes of isolation underpinning Holischer's *Golem* into an expressionist drama of telluric lust — and revolt. The Golem pure *id*, lust incarnate, the personification of chaos, demands human rights. The Golem, the monstrous image of man incomplete, becomes, as in Meyrink's *Golem*, a negative *Doppelgänger* — but not of just one man, rather of mankind.<sup>9</sup> The Golem in love is man regressing to a primitive state bereft of form and morality. Expressionist fascination with the libidinous drive informs the personage of the Golem.

The etymology of the word *golem* means unformed substance in Hebrew. As man is a marriage of earth and God, so the Golem is a marriage of earth and man; the Golem reflects man in his shared earthiness and underlines man's impossibility to reach that divinity whose creation he is. Love is the divine spirit which man possesses and the gift he cannot provide in daring to imitate divine creation. The Golem, lacking speech, archaic proof of the living spirit, and lacking love which moves the spirit to articulation, remains the incarnate image of man's creative impotence so that Rabbi Low must ultimately call upon the devil to animate the earthen human shape.

The film, insisting on the Golem's netherworld origins reinforces his

demonic nature. By contrast, the incantation in the original Jewish legend could never have called upon the devil because the very animation of the Golem depended upon godliness. The film, therefore, links the creation of the Golem to the Jews as devil worshippers. An insert in the script notes, "Astaroth will take back his creature. The dead clay will scorn its Master and destroys him and all living things" (G.: 44). This insert reinforces the impending misfortune.

The source of the Golem's sentience is a result of his secular misuse. The film shows the Golem chopping wood, drawing water, collecting herbs in the apothecary shop; these tasks — while seemingly innocuous — become violations in the Jewish folktales of an interdiction against using the Golem for personal advantage. In the film, however, this "living experience" of the Golem initiates consciousness through his imitation of human behavior and leads to revolt. The filmmakers, accordingly, insist upon the hostility of the Golem from his earliest awakening toward the "hated assistant" (G.: 29). Hate is the first emotion of the Golem. This negative feeling is, in binary form, the opposite of love in man, the distinguishing divine gift. The hate in man resides, then, in his primitive, telluric origins, which are captured in their violent chaos by this projection of man — the Golem. The Golem motif, in short, provides Expressionism with a dynamic concrete metaphor of man's primitive drives.

Man's hubris, in trying to imitate God's creation, brings nemesis upon the instigator. Jealousy drives Famulus to deploy the Golem for personal gain against the Christian under the guise of Jewish defense. The transgression triggers the disaster. The Golem, who had already sought to elude Rabbi Low before being rendered inert, now strengthened in hate goes berserk. Faced with the violence of the Golem, Famulus backs away in stereotypic cowardice while Florian, with true knightly virtues, tries to defend Miriam and dies. Lust and cruelty join hate to produce senseless violence. The Golem, unable to wrest love from Miriam, to know love as a human, wanders, dazed, destroying all in his path. A man, conversely, unable to truly love, becomes a Golem — surely a message of the film.

The innocent child who approaches the Golem, unafraid, proffers human love, in the form of food — a most basic expression — which conquers hate, soothes violence and incarnates the Christological response to the world of fate.<sup>10</sup> *Agape* can break the astrological circle and bring man freedom, linear growth and free will. This is the choice offered the viewer: the star of redemption through love or victimization. The scene of the innocent children, the presence of open nature through bright lighting, white flowers in the garlands like haloes on blond hair, all set outside of the black ghetto walls with all its negative implications, offers a clear definition of the salvation from chaos and telluric forces: Christian love.<sup>11</sup> The innocent, unaware of evil, overwhelms the Golem who experiences the first sense of sharing. *Näivete* removes the unnatural life-giving force, the "Star of David," — the metonymy of the negativity —

before its ambivalent metamorphosis, and casts it off symbolically freeing man from his evil inclinations, and hopefully restoring equilibrium and the natural order. The white costume of the child, set off against the black wall, underscores blatantly the theme of good and evil.

The return of the Golem's inert body inside the "curved walls" (G.: 51) insists on the evil that continually lurks ever ready to return. The last sequence of the film returns to the mass scenes of the ghetto where the Jews, still indulging in their strange ways, seemingly pay homage to necromancy. The flickering, distorting chiaroscuro contrasts negatively with the harmony of children dancing with flowers. The tilts and close-ups of the camera angles in the ghetto scenes increase distortion and negative comment whereas the long shots and medium long shots of the "apple" scene place the viewer at eye level for greater empathy. In the final sequence, the Jews have not learned the truth. Instead of destroying the Golem as originally planned (G.: 44), the Jews move the body back into the ghetto and thereby reincorporate latent hate and chaos into their world of circularity. Not having recognized the innocent child as a surrogate of the Christ child, the Jews are doomed to isolation and exile.<sup>12</sup>

The city, the central image of modernity for so much expressionist poetry, emerges in this film as the massive Golem itself, unnatural, unfinished, incomplete, alone. The ghetto is the synecdoche of the city. It reflects the urban labyrinth circled by physical and mental walls, and sealed off from nature. Exotic, fascinating, it symbolically becomes modern urban life; suffocating, uncontrollable, repulsive. The celebrated sets of Hans Poelzig with Boese's and Freund's lighting and Glieses' costuming are integrated in a conscious patchwork of triangles to produce the aforementioned states. The crooked triangular roofs, the windows, hats, beards, even the crosshatching of the wooden beams, the "gothic" archings, including the shaping of so many shots themselves, intensify not only gothic tonality and texture, but structure inchoate yearnings and efforts of the inhabitants as well. The triangular shapes may imply incipient Christological significance, but more likely they suggest the broken, isolated triangles of the true Jewish six-pointed Star of David which is made whole only by the overlapping of opposing isosceles triangles.<sup>13</sup> The latter cannot occur in the film for that would suggest harmony and the Jews represent disharmony. The jostling autonomous triangles impose an over-determined expressionist visual unity, based on simplification of form and distortion, which mirrors the urban confusion and plight. The city, ghetto, and its inhabitants, like the Golem itself, emerge as the overwhelming negation of nature, love, harmony, and goodness. About the city, visual expressionist techniques fuse with expressionist ideology.

Is redemption possible for the city and its residents? The Golem's "Star of David" resting on the black walls encircling the fated city fuses the chaos of triangles microcosmically into a white harmonious star of unity returning to the "darkness of the heavens" (G.: 51). The film abandons the city to its fate but the film viewer has free will to follow the star to Christian salvation and freedom.

Lotte Eisner's reticence to dub Wegener's *Golem* an expressionist film in her book, *The Haunted Screen*, is based not only on Wegener's own comments but in opposing *The Golem* to *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919), the sets and personages of which she perceives as truly conforming to expressionist conceptions (Eisner: 24). Her objection to Wegener's *Golem* as expressionist can be reduced to its visual representation. Wegener's film is "never broken by clashing or exaggerated Expressionist brio" (:56). Leaning on Kurtz's book, *Expressionismus und Film* (:58), to support her case, she argues that Poelzig's sets are not sufficiently abstract and the lighting based on Reinhardt's effects is too fluid and subtle for Expressionism. She admits, however, "from time to time [to] Expressionistic shock lighting effects (:59)." Kurtz, significantly, does not deny Wegener's film a place of respect in expressionist cinema. He notes that *The Golem* and other such films having a "literary origin" oriented Expressionism to the material (Kurtz: 83). *The Golem* is a perfect example of the latter.

What greater contrast can there be between the expressionist ghetto sequences and the "mimetic" sequences of the "flower children?" The set abstractions of *Caligari* persuasively express the harsh distorting mentality of a madman. But just as effectively do the distorted sets and protagonist in *The Golem* reinforce the "message." Expressionism is a method with a social apocalyptic vision, but not an end in itself. Unfortunately, Eisner used *Caligari* more as a paradigm than as a representative example of Expressionism, which, therefore, undermines the value of her theoretical formulations.

*The Golem* securely takes its place within the expressionist wave of films. It shares the same environment of Germany in 1920 with *Caligari* (1919) and *Nosferatu* (1922). It poses the same questions of good and evil in a world haunted by cosmic catastrophe and human despair seeking salvation. It uses the same techniques of distortion, simplification and exaggerated intensity. In the expressionist manner, personages are treated not as individuals but rather as types: the Good, the Lover, the Envious, the Monster, etc. The Golem typically objectifies, as do the other *automata*, the negative forces and qualities so concretely presented on the screen, with its folkloric appeal to black magic and the supernatural. The fantasy scenes of magic, the anti-naturalistic sets and acting, the escapist fascination with the exotic and legendary material, even the banal plotting based on lust and the simplistic solutions to redemption, all place Wegener's *Golem* within the filmic confines of expressionist creativity of post World War I Germany.

Obviously the film in general did not share the subtlety or depth of vision that a Heym or a Stadler brought to expressionist poetry, or Kaiser and von Unruh brought to expressionist theater, or Kirchner and Schmidt-Rottluff to painting. But it shared the same vision and techniques and conquered a new art form only now receiving academic respect.



When *The Golem* (1920) is compared diachronically to *Le Golem* (1937) of the French filmmaker, Julien Duvivier, the differences between an expressionist and a "socialist realist" treatment of the same motif becomes sharply defined. Whereas the German version structures the Golem as a *Doppelgänger*, the nexus of human primitive forces that haunts man psychologically and spiritually, the French version portrays the Golem as the fantasied yet necessary symbol of the Jewish people's political and social will to freedom from enslavement to their real enemies — the fascists. The Wegener version insists on the automaton as an evolving creation, a monster growing more demonstrative, more humanly expressive, the center of the viewer's attention. The Duvivier version insists on the victimization of the Jews and their determination to fight back by the use of a messianic robot. Wegener uses personages as objective, depersonalized types which is also true in his treatment of the Jews. Duvivier enriches the motivic personages with distinct personalities and makes the Jewish masses vibrant. *The Golem* (1920) builds its oppressive atmosphere by stylization, distortion, and chiaroscuro lighting; *Le Golem* (1937) creates tension by alternating incidents of indignation with comic relief. The audience leaving Wegener's *Golem* receives a traditional religious message entwined with atavistic attitudes and reactionary platitudes as ways of resolving the problems of man's condition. The viewer leaving Duvivier's film emerges demanding justice for the Jews and punishment of the oppressors. Duvivier's film, however, pays homage to Wegener's effort. Although he scrupulously avoids all the fantasy and magical effects of Wegener, he absorbed the basic plot line and the weak subplot reinterpreted in his own ideology. He learned how to handle the mass effects and animate the Golem. Duvivier rejects Wegener's expressionist techniques and *volkist* ideology, but he does so as a conscious heir to the Golem motif and its most successful filmic treatment until his time.

I do not wish to leave this essay without insisting on the dehumanization of the Jews in Wegener's film. Duvivier's portrayal is so philo-Semitic — even using Yiddish when the Jews converse — that I cannot doubt that he sought to reverse the image of the Jew in Wegener's film. Wegener accomplished the complete Christianization and Germanization of this Eastern European legend. Since Achim von Arnim introduced the Golem into German literature in his short story, *Isabella von Egypten*, the Golem has been an evil *Doppelgänger*, always created by an unsavory Eastern European Rabbi. Wegener, however, makes the Jews, their Rabbis, the Golem and the ghetto itself as the source of disturbing exotic emanations.<sup>14</sup> The Jews and their traditions are distorted — not stylized — in order to provoke humor and derision. The stereotypic presentation cannot be justified as "expressionist" distortion or mere caricaturing. The Jews are sharply contrasted to the Gentiles and are even cinematically placed among shadows. They appear as worshippers of the demonic, if not adherents of the anti-Christ. Their reprieve from expulsion is not an

act of justice but a display of "negative power," blackmail, through the use of evil forces. The Jews are dehumanized and condemned as a people. Celine always urged that he never meant to attack the Jews *per se*, but the Jews as symbols of evil capitalism. Nevertheless, the title of his most viciously satiric book, *Bagatelles pour un massacre* (1937) is not without meaning. Kracauer's thesis that the German expressionist films were presentiments of the future deserves to be taken seriously. Is it accidental that Wegener was one of the very few expressionist film directors to remain in Germany after the Nazis came to power?

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>The script of *The Golem* (1920) which I refer to in this essay, henceforth as G., appears in *Masterworks of the German Cinema* with an introduction by Dr. Roger Manvell (New York: Harper and Row, 1973).

There are two excellent treatments of the Golem motif. Gershom Scholem, in his chapter "The Idea of the Golem" in *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism* (New York: Schocken, 1965), the English translation by Ralph Manheim of *Zur Kabbale und ihrer Symbolik* (Zurich: Rhein-Verlag, 1960), discusses the Hebrew and Jewish religious sources of the motif. Beate Rosenfeld in *Die Golemsage und ihre Verwertung in der deutschen Literatur* (Breslau: Verlag Dr. Hans Priebatsch, 1934) in the series *Sprache und Kultur der Germanisch-Romanischen Völker*, Germanische Reihe, Band V, provides a thorough diachronic study of the Golem motif in German literature until 1926. Also helpful are: S. Ansky, "Ritualnije Naveti V Evreiskom Narodnom Tvorchestvo": in *Russkoe Bogatstvo*, (Jan.-Mar., 1912), vol. 1, p. 57-92 and *Dichtungen und dokumenten über Golems, Homunculi etc.*, ed. Klaus Völker, (München, dtv, 1976).

The three studies of Expressionism and cinema I have found most useful are: Lotte H. Eisner, *The Haunted Screen* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969) which is the revised English version of *L'Ecran Demonique* (1952); Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947); and Rudolf Kurtz, *Expressionismus und Film* (Berlin: Lichtbildbühne, 1926).

My thoughts and conceptions of Expressionism draw on: Armin Arnold, *Die Literatur des Expressionismus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972); Ilse et Pierre Garnier, *L'Expressionisme Allemand* (Paris: Andre Silvaire, 1962); R. Samuel and R. Hinton Thomas, *Expressionism in German Life, Literature and the Theater 1910-1924* (Cambridge: Heffer and Sons, Ltd., 1939); Richard Sheppard, "German Expressionism" in *Moder-*

nism, edited by Malcolm Bradley and James McFarlane (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1976); and particularly Walter H. Sokel, *The Writer in Extremis* (Stanford: University Press, 1959).

<sup>2</sup>Armin Arnold, *Prosa des Expressionismus* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1972), p. 121

<sup>3</sup>Today, *The Golem* appears as a *Who's Who* of German expressionist cinema. Paul Wegener, the director, and his colleague Hans Poelzig, the designer, were long matriculated from Max Reinhardt's theaters (the latter as a design-architect of the Grosses Schauspielhaus and the former as an actor at the Deutsches Theater.) Henrik Galeen, the script writer, (for *Nosferatu* as well) had previously helped direct and performed in *Der Golem* (1914). Guido Seeber had also been the cameraman in earlier Wegener films and helped direct a film called *Alraune Und Der Golem* (*Mandrake and the Golem*). Other 1914 Golem veterans were Rochus Gliese, who not only costumed the personages but created the fantastic images, and Lyda Salmonova (Miriam), Wegener's wife at the time. Impressed by Carl Boese directing Lyda Salmonova and Otto Gebühr (the Emperor) in a film, Wegener asked them to join him in remaking the *Golem* (1920). Boese directed the special effects. And Karl Freund, considered today one of the greatest cameramen, was already appreciated as a master when he joined Wegener. *The Golem* of 1920 was made, then by a professional team not only well versed in the particular motif but who shared a common concept of cinema and its possibilities. Their training and previous creations fused the lighting and staging innovations of Max Reinhardt with an expressionist vision and new cinematic techniques. *The Golem* is as much a technical triumph as it is a cinematic success.

<sup>4</sup>One can continue this Piercean chain of signification. The darkness of the screening room with the flickering shadows on the screen is by analogy the world of fate, if not man's inner world of imagination or superstition which yields normally when the lights of the theater are tuned on to reason and linearity.

<sup>5</sup>Rosenfeld, *Die Golemsage*, p. 145. I have never seen this book which is cited by Rosenfeld; nor does Dr. Manvell mention the German text used for the translation in his introduction to G.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 149

<sup>7</sup>Kracauer, *From Caligari*, p. 113.

<sup>8</sup>Rosenfeld, *Die Golemsage*, p. 145.

<sup>9</sup>In 1920, the Yiddish poet and dramatist, H. Leivick, wrote his version, *The Golem*, in which the Golem becomes a positive *doppelgänger*, the image of unredeemed suffering man, desperate for love and meaning but trapped in isolation like the Jews themselves.

<sup>10</sup>The possibility of interpreting the little girl as baby Eve tempting a pre-Adamic figure with the apple of love/lust adds an

ironic texture to the scene. The physical and emotional needs of man expressed through the act of sharing (the apple offering) differentiate an Adam from the Golem. A Golem does not eat, talk or share; and it lacks any *mons*. It can serve or demand, but it cannot participate. However, the smile of the Golem, the first emotive response, follows logically his wending towards manhood. Unconsciously Wegener *et al* had stumbled on the parallel Talmudic exemplum, see *Sanhedrin* 38b, that Adam was a Golem (unformed mass) before God made him a full human being. That the Golem dies unexpectedly at the hands of the naive child at this epiphany, heightens the ironic tone. Perhaps it augments the ultimate Christological position of the film, that man, like the Golem, conceived in sin, can be saved only through *agape* and grace.

<sup>11</sup>This pastoral scene stirs thoughts of "intertextuality," specifically of Goethe's *Faust II*, the closing scene:

Seliger Knaben  
Seh ich bewegte Schar,  
Los von der Erde Druck,  
Im Kreis gesellt,  
Die sich erlaben  
Am neuen Lenz und Schmuck  
Der obern Welt.

Both texts share the images of roses, innocent children "Freudig zum Ringverein" in springtime renewal, metaphors of the Christological theme of spiritual rebirth. Without implying that *Faust II* is the actual source of *The Golem* children sequence, we cannot discount its resonance. "Regt euch und singet/Heil'ge Gefühle drein" — a noble "subtext."

<sup>12</sup>When Rabbi Low projects in the Emperor's presence (G.: 41) the image of the Christ child in flight to Egypt coupled with Jewish wandering, the oblique allusion seems to be that the rejection of the Christ is the source of Jewish wandering, suffering, and hubris. The young innocent, like the Christ child, saves the Jews from the Golem (chaos and evil) and goes "unrecognized."

<sup>13</sup>Hans Poelzig knew that a Star of David is six pointed as can be seen in his sketches reproduced in Lotte Eisner's book, *op. cit.*, p. 60. Why the Star of David became five pointed, and thereby not Jewish, remains a mystery. Another inconsistency is Florian's hair which appears blond in the first part of the film and becomes black in the love scenes.

<sup>14</sup>Germany in 1920 had just witnessed the Spartacus Revolt and other unsuccessful revolts. The country was in political turmoil. Are the Jews being equated with disorder or the source of chaos?