***Special Effects and German Silent Film: Techno-Romantic Cinema*, by Katharina Loew, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2021. 320 pp. RRP. €109 (Hardback) ISBN: 9789463725231.**

Katharina Loew’s *Special Effects and German Silent Film: Techno-Romantic Cinema* is one of the latest and most prestigious publications in the expansive Film Culture in Transition series from Amsterdam University Press. Loew’s new study covers one of the most important and interesting periods in early film history, and brings a range of industrial, aesthetic, and critical perspectives to illuminate an intriguing central theme of ‘techno-romanticism’, or ‘the inclination to construe technology as a means to evoke the imagination, emotion, and more generally the intangible or spiritual’ (Loew, 2021: 14). Although this term names a common theme in the cultural discourse of early film, Loew’s book takes techno-romanticism as a connecting thread linking varied and well-researched chapters. By combining historical and filmic case studies, *Special Effects and German Silent Film* grounds its central theme in detailed and engaging analysis.

Chapter one examines the discourse of techno-romanticism in early German film criticism. Loew addresses how writers, critics, and philosophers such as Hermann Häfker, Georg Lukács and Hugo Münsterberg contributed to the development of film’s aesthetic legitimacy and theorisation by adapting traditional idealist notions of artistic value to suit the cultural discussions surrounding modern technological media. The analysis demonstrates how the value of film as a photographic medium was negotiated in reference to existing understandings of folk art, abstract states of subjective existence, and the representation of the imaginary.

Chapter two looks at techno-romanticism in reference to creative individuals behind the camera in the early German film industry. The analysis focuses on the special effects and ‘trick’ techniques devised, patented, and employed by German cinematographers Guido Seeber and Eugen Schüfftan. By summarising their aesthetic and mechanical contributions to cinematographic practice – including ‘montage shots’ and the famous ‘Schüfftan process’ (Loew, 2021: 80-99) – Loew demonstrates how the various technological methods created by such film artists contributed to the pervasive atmosphere of idealist cultural revaluation surrounding the cinematic medium.

Chapter three begins a series of case studies devoted to individual film texts. The first selection is *Der Student von Prague* (1913), which is presented as a consolidated effort on behalf of the early German film industry to raise the cultural legitimacy of cinema by employing a techno-romantic aesthetic paradigm to create a ground-breaking work of art founded upon trick cinematography (Loew, 2021: 118-119). Drawing upon classical literature as well as contemporary technology and cultural fashion, Lowe outlines the means by which *Der Student von Prague* contributed to the techno-romantic aesthetic discourse of its time.

Chapter four continues the chronological series of filmic case studies by discussing *Nosferatu* (1922). In addition to providing an overview of the central production background and special effects techniques, Loew’s analysis employs an expansive and interventional study of early twentieth century occultism and its various social, philosophical, and cultural realisations (Loew, 2021: 149-159). Once again, a technologically innovative cinematic spectacle is shown to evoke techno-romantic cultural assumptions as a means of integrating standards of aesthetic value with mass popular appeal.

Chapter five brings the case study sections to a close with an analysis of perhaps the most influential and thematically pertinent of all early German films, *Metropolis* (1927). Loew’s discussion ranges from accounts of the Schüfftan process and its carefully marketed effects to overviews of the concept of the ‘technological sublime’. Another multifaceted examination ultimately seeks to contextualise an iconic German techno-romantic cinematic production in which the immaterial themes it represents are nothing less than ‘the unfathomability of technology itself’ (Loew, 2021: 221).

Chapter six moves again from textual analysis to industrial context to examine the brief period at the end of the 1920s when German cinema’s influence over Hollywood was at a peak. Lowe addresses the impact of German cinematography on American productions and critical discourse following the release of *Der letze Mann* (1924) and *Varieté* (1925) – films which showcase the techno-romantic inclinations of European film culture and the technical methods then adopted by Hollywood studios to improve their products’ prestige and audiences’ emotional engagement.

A brief conclusion reiterates the essential arguments concerning the aesthetic contributions and ongoing relevance of techno-romantic attitudes, and hints at an expanded history of special effects, including CGI, adopting a perspective toward technology and art shaped by the discussions of earlier centuries.

*Special Effects and German Silent Film* provides an authoritative and well-researched analysis of its selected topics and adopts an engrossing variety of methodological and theoretical approaches. Although ‘techno-romanticism’ (a term appropriated from Karl Kraus) is an intriguing and useful concept, Loew’s discussions draw upon a great variety of existing theories and echo many similar perspectives (including Tom Gunning, Ben Singer, Mark Coeckelbergh [Loew, 2021: 15, 39, 274]). The essential conclusion drawn from the historical and textual analyses is often simply the identification and contextualisation of an artistic desire to justify film as an art by appealing to the camera’s ability to evoke a ‘spiritual’ dimension. Among the most interesting aspects of Lowe’s study is the discussion of trick cinematography as a means of contributing to the uncanny ‘essence’ of filmic representation itself: ‘the notion that cinema produces uncontrollable, wicked duplicates of reality bespeaks the fundamental ambiguity of the techno-romantic paradigm’ (Loew, 2021: 138). Although this kind of analytical richness is often sought in reference to interesting and apposite concepts (such as the sublime, the occult, and the doppelgänger) some readers may be disappointed at the repetitiveness of certain concluding sections which contextualise these complex ideas in reference to the cinematic techno-romantic paradigm. For some, the most impressive sections will be those concerning the biographical and historical aspects of the film industry itself and the transatlantic cross-fertilisation of media production and aesthetic discourse. In spite of its occasional over-simplicity, *Special Effects and German Silent Film* will no doubt become a standard reference work concerning its central topics. In addition to contributing to the growing interest in film and Romanticism more generally (see Richard I. Suchenski, *Projections of Memory: Romanticism, Modernism, and the Aesthetics of Film* (2016), Will Kitchen, *Romanticism and Film: Franz Liszt and Audio-Visual Explanation* [2020] and Paul Dave, *Revolutionary Romanticism and Cinema: Country, Land, People* [2020]), Loew’s book provides many useful and engaging chapters on early German cinema which address a variety of academic needs for both students and academics.

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References

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