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## WHO GETS THE LAST LAUGH?

OLD AGE AND GENERATIONAL CHANGE IN  
F.W. MURNAU'S *THE LAST LAUGH* (1924)

SABINE HAKE

*Der letzte Mann* (*The Last Laugh*, 1924), the most famous collaborative effort by director Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, screenwriter Carl Mayer, and cinematographer Karl Freund, has been overshadowed by its critical reputation and canonical status. In fact, its most fascinating qualities today are not necessarily those highlighted by the numerous contemporary reviews or examined in the surprisingly few scholarly articles on the film. Like the creative individuals involved in the production, most critics from the 1920s concentrated on the film's innovative cinematography and dynamic conception of narrative space. Very few mentioned the melodramatic elements, and if they did at all, they did so only to dismiss the tragic story of an elderly hotel porter's demotion to washroom attendant as exaggerated and overwrought. The film's many technical accomplishments, from the freely moving camera to the use of perspectivism in set design, were quickly incorporated into mainstream practices. By contrast, already in 1924, the film's emotional universe of degradation, despondency, and disavowal struck most non-German audiences as incomprehensible and utterly strange. Yet even for Germans who had lived through the trauma of World War I, the collapse of the monarchy, and the postwar years of continuing political instability and economic crises, the porter provided not only a figure of identification with their own suffering but also a figure of distanciation through which to move beyond the political legacies of the past.

In recognition of such contradictory responses and effects, my reading of *The Last Laugh* focuses on Emil Jannings's portrayal of the title figure to shed new light on the pervasiveness of generational conflict in Weimar society and to trace the overdetermined function of this conflict in the film's innovative visualization and

narrativization of social change. In reading the story of the aging hotel porter in this self-reflexive fashion, however, we cannot reduce the traumatic loss of patriarchal power to our contemporary interest in questions of masculinity and ignore the historical dimensions of the fundamental rift between young and old. Similarly, we cannot dismiss the question of generational conflict as a mere displacement of the hopes and fears generated by increased social mobility and its resultant destabilization of class identities. Instead, we must approach the film's treatment of old age as an expression of the deep generational divide that, even when approached through father-son conflicts, affected all areas of Weimar culture and society and took particularly antagonistic forms in the workplace and in public life. Whether as social problem, literary motif, or critical metaphor, generational conflict dominated the period's own narrativization of historical change, including in the new medium of film. Yet understanding the mechanisms of embodiment that turned the title figure of this Weimar classic into both a signifier and a signified requires that we move beyond the standard auteurist readings focusing on director and screenwriter and pay equal attention to the film's one and only star, Emil Jannings.

His virtuoso performance of the hysterical or feminized male thematized the complicated relationship between masculinity and professional identity and, in so doing, provided the filmmakers with a tool for measuring the profound impact of modernization on social relations, psychological dispositions, sensory perceptions, and aesthetic sensibilities. Jannings had started his film career by playing mighty and lustful rulers in the costume dramas of Ernst Lubitsch, *Madame Dubarry* (1919) and *Anna Boleyn* (1920). After the success of his performance in *The Last Laugh*, Jannings began to specialize in stories of defeat and humiliation, including the kind of sexual humiliation portrayed in E. A. Dupont's *Variété* (1925) and Josef von Sternberg's *Der blaue Engel* (*The Blue Angel*, 1930). In all these films his reenactment of the undoing of the authoritarian subject, the Wilhelmian *Untertan*, not only expressed historical audiences' deep ambivalence about modernity and modernization but also translated the shock of the new into the gendered and generational terms that connected politics and erotics in highly suggestive and often problematic ways. Through his roles, Jannings came to personify the once powerful father figure who, since the heyday of the expressionist drama, had united young men and women in their ardent desire to change traditional gender roles and family structures and thereby to change the social institutions and economic conditions sustaining them. Yet through his screen persona, Jannings also articulated the humiliation and betrayal both of an entire generation of obedient *Untertanen* and of all those who, for various reasons, experienced a postwar loss of power and influence.

In narrativizing the older generation's sense of trauma, *The Last Laugh* takes full advantage of the heightened terms of nineteenth-century melodrama. The story of

a hotel porter who, because of failing health, is demoted to the position of washroom attendant could be an episode from the popular novels of Eugenie Marlitt or Hedwig Courths-Mahler—if the main protagonist were a young woman. The difference in sex and age is significant for the contradictory emotional investments that distinguish this lightly ambivalent treatment of male suffering from the more predictable-identificatory effects found in most female melodramas. Working for a luxury hotel in a big city resembling Berlin, the porter derives his entire personal and professional identity from his splendid uniform and its symbolic meanings (Fig. 6.1). This uniform gives him a clearly defined role both in the economy of the hotel and in the social structure of his working-class neighborhood. When the young hotel manager notices the porter's difficulties in unloading a large steamer truck, he offers him the position of washroom attendant as a form of semiretirement. For the porter, the loss of his beloved uniform is tantamount to a complete loss of self. Unable to accept the fact of his demotion and unwilling to be shamed in front of his relatives and neighbors, the old man steals the uniform and starts a secret double life to keep up appearances at home. His desperate scheme falls apart, however, when the elderly woman living in his household (referred to in the credits as the fiancé's aunt) comes to the hotel to bring him his lunch and discovers his shameful secret.

Her shocked reaction, which repeats his initial trauma, and the *Schadenfreude*, the proverbial joy in someone else's misfortune, displayed by his neighbors, causes an unexpected break in the narrative. Thus when the porter returns the uniform to the hotel in one final act of defeat, the first and only intertitle appears: "Here the film was supposed to end. In real life the unhappy old man would hardly have something other to expect than death. But the screenwriter took pity on him and added a somewhat improbable epilogue." In this epilogue the porter becomes the sole heir of an American millionaire who, by sheer coincidence, died in the washroom in his arms. He celebrates his sensational inheritance with a sumptuous meal for himself and his best friend, the night watchman, before both, together with a street beggar, take off in a luxury car: a fairy-tale ending indeed.<sup>1</sup>

As a prestige production with a big budget, *The Last Laugh* brought together a highly qualified group of professionals: director Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, scenarist Carl Mayer, cinematographer Karl Freund, set designers Walter Röhrig and Robert Herlth, and character actor Emil Jannings. The Ufa studio had originally purchased the script from Mayer for Lupu Pick, who was scheduled to direct the film as part of a trilogy alongside *Scherben* (1921) and *Sylvester* (*New Year's Eve*, 1924). Shooting took place during the spring and summer of 1924 in the Ufa-Tempelhof studios and on the Babelsberg lot. The collaborative approach taken by producer Erich Pommer followed the *Bauhüttenprinzip*, the artisanal mode of production cultivated at the Ufa studios throughout the 1920s. Although the



FIGURE 6.1 The hotel porter (Emil Jannings) arrives home in F. W. Murnau's *The Last Laugh* (1922). Courtesy of the Filmmuseum Berlin, Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek.

making of art films required the innovative work of scenarists, cameramen, and set designers, as well as directors, advertising campaigns and critical reviews had already begun during the 1920s to privilege the director as the unifying creative force. The *auteurist* approaches dominant during the initial rediscovery of Weimar cinema in the late 1960s have translated these promotional strategies into interpretative dogmas, with the result that *The Last Laugh* continues to be read primarily as a film by F. W. Murnau (Eisner 1973; Gehler and Kasten 1990; Prinzler 2003).

Expanding the definition of authorship requires not only closer attention to the screenwriter, however, a process that has already been initiated; it also means to take seriously the contribution of actors in creating filmic meanings and producing subject effects. In discussing questions of authorship in Murnau, Thomas Elsaesser refers to a peculiar division of labor between Murnau, the sadistic ironist, and Mayer, the masochistic expressionist (Elsaesser 2000, 232). Vacillating between submission and domination, Jannings's screen persona in *The Last Laugh* was organized around a similar sadomasochistic structure that duplicates the dynamics of the Murnau-Mayer collaboration. Working again with Murnau and Mayer on a modern adaptation of Moliere's *Tartuffe* (1925), the actor remained closely identified with the underlying crisis of masculinity and, more specifically, of patriarchy. By embodying experiences of disorientation and disempowerment, he came

to stand in for the affective dilemmas of an entire generation confronted with the inherent violence behind the process of modernization.

For such emotional investments to take place, Jannings had to remain a Wilhelmian character in appearance and attitudes: paternalistic, misogynistic, and authoritarian but also extremely status-conscious and hierarchy-oriented. Many critics (before and after 1933) saw him as a quintessential German film actor: larger than life in physique and personality, a figure compelled by raw emotionality and sheer physicality and therefore to be identified with deep essences and truths. With his long sideburns reminiscent of nineteenth-century burghers and patriarchs and with his massive body suggestive of even earlier notions of the king's two bodies (one of them as a version of the body politic), Jannings personified one of the hidden secrets of Weimar modernity: the continued existence of the authoritarian past. Through his association with a particular national physiognomy, social type, and historical consciousness, Jannings offered a uniquely German perspective on the profound changes in gender relations and definitions of masculinity. When the camera in *The Last Laugh* assumes his point of view, the actor appears initially as a figure of sympathetic identification; he may be vain, but his is a benign vanity tempered by his jovial disposition, as evidenced in his interactions with children. Yet with the gradual unraveling of his public persona, the psychological pathology of this typical product of Wilhelmine society comes into sharper focus. All of his character traits, from smugness and pretension to servility and self-pity, attest to the sadistic and masochistic tendencies that have been analyzed as central to the authoritarian personality by members of the Institute of Social Research in exile, including by Theodor W. Adorno in *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950). In his work with Murnau, Jannings plays down the sexual implications of this personality type, unless one wanted to think of the porter's uniform as, quite literally, a fetishistic love object. Yet in his later work with von Sternberg, the erotic obsessions of the authoritarian personality assume central significance, a point acknowledged by the director's remark about Jannings that "to be humiliated was for him ecstasy" (Coates 1991, 64).

*The Last Laugh* can be seen as Murnau's first attempt to explore the dynamics of identity and space in the modern metropolis, a project that culminated in his Hollywood masterpiece *Sunrise* (1927). Influenced by German romanticism and its thematization of transitional states and transgressive experiences, Murnau approached the drama of modern subjectivity from the perspective of fantasy and desire, including their visual and spatial dimensions. Liminal states such as hallucinations or dreams allowed him to experiment with the possibilities of the filmic apparatus and, in so doing, to move beyond conventional notions of realism and reality. From fantastic films like *Nosferatu* (1922) to literary adaptations like *Faust* (1926), the director explored the ambiguous relationship between domination

and submission, between terror and attraction, and between violence and dread as constitutive of the modern condition. These oppositions gave rise to the sublimated eroticism that for Murnau distinguished spectatorship in the cinema, a point that is especially relevant to *The Last Laugh*. For by problematizing the relationship between vision and visuality, Murnau sheds light on the social, sexual, and generational divisions that structure both the porter's life and Weimar society as a whole.

Murnau shared his affinity for social outsiders and marginal perspectives with his frequent collaborator Carl Mayer (Kasten 1994; Weishmann 1997). This true "film poet," to quote Joseph Roth (1976, 493), approached the film script as a genre in its own right by simulating filmic effects through his distinctive short phrases, incomplete sentences, and montage-like exclamations; he also included detailed instructions for camera positions and movements. Hailed by many contemporaries as the unifying force behind the expressionist film, Mayer for *The Last Laugh* wrote an entire screenplay without intertitles, that is, except the one announcing the unexpected happy ending. Apparently lost, the screenplay was considered so innovative at the time that several excerpts were reprinted, including once by Vsevolod Pudovkin in his famous *Film Direction and Screenwriting* (1928). The literary journal *Das Tagebuch* started the trend by publishing the fateful scene in which the porter mistakes his successor as a reflection of himself: "Now he steps in the revolving door. And! Now he moves with it: There, he stops. Because: In this very moment: Someone moves through. Indeed! This someone almost seems to be his double. Because: He, too, wears a uniform and hat. As he does. With all the braids. Only he seems somewhat younger. And very tall. But with an indifferent gait. That is how he now steps outside. Assuming the position. And there! Our porter! Bewildered he follows the other with his gaze" (1924, 1854; my translation).<sup>2</sup>

Speculations continue to this day about whether the film's surprise ending was forced on Mayer by Ufa executives. In either case, the addition of the intertitle can be read as an assertion of his own authorial voice and, more specifically, a critical comment on the sociopsychological function of entertainment cinema. The intertitle separates the trivial elements of the happy ending from the serious treatment of a human tragedy that may have been inspired by the many reports of suicides, suicide attempts, and other acts of desperation during the inflation years (Hempel 1968, 85–86). Moreover, the insertion of an author's voice prevents the elevation of the main character to a figure only of pity, empathy, and compassion and forces spectators to take a more distanced perspective on his traumatic experience and the melodramatic conventions used to present this exemplary story of downward mobility and male humiliation.

The film's innovative approach to narrative space would not have been possible without the contribution of two of Ufa's most famous set designers, Robert

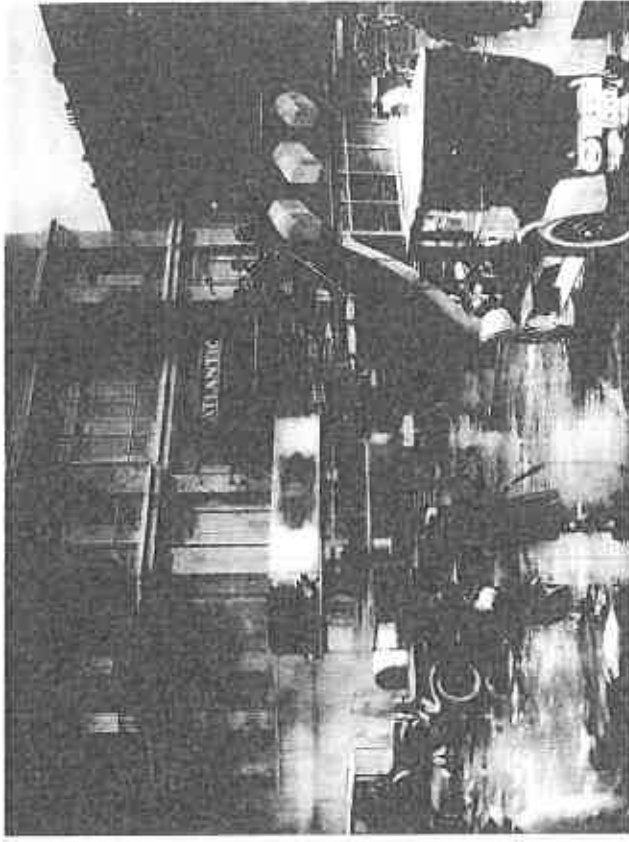


FIGURE 6.2 Street scene in front of the Atlantic hotel. Courtesy of the Filmmuseum Berlin, Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek.

Herlth and Walter Röhrig. Gone were the painted backdrops from *Das Kabinett des Dr. Caligari* (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, 1920) that required a static camera and that, despite the fantastic qualities, remained indebted to a theatrical mise-en-scène. Four years later, Herlth and Röhrig took a uniquely filmic approach to the two main settings in *The Last Laugh*, the hotel and the tenement, and designed their interiors and exteriors specifically for a moving camera. Creating such an "optical vision" (Herlth) required elaborate planning and exact calculation. On Ufa's large outside lot in Babelsberg they used hundreds of extras and a large number of cars and buses to shoot the busy street life in front of the Atlantic Hotel (Fig. 6.2). Taking full advantage of the laws of perspective, the set designers even incorporated model cars and skyscrapers in the filmic mise-en-scène. According to *Film-Kurier*, the row of houses on the lot decreased from 8 meters to 4 meters. And the skyscrapers in the distance were no taller than 12 meters, reason enough for the reporter to conclude that "this will surpass everything because of its incredibly daring use of perspectivism in the film set, because of the astonishing lighting scheme, the exemplary sense of timing, and the spectacle of the teeming crowds surging past the hotel during a rainstorm" (Jacobsen 1992, 86).

Because of Herlth's and Röhrig's creative contribution, *The Last Laugh* has sometimes been described as an architectural film. Its tightly constructed spaces, however, become alive only through the innovative cinematography of Karl Freund. Already in his earlier work with Murnau, Freund had contributed greatly to the director's unique combination of psychological realism and object symbolism (Eisner 1973, 105-35). Together with his assistant Robert Baberske, the famous Weimar cinematographer used the creative challenges of *The Last Laugh* to animate filmic space through a new technique known as "unfertered" or "unchained" camera (*entfesselte Kamera*). Elaborate tracking shots had become possible through dramatic advances in camera technology such as the introduction of smaller and lighter cameras, more light-sensitive lenses, and a motor-driven cranking device. These features allowed Freund to experiment with an early version of a Steadicam, with the camera in one case tied to his body suspended in midair. Remarkable for its time, *The Last Laugh* contains several extended camera movements, beginning with the spectacular opening sequence, in which the camera assumes the position of an imaginary hotel guest as he is greeted by a page; walks across the bright, spacious lobby; and leaves through the revolving glass door. As the camera becomes, in the words of Murnau, a "recording apparatus freely movable in space" (Gehler and Kasten 1990, 141), it gives rise to an aesthetic of the camera eye that is both embodied (e.g., in the porter's later hallucinations) and disembodied (e.g., in the above-mentioned opening scene). And through the use of subjective camera, the title figure is not merely a sociopsychological type but a function of the competing perspectives of narrator and spectator. In achieving this destabilizing effect, Freund benefited greatly from the atmospheric score of composer Giuseppe Becce, whose Wagnerian approach to melos, together with the effective use of jazz and folklore motifs for different narrative settings, strengthens the implied link between motion and emotion and thus confirms the dynamization of filmic space as a hallmark of modern subjectivity and visual consciousness.

Last but not least, the 1924 production bore the signature of independent producer Erich Pommer, who had charged his creative team with the following task: "Please invent something new, even if it is crazy!" (Eisner 1979, 90). Pommer's approach was part of Ufa's expansionist strategy that, built around the notion of the quality film, aimed at a greater German presence in domestic and international markets. The stabilization of German currency in 1924 put an end to the favorable economic conditions that had given rise to the expressionist cinema as a cinema of inflation in the literal and figurative sense. From then on, German films strove to be both similar to, and different from, other Hollywood productions by meeting international standards of technical quality but emphasizing national characteristics in the approach to artistic quality. By transforming German film into a category of product differentiation, studio executives and producers achieved the difficult

compromise between art and industry in the essentialist terms of national identity. In the words of influential Weimar theater critic Herbert Ihering, "*The Last Laugh* is international because it is a German prestige film (*Spitzenfilm*), in the same way that an American production is international because it is an American prestige film" (1961 2:487). It is this seeming paradox that also holds together the film's double ending. The introduction of an all-powerful narrator evokes the kind of self-reflexivity characteristic of art cinema. Meanwhile the expansion of the happy ending into a farcical second story line, which takes up almost twenty minutes in an approximately eighty-minute film, accommodates the generic conventions of melodrama and comedy. As a result, *The Last Laugh* ends up both emulating and mocking Hollywood—an ambiguous position that undoubtedly contributed to its remarkable success with film critics, studio bosses, and other filmmakers.

As Pommer had hoped, the film's critical reception surpassed all expectations. After an extensive advertising campaign and a spectacular opening night at the Ufa-Palast am Zoo on December 23, 1924, which included an orchestral performance of Becce's original score, German critics topped one another in their use of superlatives and bold pronouncements on the birth of film as art. Yet as was often the case with art films, great critical reviews did not necessarily produce the kind of box-office successes that could have helped Ufa in its growing financial difficulties. Many reviewers referred to *The Last Laugh* as a masterpiece and an instant classic. Not known for his love of modern mass diversions, Joseph Roth called it "the best film not just in Germany but in the entire world" (1976, 493). In the *Berliner Börsen-Courier*, Herbert Ihering praised the film as "a true light play (*Lichtspiel*), a true moving play (*Bewegungspiel*)" (Ihering 1961, 488) that proved the new medium's potential as an art form. In *Film-Kurier* Willy Haas described it as a work of stylistic perfection, signaling a formal revolution, "the beginning of a new era in the history of cinematography" (Jacobsen, Prünim, and Wenz 1991, 108). While joining his colleagues in acknowledging the film's formal qualities, Kurt Pinthus, in *Das Tagebuch*, spoke more critically of the kind of mannerisms often found during transitional periods, concluding that "they [these filmic techniques] aim at a heightened reality but sometimes only look exaggerated" (Pinthus 1925, 27).

American reception of *The Last Laugh* was likewise split between critical acclaim and limited mass appeal. An advance press screening prompted a reporter from the trade journal *Variety* to conclude that "if it [the film] is to be accepted as a criterion of what the Ufa is going to offer in this country, then by all means throw open the screens of the country to pictures of this type" (December 10, 1924). After the 1925 New York premiere, the response in the *New York Times* was equally effusive, with Mordaunt Hall confessing that "there were tears to the left of us, tears to the right of us and tears in our own eyes as we looked at this production for a second time" (January 29, 1925). Even more than in Germany, the enthusiasm of

the educated elites did not extend to mass audiences unable or unwilling to appreciate the uniquely German qualities of this somber tale of downward mobility. Despite early successes with expressionist art films and elaborate costume dramas, Ufa ultimately failed to gain a foothold in American markets, and its film imports remained limited to the small art-house circuit. Nonetheless, the studio's quality films left a strong impression on Hollywood moguls looking for new talent. Thus in 1926, when *Motion Picture Magazine* introduced the director of *The Last Laugh* as the German film genius, Murnau was already in contract negotiations with William Fox; similar deals with Mayer and Jannings soon followed.

How did historical audiences respond to the high degree of ambiguity in the film, especially as regards its melodramatic structure? Patrice Petro has suggested that the figure of the feminized man, far from being of interest only to male audiences experiencing a crisis of identity, offered a point of identification for a female audience searching for figures on which to project their own desire for freedom from patriarchal domination (Petro 1989, 23–25). Complicating such readings, does the main character in *The Last Laugh* announce the long-awaited demise of patriarchal authority or its replacement by more elusive structures of domination and control? Is the old man a figure only of compassion and pity, or does his emotional appeal depend on the degree to which historical audiences could both sympathize with his suffering and participate in his humiliation? Resisting the tendency to reduce such alternatives to essentialist gendered binaries, Richard McCormick reads “the blurring and confusion of traditional categories of identity” as an emancipatory process within Weimar culture (McCormick 2002, 6). Accordingly, the downfall of the porter can be interpreted as a reenactment of this long-overdue process of social change. Overdetermined in its social, political, and psychological references, Jannings's performance connects the crisis of masculinity to more fundamental questions about gender relations and family life.

The underlying discourse on generational change played a central part in the balancing of competing audience expectations and spectatorial investments that defined much of Weimar cinema between the difficulties of the early postwar years and the more hopeful scenarios that began to take hold of the filmic imagination after 1924. The year of the film's production marked the beginning of the so-called stabilization period that, with the introduction of the new currency, brought a few years of healthy economic growth and relative political stability before the world economic crisis of 1929. At first glance the figure of the porter personifies typical war and postwar experiences, from the trauma of political and military defeat and the pervasive sense of national humiliation to the shock of hyperinflation and the attendant devaluation of social traditions and conventions. As Karl Prümm argues, the explicit and implicit references to the breakdown of social and political hierarchies gave the film its heightened political significance (Prümm 2003, 44). The ex-

perience of profound loss, however, cannot be understood without recognition of the considerable gains and advances made after the collapse of the old system. As a temporal marker from which to view the past and imagine the future of the Weimar Republic, the year 1924 consequently provides the film historian with two very different vantage points for situating *The Last Laugh* in the larger context of Weimar culture. According to an optimistic version, 1924 stood for the promise of progress and democracy after years of political and economic crises. According to a more pessimistic version, the year marked the beginning of full-fledged modernization, including the worst excesses of Fordism, Taylorism, and Americanism. The adjustments and sacrifices made in the process have often been seen as a contributing factor to the rise of conservative, nationalist, and anti-Semitic ideologies. By offering a pessimistic and an optimistic ending, *The Last Laugh* not only acknowledged these deep contradictions within German modernity but also thematized its own precarious position within the metanarratives of Weimar cinema that continue to complicate our understanding of the period.

The film's year of production is often cited as a dividing line between the exploration of imaginary worlds attempted by the expressionist film and the rediscovery of physical reality by the writers, painters, and photographers associated with *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity). The story of *The Last Laugh* represents this expressionist–New Objectivist divide along generational lines. Expressionist tendencies are subsequently identified with old age and New Objectivist tendencies with youth; in the mise-en-scène this is most evident in the juxtaposition of old dark tenement and new shiny hotel. Chiaroscuro lighting and object symbolism place the film within a recognizably expressionist tradition of abstraction and empathy, to evoke the terminology introduced by Weimar art historian Wilhelm Worringer. The dramatic use of screens and windows and the many high- and low-angle shots clearly follow expressionist conventions of establishing *Stimmung* (mood). At the same time, the influence of New Objectivity is apparent in the camera's almost fetishistic involvement with the surface splendor of modern consumer culture and the social and cultural physiognomy of Americanism, suggesting a growing interest in, and appreciation for, the materiality of everyday life. Commenting on these competing influences, Helmut Wehsmann sees the formal qualities of *The Last Laugh* as indicative of Weimar's culture of nonsynchronicity (Wehsmann 1994, 27). In a similar vein Thomas Elsaesser connects the dynamization of filmic space to a constitutive tension within Weimar cinema between ambiguous narratives and narratives of ambiguity (Elsaesser 2000, 86–90).

The same constitutive tension accounts for the many references to other film genres that make *The Last Laugh* also a film about film. Its thematic choices evoke the early social drama of the Wilhelmine period, which focuses on the problems of the poor and oppressed and relies on melodramatic conventions to invite identi-

fication with their suffering. In its approach to filmic space the film reveals obvious similarities with the chamber-play film (*Kammerspiel*film), an intimate genre modeled after the modern drama, both naturalist and symbolist, and distinguished through its highly stylized use of interiors as extensions of the bourgeois self (Eisner 1977, 207–21). Finally, in its treatment of the modern metropolis the film betrays the strong influence of the contemporaneous genre of the street film (*Straßenfilm*), whose characters' movements between public and private sphere invariably reveal the limits of individual freedom and social mobility (Vogt 2001, 114–24).

These generic references place *The Last Laugh* in a uniquely German tradition of staging subjectivity, a tradition that extends from the bourgeois tragedy of the Enlightenment to the social dramas of early cinema and that frequently includes a direct confrontation with the problems of aging and generational strife. By refusing to validate the central conflict through a tragic ending, Mayer and Murrau move beyond the prewar melodrama's infatuation with fate and destiny. Similarly, their ironic use of the happy ending can only be understood as an implicit critique of the social drama's reformist ethos of moral uplift and its enduring belief in self-improvement. By separating the porter from the traditional family structures known from the chamber play, the narrative avoids the confining effects of oedipalization and instead focuses on the emotional complexities of a singular crisis experience. And by ignoring the attractions of the street film, which usually revolve around the spectacle of a simultaneously alluring and threatening sexuality associated with the figure of the prostitute, the filmmakers are able to explore the metaphorical function of masculinity in relation to professional identities and generational differences. Finally, by essentializing the workplace problems that are a specialty of the critical social drama, *The Last Laugh* avoids any reductionist treatment of social and professional milieus in favor of the emotional effects of job loss and demotion and its allegorical function within the underlying narrative of disempowerment. As a consequence, the main protagonist has little in common with the exploited employee of the social drama, the authoritarian father of the chamber-play film, or the straying husband of the street film. Precisely this resistance to the determinants of gender and class creates the conditions for a sustained reflection on the psychological mechanisms of domination and submission underlying Weimar discourses of social mobility and generational change.

Like other classics of Weimar cinema, *The Last Laugh* reenacts the experience of generational change in highly emotional terms, but it does so with great ambivalence and ambiguity. This unsettling quality can be observed on two levels: through the main character as the embodiment of historical trauma and through the filmic representation of modernity as an experience of that trauma. Within the dual structure established by the dramatic/comical story line, the main character/actor functions as a conduit for two opposing forces and developments. His

attitudes and behaviors reflect the authoritarian, militaristic, and hierarchically structured society of the Wilhelmine Empire. Yet his dismissal also highlights the cold rationality of a modern society organized according to capitalist principles. The porter's inability to deal with the loss of social status and male authority shows the resilience of established psychological patterns. Yet it also makes the spectator painfully aware of the problematic connection between profession and identity. Similarly, the man's unwillingness to deal with the realities of old age draws attention to the pervasive cult of youth in Weimar culture, at the same time validating the younger generation's need to remove all obstacles to their ambitious projects of innovation and change.

With his enormous body suggesting strength as well as weakness, Emil Jannings proved ideally suited to perform the confrontation between young and old in relation to the changing definitions of work and profession. When he first appears on the scene, the porter seems like the personification of competence and confidence. All of his gestures attest to the unity of individual and role: when he salutes the guests, expands his chest, strokes his beard, and folds his hand as pedestrians walk past the hotel entrance. The spectacular uniform with the gold tresses and shiny buttons gives him a military bearing. It functions like an external armor that imposes a distinct form and structure on a malleable, amorphous body. Like a prosthesis—or an external crutch of sorts—the uniform holds him up and provides him with a sense of wholeness. To what degree the uniform is indeed his identity becomes painfully obvious when the old porter confronts his younger successor, for whom it is nothing more than professional attire that can be exchanged at any time. Paralyzed by the shock over his dismissal, the old man is unable to remove the uniform himself and has to be undressed like a little child. In the process a button is torn off, which prompts him to lose his posture entirely and slump forward, as if his back were broken. As he puts on the simple white frock of the washroom attendant, he assumes the status of a civilian and becomes what the ambiguous title, in one of his meanings, refers to as “the last man.”

Jannings expertly uses his compelling physical appearance, facial expressions, and body movements to elicit a wide range of reactions in the spectator. As the proud man in uniform, he represents a figure of sympathy as well as mockery. Yet as the embodiment of victimhood, the man in the white frock invites equally strong feelings of compassion and contempt. Associated with the opposing forces of tradition and modernity, his performance structures the two-part narrative and its contradictory forms of identification in highly ambivalent terms. Significantly, the trauma of demotion cannot be resolved through the body but, instead, requires its containment within the field of vision. The blurring of vision when he reads the letter of dismissal or when he awakens from a drunken sleep represents the optical equivalent of his loss of authority. Yet these crisis situations also give rise to



the extended hallucinations compensating for such traumatic loss. Using superimposition, trick photography, distortion mirrors, and anamorphic lenses, both sequences openly reference the avant-garde film, with the initial trauma depicted through Caligaresque effects and the subsequent wish fulfillment shown in almost surrealist styles. The first hallucination occurs when the porter flees the hotel without his uniform, then looks back one more time and, with eyes wide open, sees the building collapsing and almost burying him. The moving camera in this scene performs the detachment that he himself, paralyzed by fear, fails to achieve. The second hallucination, whose function can be likened to secondary revision in the Freudian sense, takes place after the drunken revelries of the wedding party. In this dreamlike sequence, the porter returns to a fantasy hotel with grotesquely exaggerated dimensions to prove his supernatural physical strength by juggling enormous suitcases in front of admiring onlookers.

The uniform as the founding site of male identity reveals the porter as a product of prewar militarism and authoritarianism, and the close-up on the word *Alterschwäche* (fragility of age) in the dismissal letter clearly presents his demotion as a generational experience. Significantly, all of the main contributors to *The Last Laugh* were from the generation of former emperor Wilhelm II (born 1888): Jannings (born 1884), Murnau (born 1888), Freund (born 1890), and Mayer (born 1894). Historically, this was the generation that had welcomed the war and seen the largest number of fatalities and injuries. They had been most heavily invested in the survival of the monarchy and most passionately opposed to the principles of social and sexual equality. During the postwar period, they witnessed the transition from the old political and military elites of the empire to the new managerial and technocratic elites of the republic, a process the critical members of this generation registered with the mixture of expectation, trepidation, and resentment typical of the victims of progress and change.

The porter's inability to demonstrate the kind of New Objectivist "cool conduct" cultivated to perfection by the hotel manager makes him a perfect exemplar of what Helmut Lethen has described as the persona of the "poor creature" (*arme Kreatur*). Identified with "the other side of modern consciousness," this creature is perceived to be authentic; yet it is a mask like all others. Its function within the modern imaginary is to announce the disappearance of a particular set of masks (e.g., the type of the subordinate) and prepare for its subsequent identification with (pathetic) authenticity in the new rituals of public shaming. Under these conditions, the physiognomy of the creature "reflects a social situation, shields nakedness, overcomes shame, evidences a defensive reaction to mortal fear or an ambition to be demonic, striking a ferocious pose among the besiegers" (Lethen 2002, 195).

How does Jannings perform this physiognomy of the creature? By identifying victimization with old age. In accordance with old-fashioned views of maturity

and old age, the forty-year-old actor looks and acts more like a man in his sixties. The aging porter is removed from the sphere of productive labor and marginalized within the social hierarchies that defined traditional masculinity at the time. As the older generation personified by the porter, the night watchman, and the governess is banned to the underground of the hotel economy, a younger generation of managers, porters, and pages takes control of its public spaces and vital functions. The dynamic manager in his office, the international travelers waiting in the lobby, and the elegant guests dining in the restaurant are all in their twenties—too young to have consciously experienced the monarchy but old enough to enjoy the promises of social mobility and the blessings of modern consumer culture. The differences between these two generations are made clearly visible through their physical appearance and choice of clothes and accessories. For the young men this means mustaches rather than beards, cigarettes rather than cigars or pipes; for the young women it means short hair and short dresses rather than the braids and long skirts with aprons worn by the perennially middle-aged women of the tenement.

Generational conflict not only creates two very different sets of characters but also establishes two very different narrative settings: the modern luxury hotel and the lower-class tenement. Divided by the street as the site of perpetual movement and an almost utopian mobility, both places appear as highly gendered spaces. The lobby and restaurant of the hotel, itself a symbol of wealth, luxury, and sophistication, provide the perfect stage for the performance of masculine strength and efficiency. During the daytime the tenement is ruled by housewives and children. After work the porter returns to this domestic sphere as a worldly visitor demanding admiration and respect. Lighting and set design contribute to this highly gendered division of hotel and tenement and determine its symbolic contribution to the generational divide in the narrative. The porter's apartment, the staircase, and the narrow inner courtyard are dark and confining spaces, reminiscent both of the oppressive familiarity explored by the chamber-play dramas and the unhealthy living conditions depicted in the so-called Zille films. By contrast, the luminous interiors of the modern luxury hotel—with its open spaces, shiny floors, smooth walls, and large window panes—give rise to the spectacle of movement and change captured so compellingly by the revolving door as a foremost symbol of cinema and modernity.

The porter not only moves between two worlds but, after his demotion, is also forced to alter his movements inside and between these worlds. Not surprisingly, many of these movements involve spatial hierarchies and divisions. Before his demotion the porter climbs the staircase in the tenement and bathes in the administration of his neighbors. After his demotion he descends the stairs leading to the washroom as the embodiment of debasement. This downward movement is repeated later when he returns to the tenement, now a figure of public ridicule. In

accordance with expressionist conventions of *mise-en-scène*, the main character's movements inside this symbolically changed space can be read in sexual terms, with scenes of climbing equated with virile strength and of descending with impotence. The extreme close-up of the aunt's face offers a visual reenactment of the implied act of castration; likewise, the montage sequence of gaping mouths, with its multiple exposures an homage to the abstract film, alludes to the threat of *vagina dentata*. Accusing Murnau or Mayer of misogynistic tendencies, however, would miss the point. The women's laughter, while unmistakably gendered, expresses above all the revenge of the powerless witnessing the fall of a once-powerful person; their vicious gossiping articulates what Kracauer, somewhat problematically, refers to as "the evil lower middle-class instincts" (Kracauer 1947, 100). For the same reason, the image of the porter scrubbing the restroom floor on his knees intentionally references a traditionally female activity to corroborate the defeat of the older generation and announce its replacement by a young, dynamic, and new middle class.

One of the blind spots in the portrayal of the porter is the question of sexual desire, a characteristic that makes *The Last Laugh* the uncanny double of *The Blue Angel* and brings us back to the central role of Jannings in organizing the various layers of social commentary, formal experimentation, and self-reflexive commentary in this film. The porter lives with an incomplete family consisting of a niece, her fiancé, and his aunt; after the young couple marry, the husband assumes the role of head of household. This domestic arrangement has caused some confusion among scholars, with some describing the fiancé's aunt as the porter's wife or others, rather improbably, referring to her as his own aunt. Such lack of clarity is not only typical for Murnau, who throughout his work remained indifferent to marital relations and familial structures, exploring instead the ambiguities of sexual desire. Very concretely, the expanded definition of family also reflects the improvised living arrangements endured by many inhabitants of the infamous tenement city. The fiancé's aunt, it seems, harbors some romantic feelings for the porter until she discovers his loss of the uniform—his castration, as it were. Estranged from his relatives, the sad old man finds true companionship only with the night watchman. It is he who joins the porter on his spending spree, first as his "female" date during a sumptuous meal and later on their journey to an unknown destination. Some scholars have read their relationship in homoerotic terms. For instance, Stephan Schindler argues that the film "constructs a world without women, a homosocial environment where 'social bonds' are negotiated exclusively between men" (Schindler 1996, 40). And Elsaesser describes the ending as "a homoerotic scenario, in which the doorman and the night watchman ride off as the perfect couple, with the young beggar boy they just picked up as their 'son' in tow" (Elsaesser 2000, 247; see also Elsaesser 2003). But can we really describe the two old men as

two feminized men, as Schindler does, without taking into account the historically specific function of feminization and infantilization as a displacement of the ongoing struggle between the generations? Renouncing all forms of adult sexuality (whether homosexual or heterosexual), both men regress to an infantile state of pure orality, a point underscored by the childish joy with which they devour the restaurant's delicacies while coyly playing husband and wife. For that reason their final exit from the stages of Weimar modernity must be read as a happy ending not only for these two victims of historical change but also for all those nameless supporting characters on the margins of the narrative who can now continue to realize the new promises of social mobility and equality.

As I hope to have shown, the dynamization of narrative space that so enthralled contemporary critics of *The Last Laugh* has a powerful equivalent in the contradictory identifications that link character, star, and spectator and that account for the film's continuous relevance as a highly self-conscious reflection of ambivalence as the very condition of modernity. For that reason I disagree with Kracauer's conclusion that "since the film implies that authority, and authority alone, fuses the disparate social sphere into a whole, the fall of the uniform representing authority is bound to provoke anarchy" (Kracauer 1947, 100). Greater attention to Jannings's screen persona and performance suggests something very different, namely that these authoritarian structures represent a disturbance in the struggle for more democratic structures and egalitarian principles. Unmasked as someone still caught within the old dynamics of domination and submission, the old porter must be expelled from the modern designs for living. All too evidently, this process is painful, with the happy ending offering only some compensation for the victims of modernization and the enemies of democratization. The film's German title, which translates literally as "the last man," recognizes this inevitability of social and cultural change, whereas the English title emphasizes the psychological release promised by the proverbial "last laugh." Yet one question remains ultimately unanswered: Who in fact gets the last laugh? The old porter (and with him, Jannings) as a representative of the Wilhelmine Empire or the young men and women as the true representatives of the Weimar Republic?

## NOTES

1. Rejecting such inflation-driven fantasies as too artificial, the film's 1955 remake with German screen hero Hans Albers in the title role opts for a more conventional happy ending in accordance with the can-do mentality of the Economic Miracle; thus the "last man" is promoted and becomes senior manager of the hotel. Whereas the Weimar original offers a critique of authoritarian structures that extends to its emotional foundations, the remake accommodates a deep sociopsychological need for patriarchal authority. Ironi-

cally, in 1955 the reaffirmation of authority was achieved by an aging male star, Albers, who could have played the young hotel manager in the 1924 original.

2. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

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