

### **Doppelgangers: Comparing and Contrasting Two Versions of *The Student of Prague***

In many ways, the two *Student of Pragues* are like the two “Students of Prague” that they depict—virtually identical clones. In terms of plot and characters, little sets the 1913 version directed by Paul Wegener apart from the 1926 version directed by Henrik Galeen. In both films, a young man named Baldwin, distraught over his financial situation and smitten with a local noblewoman, receives thousands of dollars in gold from a sorcerer named Scapinelli—in exchange (much to Baldwin’s surprise) for the young student’s reflection, which gains a malevolent life of its own. This ‘other self’ “sets out,” as Siegfried Kracauer puts it, “to destroy the other and better self [Baldwin] has betrayed”<sup>1</sup> with his ill-advised bargain.

But just as vastly different personalities are at work in the otherwise identical Baldwins, superficial similarities between the two versions belie the differences beneath the surface. An examination of the two films reveals that the subtlest contrasts between the ways the two films depict certain minor plot points—particularly as regards narrative causality—indicate major distinctions in the films’ agendas. This essay will begin by describing specific differences between the two films. Taking these differences as a whole, it will conclude by

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<sup>1</sup> Kracauer, Siegfried. *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947, 29. Further references to this edition are in parentheses in the text.

taking a cue from Siegfried Kracauer and describing the overall, socio-historically dictated ideological patterns that they suggest.

Crucial differences between the 1913 version of *The Student of Prague* and its 1926 remake are evident from the films' opening scenes. The earlier version begins with a mysterious poem about a figure in black that, though neither "God" nor "demon," claims to shadow the every move of the reader, even until death. The poem introduces the theme of the Double, but in an elliptical, literally (and literarily) poetic fashion, setting an eerie, morbid tone for the film to follow. In some versions of the film, the poem is inscribed on a tombstone beneath a weeping willow, which is visited by the titular student, Baldwin.<sup>2</sup> His story, it would seem, will mirror that described by the poem.

In Galeen's version, however, the introduction is far less mysterious and far more fixedly fatalistic. We are simply presented with a tombstone reading "Here lies Baldwin," blaming his demise on a deal with the devil. No cryptic references to a sinister double here: we know from the opening shot that we will be told the story of Baldwin's death. Though this decision to "lay the cards out on the table" might be attributable to the fact that this was a remake of a very popular film (everyone is aware of Baldwin's fate already, so why play games?), it has the effect of casting a deterministic slant on the narrative to follow. The opening of the 1913 *Student* suggests that arcane, inexplicable forces are at work; the opening of the 1926 does the opposite, "explaining" the forces behind the narrative before the narrative is even underway. This is an approach that will be taken throughout the film.

Following the opening credits, the two films move on to depict a band of students gaily carousing one afternoon. However, the 1926 version follows them as they march through the woods, singing and playing musical instruments, until they arrive at an outdoor café. This locates the café setting, in which we are introduced to three of the film's main characters, in a definite spatial location within the real world, in relation to the shots of the obviously real forest through which the students march. Changes in camera position throughout the scene reinforce its existence within a "real world" frame. The 1913 version, on the other hand, introduces the students as already in the café. In addition, the scene unfolds rather theatrically, with the action never moving from the café set (as opposed to an actual outdoor café), and with the camera positioned as an audience member would be, its view straight on. These factors make the scene less "locatable" within a spatial framework.

This difference becomes intriguing when viewed in tandem with the films' next sequence, the nobles' hunt. As Peucker points out, the 1913 version begins this sequence in an extremely theatrical set, that of a lounge in which the nobles relax before the hunt. A mural of the hunt is painted on the lounge's rear wall. This two-dimensional representation of the hunt is ruptured when a servant opens the door to the lounge, revealing an actual, three-dimensional forest outside. (14) The 1926 version presents this sequence in a more straightforward setting, introducing the nobles on the steps of their enormous palace. While the 1913 version calls attention to the more or less arbitrary placement of the lounge by contrasting it directly with real-world space, the 1926 version situates the hunt

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<sup>2</sup> Peucker, Brigitte. "Unnatural Conjunctions: The Heterogenous Text," 23.

sequence firmly within that real world. Like the tombstone that firmly delineates the course of the narrative to follow, this version of the film eliminates the uncertainty raised (however subtly) by its predecessor (in this case through its juxtaposition of contrasting theatrical, painterly, and cinematic space). A similar contrast can be seen in the films' card-playing scenes: the 1913 version takes place in a dark non-space, while the 1926 version takes place in a clearly defined real-world student lounge. Once again, the 1926 version defines and delineates while the 1913 version obscures and transgresses.

The introduction of Scapinelli, the malicious magician with whom Baldwin makes his Faustian pact, is another plot point in which telltale differences can be found. Thomas Elsaesser quite astutely points out the interesting way in which the 1913 version brings this character into play. As Baldwin sits in the foreground of the café, staring into the camera, his fellow students and the gypsy girl who loves him, Lyduschka, party hard behind him. "While a classical narrative ("realistic film") would develop its narrative out of the need to reconcile and mediate between these two levels, after setting up such a division or contradiction,"<sup>3</sup> this version accentuates the division even as it introduces its presumed mediator by having Scapinelli burst onto the scene from the side of the screen, in a huge black carriage that blocks out the celebrating students behind Baldwin. According to Elsaesser, this "excessive, monstrous, tabooed" entrance serves as an encapsulation of the way fantastic and uncanny motifs function in general:

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<sup>3</sup> Elsaesser, Thomas. "Social Mobility and the Fantastic in German Silent Cinema," 1982, 16. Further references to this edition are in parentheses in the text.

The basic strategy of *The Student of Prague* is thus to allude to a “real” problem with which the audience can identify, interrupt its development, disguise its direct investigation and reinforce it on another level by introducing a magic and demonic chain of causality via mystery figures and chance which are internalized as they force a split on the protagonist and so act as repressive and inhibitive agents rather than as fairy tale donors or helpers in the Proppian sense. (16)

In other words, fantastic figures like Scapinelli are a rupture in the fabric of reality/causality, their monstrous intrusion facilitated by the decidedly ordinary anxiety or anger of a given character. They cloak the social or psychological processes that are “really” at work in a veil of chance and magic. As Elsaesser points out in his refutation of Kracauer’s historical thesis regarding German cinema, the presence of such by-definition non-causal entities in narratives like *The Student of Prague* prevent us from reading them in a linear, Hollywood-style cause-and-effect fashion (16).

By contrast, in the 1926 version, Scapinelli is first shown simply as another customer of the café, who cannot help but overhear the joking songs the students sing about Baldwin’s dire financial straits. There is nothing supernatural about the process—he seizes an opportunity that has naturally arisen before him, rather than emerging out of nowhere at what happened to be just the right moment to bamboozle Baldwin.

It is also worthy of note that this Scapinelli is a more recognizable “type” than the earlier version; his diabolical black goatee clearly denotes his evil nature. In much the same way, this version’s Lyduschka is much more demure and seemingly virtuous than her suggestively-dancing predecessor. This change makes it easier for her to be seen by a traditional audience as a sympathetic

character, something both films clearly intend her to be. In both cases, the 1926 version's refinements serve to make the characters easier to define in relation to their roles in the narrative.

Let us return to the decidedly un-fantastic way in which Scapinelli is introduced in the later version of the film. One might expect his role in the narrative to be less fantastic as well. Interestingly, though, the 1926 Scapinelli plays a much larger part in the events of the story than his predecessor. He appears to be directly responsible for bringing the hunt to a location near Baldwin, and for causing the Countess's horse to go wild, throwing her to the ground and giving Baldwin the opportunity to care for her. In addition, later on, Scapinelli's shadow, huge and menacing, tips a love note from Baldwin to the Countess directly into the hands of Lyduschka, who has been spying. In contrast, the 1913 Scapinelli simply makes his trade—money for Baldwin's reflection—and reappears only twice: to harass the Countess as she makes a pilgrimage to the Holy Fountain to pray for strength, and at the end of the film as he celebrates the destruction of Baldwin. It would seem that, quite uncharacteristically, the uncanny and supernatural are playing a larger role in the 1926 version.

But upon closer examination, the later Scapinelli's actions (fantastic though they may be) make a good deal of "sense." During Scapinelli's initial conversation with Baldwin, in which he does such a mundane thing as offering the student a loan at interest, the young man tells him "Find me a rich heiress—the big jackpot. Then I'm your man!" Despite their magical nature,

Scapinelli's subsequent actions are simply his way of gaining a customer. By contrast, the Countess's runaway horse crosses the path of the 1913 Baldwin and Scapinelli by pure happenstance; in fact, the old sorcerer practically doesn't notice it at all, and has to be alerted to it by Baldwin. Magic evidences at least a *fanciful* causality; chance, on the other hand, is completely random. Such is the force that brings Baldwin and the Countess together in the 1913 version.

Scapinelli's intervention in the case of the note seems a bit more difficult to "rational-ize." However, it deprives agency from Lyduschka, who is presented as a thoroughly good girl in the 1926 version (which pointedly makes her first, characteristic act of "sneaking around" one in which she does stereotypically feminine things like making Baldwin's bed, polishing his shoes, and, in a bit of dime-store Freud, fondling his sword), and assigns agency to the "villain," traditionally a more active character. Though it serves the uncanny function of replacing natural causality with magical causality, it does so in service of streamlining the narrative vis à vis the roles of the characters involved.

Another important difference can be found in the two films' depiction of the Double itself. Kracauer was quite right to point out that the later version "put more emphasis on the psychological significance of the plot" (153). However, he failed to point out that it does so to the direct weakening of the supernatural aspects of Baldwin's doppelganger. From the first scene in which the double appears, its supernatural nature is downplayed. In the 1913 version, after Scapinelli leaves with the double in two, Baldwin reacts in horror at what has happened; his dismay is deepened when he looks in the mirror and sees that he

no longer has a reflection. The 1926 version, however, cuts directly from the moment when Baldwin's double steps out of the mirror to a scene in which it is announced that Baldwin has donated a large sum of money to help needy students at his university. If we believe that the reaction of a spectator-character to a monster is crucial to horror, then the element of supernatural horror has been almost completely winnowed out of the double's birth in the later film.

The double's supernatural origin continues to be undermined throughout the film, by virtue of the fact that Baldwin is the only person who ever sees it. It appears to him when he walks alone among shadowy columns prior to his rendezvous with the Countess. During that rendezvous, it stands tombstone-like in the graveyard; Baldwin sees it and reacts with horror, but when the Countess turns to see what is frightening him, it is gone. A similar act of non-seeing occurs when Baldwin manages to distract a noblewoman to whom he has promised a dance long enough to whisk her past a mirror without her noticing that he has no reflection. Finally, though the Countess ends up seeing Baldwin's lack of reflection (if such a thing can be "seen"), it is this that causes her to faint, *before* she actually can see his double enter through her balcony. In the 1913 version, she most definitely sees the doppelganger itself. This provides much stronger corroboration of the actual existence of supernatural forces at work in Baldwin's life than does her seeing his lack of reflection, which itself is the sole outside confirmation of supernatural events in the 1926 version. All told, these seemingly minor points could lead one to posit that we are seeing a *Fight Club*-style story of a man in the grip of a powerful hallucination. It is safe to say that both films view

the double as a psychological projection of Baldwin's anxieties and desires; in the 1926 version, however, this may well be *all* it is.

Furthermore, the double is portrayed quite differently in the two films. In the earlier version, the doppelganger actively taunts Baldwin, smirking at him after killing the Baron in a duel and thus besmirching Baldwin's name, threatening Baldwin as he sits alone at a card table, and ultimately sitting mockingly on Baldwin's grave. On the other hand, 1926 double is itself deprived of an independent personality. Its posture and gait are those of a zombie—or, considering the fact that Conrad "Cesare" Veidt is playing the Baldwins in this version, a somnambulist (a comparison strengthened by the color scheme of the two monsters' outfits—basic black). Its appearances do not appear to be motivated by a perverse desire to torture Baldwin; they rather seem to function in a fashion similar to the beating of the tell-tale heart, reminding Baldwin of his error. The doppelganger even seems to be horrified at its own act of murder in the duel with the Baron. The clear implication is that Scapinelli is the double's Caligari, its puppet master, its tyrant. The double's behavior is dictated, not chosen by the double itself.

This, ultimately, is the key for understanding the relation of the two films' differing worldviews to their differing historical contexts. The 1913 version seems to present a picture of the world as ruled by random, non-causal forces. Major chains of narrative events are set in motion by uncanny means (Scapinelli's introduction and intervention, the double's malicious use of its supernatural powers) or coincidence (the Countess's horse happening to run right past

Baldwin and Scapinelli). Events play themselves out in spaces that deliberately call attention to their own artificial, arbitrary, or ill-defined nature. One is reminded of the quote from Hassan i Sabbah later made famous by William S. Burroughs: “Nothing is true. Everything is permissible.” The overall picture painted is one of chaos—perhaps the chaos of the impending Great War, or perhaps, as Kracauer suggests, a premonition of the chaos feared by filmmakers of the Weimar period (31).

The 1926 version presents a radically different worldview, one in which true chaos is not an option. The world is clearly defined, with none of the jarring juxtaposition or spatial uncertainty of the earlier film. The narrative is made easier to “buy” by strengthening the possibility that Baldwin’s doppelganger may be purely psychological in origin. Characters are made easier to pigeonhole in their respective types or roles. Finally, by giving him more direct agency in the plot and making good use of the associations conjured by the likeness of Baldwin’s double to *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*’s Cesare, Scapinelli is made into a true authoritarian tyrant. He takes advantage of the psychological unrest of his victim, forcing him (through his projected doppelganger) to kill, and ultimately destroying him.

A better fit for Kracauer’s historical thesis would be difficult to find, indeed.