Deadly Fascination

The “Tale of the Three Brothers” sequence from the recent *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* attests to the enduring influence and abiding appeal of films made in Germany during the Weimar Republic (1918-1933). Designed and directed by Ben Hibon, this film-within-a-film is an apparent citation of Lotte Reiniger’s *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* (1926), itself indebted to the traditions of Javanese theater, in which the silhouettes of intricate puppets are projected onto a screen using candlelight. At first blush, this cinematic incorporation of so archaic a technique may surprise us, and yet the cinema perpetually masks its mechanical apparatus through forms of expression considered “primitive” (a term we apply with care). This effacement of technology goes hand in hand with the embrace of the primitive that is one of Modernism’s defining gestures (as exemplified by the African masks that appear in paintings by Pablo Picasso or Ernst Ludwig Kirchner). That the cinema—the most thoroughly technological of artistic media—should tether itself so closely to earlier forms of projection has the effect of restoring the word “animation” to its more literal and original sense of bringing the dead (back) to life. Filmmaking in particular engages with an order of belief in which this “magical” restoration is possible. Cinema emerges and matures alongside Freudian psychoanalysis—a perspective from which film may be thought to satisfy desires or address fears discredited by “civilization” (a term we likewise apply with care). To this we may add that a great many of the films of this era confront us with objects of horror—vampires, ghosts, and creatures or robots that turn against their masters. James Whale’s *Frankenstein* (1931), an amalgam of motifs from German films of the previous decade, is emblematic in its display of the terrifying consequences of the dream of defying death—a dream this film and its German predecessors reveal as taboo. This returns us to “Tale of the Three Brothers,” in which three young men, who have cheated death, are each granted a wish, the fulfillment of which is, in at least two cases, tantamount to dying.
Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*
Weimann, Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition of Drama
*Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”
*Freud, “The Uncanny,” “Screen Memories”
Noel Burch, *Life to Those Shadows*
Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*
Kracauer, *Mass Ornament*
*Lotte Eisner, The Haunted Screen*
Thomas Elsaesser,
*Monaco, How To Read a Film*
Gunning, *Cinema of Attractions*