

Happy
in
BERLIN?

SSF
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Ufa-Pavilion

The Ufa-Pavilion on Nollendorfplatz was a modern, purpose-built cinema affiliated with the major production and distribution company Ufa. Berlin was a film hub in the 1920s and 1930s. Many of the people responsible for Ufa's hits in this period later worked in Hollywood and Britain. One of these was Hungarian-born screenwriter Emeric Pressburger, who left Berlin when the Nazis came to power and subsequently co-created some of the most beloved British films of the 1940s (e.g. *The Red Shoes*). Most British writers in Berlin in the 1920s loved cinema, and particularly relished the opportunity to see Soviet films that were censored at home. Virginia Woolf and her friends argued over the British imperialism depicted in *Storm over Asia*, and Bryher was so inspired by her cinema-going experiences in Berlin that she sought to introduce Soviet film to a British audience.

Christopher Isherwood lived near the Ufa-Pavilion, on Nollendorfstraße. His writing contains many references to film, such as the famous opening to *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939): "I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking."



Ufa Pavillon on Nollendorfplatz. Photograph by Martin Höhlig, 1928
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Read this extract from Virginia Woolf's essay 'The Cinema' (1926) then discuss the questions.

But what, then, are [the cinema's] devices? At present it is only from hints that one can frame any conjecture. For instance, at a performance of Dr. Caligari* the other day a shadow shaped like a tadpole suddenly appeared at one corner of the screen. It swelled to an immense size, quivered, bulged, and sank back again into nonentity. For a moment it seemed to embody some monstrous diseased imagination of the lunatic's brain. For a moment it seemed as if thought could be conveyed by shape more effectively than by words. The monstrous quivering tadpole seemed to be fear itself, and not the statement 'I am afraid'. In fact, the shadow was accidental and the effect unintentional. But if a shadow at a certain moment can suggest so much more than the actual gestures and words of men and women in a state of fear, it seems plain that the cinema has within its grasp innumerable symbols for emotions that have so far failed to find expression. Terror has besides its ordinary forms the shape of a tadpole; it burgeons, bulges, quivers, disappears. Anger is not merely rant and rhetoric, red faces and clenched fists. It is perhaps a black line wriggling upon a white sheet.

* the 1920 German Expressionist film The Cabinet of Dr Caligari.

Questions

- 1. What does Woolf mean by "Anger is a black line wriggling upon a white sheet"? What is she saying about cinema as a language and an art form?**
- 2. Has something unintentional, such as a smudge on the screen, ever caught your attention during a film? What effect did it have?**
- 3. Do you think films are enjoyed for the same reasons now as they were in the early twentieth century? Give two reasons why/why not.**
- 4. Explain three ways in which the experience of going to the cinema has changed or stayed the same.**

Extension: Make a timeline of 6-8 significant 1920s and 30s films, and justify your choices.
