

GE II (SEMESTER II)

Topic: THE CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI

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THE CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI

The plot begins with the main character, Francis (Friedrich Fehér) sharing stories with an elderly companion. A disturbed- looking woman passes by, who Francis claims is his betrothed, before beginning to narrate his tale.

- It is the annual fair in “Holstenwall”, where the story takes place, that Francis first encounters Dr. Caligari, as a sideshow in which he awakens a somnambulist, Cesare. Francis’ friend Alan, whom with he is competing for the affections of a girl, Jane, asks Cesare how long he has to live, in which Cesare replies, ironically, “until morning”. Sure enough, the next morning Alan turns up dead.
- Francis and Jane begin to investigate. One night, as Francis is spying on Dr. Caligari, we see Jane sleeping in her bed. And Cesare, climbing in through the window behind her. Cesare moves to stab Jane with a knife, but is softened by her sweet appearance and instead kidnaps her. Jane’s father hears a noise and, along with his servants, they chase Cesare until at last the exhausted somnambulist puts down Jane, and eventually dies. Meanwhile, Francis follows Caligari to a mental asylum just out of town. When asking staff if they have a patient named “Caligari” there, Francis discovers Caligari is actually the asylum’s director!
- Francis then discovers that this “Dr. Caligari” is obsessed with the story of a mythical monk called Caligari, who, in 1703, visited towns and similarly used a somnambulist to kill people. It is revealed in flashbacks that this “Dr. Caligari” is driven insane, by this obsession with becoming this monk.
- Francis convinces some of the mental facility’s staff to help in capturing the doctor. Once Caligari discovers his beloved somnambulist is dead, he admits to everything, and is locked away in his own hospital. But wait....

The Plot Twist

- In what is considered the first (ever) plot twist in a movie, it turns out Francis, Jane and Cesare are all patients in a mental hospital, and the kindly asylum doctor IS Caligari, who now, understanding Francis' delusion, announces that "he can cure him".

Reception

- The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari released in Germany on February 6, 1920, and the U.S. on March 19, 1921. The film seemed to be an instant worldwide sensation, and was exhibited in Paris non-stop for 7 years after it first was released. As late as 1958, it was chosen by a panel of 117 film historians as one of the twelve most important movies of all time.

Expressionism in the film

- The main reason for the painted sets instead of real settings was partially due to a lack of money in the Decla-Bioscope studio. • However, this worked well in the film, not only to create an eerie, jarring setting, but also in foreshadowing the idea that this story was fantastical and all inside of Francis' head. • Designer Hermann Warm and painters Walter Reimann and Walter Rohrig designed and painted these sets. • The sets also seemed very symbolical- autocratic figures were seated high or appeared taller, and, interestingly enough, there are only two places in the film that appear almost normal- the mental hospital and Jane's house, perhaps another hint that this is all in Francis' warped mind.

Techniques

- Because the Germans were not allowed to view American films in that time, they had missed the extensive editing and camera angles of films like that of Griffith's Intolerance and so many of the shots are still basic wide-angle shots (minus one panning close-up). • In some shots this benefits, but for the most part, it is obvious at how much the Germans were behind as far as this goes.

Controversy

- No one is sure who first introduced the idea of the plot twist to the film- the producers, Pommer, or Wiene, however it certainly wasn't the writers. • Janowitz and Mayer had written this film in hopes of protesting Germany as an unlimited authority- and, in the end, the insane authority was symbolically put away. • They felt this new end to the film diminished the importance of the symbolism in the story and encouraged the German omnipotent authority as a hero.
- Though perhaps not the first ever horror films, The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari was certainly one of them, and likely the first psychological horror. • This movie influenced horror films for years to come and was quite innovative in creating the "film noir" genre. • Cesare was also instrumental in creating the kind of monster that would be used for years- look at any zombies, or Frankenstein, or even vampires. His stiff gait, waking from a coffin, e.t.c., is commonly credited for the presence of such demons.

Characteristic:

- **The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari** Mise en Scene and German Expressionism

- **Mise en Scene** “What matters is the way space is cut up, the precision of what happens within the magical space of the frame, where I refuse to allow the smallest clumsiness.” Federico Fellini Mise en Scene – staging a scene through the artful arrangement of actors, scenery, lighting, and props; creates the look of the world in the story (narrative film) and/or arranges chosen elements in the frame (documentary)



- **Mise en Scene in The Godfather Trilogy** Wedding Scene Part I Emphasizes the secular, wealth, and business Wedding Scene Part II Emphasizes religion, tradition, family, community

- **Expressionism** Expressionism – 20th century modernist art that is the result of the artist’s unique inner or personal vision and that often has an emotional dimension (created through abstract shapes and vivid colors). Expressionism contrast with art focused on visually describing the empirical world Anti-mimetic vs. mimetic

- **Dr. Caligari’s Significance for Film**

dramatic use of mise en scene distinguishes the film’s importance • uses avant-garde/expressionist techniques such as: • chiaroscuro lighting – the use of contrasting areas of lightness and darkness to create compositional effects • diagonal lines • bizarre, artificial sets and shadows • combined techniques with a narrative involving a sleepwalker and a murderous mad man

- **Expressionist work, Das Kabinett des Dr. Caligari (The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, 1919)** The film recounts a series of brutal murders that are committed in the north German town of Holstenwall by a **somnambulist** at the bidding of a demented **mountebank**, who believes himself to be the incarnation of a homicidal 18th-century hypnotist named Dr. Caligari.



- **To represent the narrator's tortured mental state,** **the** director, Robert Wiene, hired three prominent Expressionist artists—Hermann Warm, Walter Röhrig, and Walter Reimann—to design sets that depicted exaggerated dimensions and deformed spatial relationships.



- **To heighten this architectural stylization (and also to economize on electric power, which was rationed in postwar Germany),** bizarre patterns of light and shadow were painted directly onto the scenery and even onto the characters' makeup.

