

The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari

[1920]

by

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The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari. Directed by Robert Wiene, written by Carl Mayer & Hans Janowitz, produced by Erich Pommer, photography by Willy Hameister, art direction by Hermann Warm, Walter Reimann, & Walter Rohrig, costumes by Walter Reimann. Decla-Bioscop Goldwyn Production – Germany. Dr. Caligari - Werner Krauss, Cesare - Conrad Veidt, Francis - Freidrich Feher, Jane - Lil Dagover, Alan - Hans Heinz von Twardowski, Dr. Olson - Rudolf Lettinger, A Criminal - Rudolph Klein-Rogge.

The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari is one of the first films self-consciously intended as a work of "art." It had a profound and lasting impact on the world's creative community far beyond the world of film.

This is the first film that exploded the cinema beyond its obsession with recreating reality that had preoccupied it since its birth. Most films of the day were based on novels (*Greed*, *Birth of a Nation*) or legends (*Siegfried*). *Caligari* was different, it was written specifically for the screen by Hans Janowitz and Carl Mayer. Janowitz contributed the real-life unsolved murder of a girl during a carnival. Mayer added to this story his own real-life and very bad experiences with psychiatrists during World War I. What resulted was a bleak, pessimistic view of post-war German society extremely distrustful of authority.

Producer Erich Pommer liked the story and liked it even more when he heard that they wanted to film the story against painted canvas backgrounds – he'd save lots of money. The director, Robert Wiene, also liked the idea and hired Expressionist painters Hermann Warm, Walter Rohrig, and Walter Reimann, all affiliated with the magazine *Der Sturm* (which championed the avant-garde artistic movements of the day – Expressionism, Cubism, Dada, and Surrealism) to design the sets. Distorted perspectives, twisted shapes, sharp angles, and a conscious avoidance of verticals and horizontals make up the look of both the exteriors and the interiors. Not only were the sets bizarre and Expressionist in their distortions, but so were the costumes and the furniture.

Director Wiene took things still further and invented an Expressionist acting style (though it occasionally falls back on what we now see as typical silent-style melodrama style). Werner Krauss (Caligari) and Conrad Veidt (Cesare) move as if they belonged in another world. Cesare moves slowly, almost gliding along the walls more than the floor. Caligari is hunched over and moves in sharp steps accentuated by the use of a cane, a gigantic, white-haired beetle.

Even the camera work is occasionally expressionist. At one point, in the upper right corner of the screen we see what appears to be a monkey and a man riding a train with the background whizzing by. As the camera pulls back, we see that it is exactly the reverse of what we assumed. At another point we see an iris-out for the present and an iris-in in another part of the screen for a flash back. Time melts on the screen.

Caligari set many of the conventions now found in almost all horror films. The most prominent of these is an evil doctor who commits crimes through a "monster" whose will he controls. At a psychological level, we must always ask what repressed portions of his psyche has the doctor projected into his monster?

Caligari also introduces the sympathetic monster who falls in love with the intended victim.

We see a strong endorsement of populism when the town's people rise up in an attempt to subdue the monster. In some films the terrified and vengeful crowd are more effective than in others; but they are always more effective than the legal authorities.

We also see the idea of the carnival as a site of psychological chaos for the first time. This will become a filmic staple in films from trivial (*Something Wicked this way Comes* [1983]) to masterpieces (like Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train* [1951]).

Conrad Veidt, without whom this film would be considerably inferior, is an interesting character. Born in Germany, he trained in theater with Max Reinhardt and began a film career in 1917 where he specialized in demoniacal roles.

After *Caligari* and *The Student of Prague* [1913], he became world famous. The list of the titles of his film roles give you a good impression of what was going on in German film at the time: death, morbidity, insanity, torment were a grist for the Expressionist mill: *Spies* [1921] directed by Fritz Lang, *Diary of a Lost Girl* [1929] directed by G. W. Pabst with the American film star Louise Brooks, *Opium* [1919] directed by Robert Reinert with Werner Krauss, *Peer Gynt* [1934] based on the play by Henrik Ibsen, *Prince Cuckoo* [1919], *Unheimliche Geschichten (Uncanny Faces or Eerie Tales)* [1919] in which at the stroke of midnight, three paintings hanging in a used book shop portraying Death, the Devil, and a prostitute come to life and each tells an eerie tale, *Janus Head* [1920] (dual roles as Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde), *Kurfürstendamm* [1920] as Satan, *The Prince of Cagliostro*, *The Indian Tomb* [1921], *Lucretia Borgia* [1920] as Cesare Borgia, *Waxworks* [1924] as Ivan the Terrible, *The Hands of Orlac* [1924]. And dozens of others. If you watch carefully, you will recognize him as Colonel Strasser in *Casablanca* [1942]