

# *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* Opening scenes analysis

A close analysis of the German expressionist film, 'The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari' discussing how the film examines the nations leadership under the third Reich.

This essay will focus on the scene in which Caligari visits the Clerk's office and then unveils Cesare at the fare. I will be explaining how these scenes express the conflicts within Weimer Germany. I will also attempt to show which aspects of Weimer German have been left out and what the reasons are behind these decisions.

From my point of view, Weine's use of expressionistic credit design, oblique camera angles, and his intertextual references to the world of plays depicted through his theatrical set design draw attention to the constructed nature of the film. Merrick Doll of Yale University supports this point by saying 'Expressionist artists commit themselves to impulses, which results in the desire to express emotion through extreme visuals. Often, aesthetic value is exchanged for emotional power... This is achieved in Caligari through it's unique set design.' (Doll 2010) The lack of realism allows Weine to address the serious social issues of recession and government oppression present in 1920's Germany without alienating his audiences. As Doll says 'reality is reproduced as if it were reflected in a fun house mirror.' Seigfreid Kracauer supports these ideas by saying that the writers Janowitz and Mayer 'attacked the omnipotence of a state authority which manifested itself in universal conscription and declaration during World War I' (Kracauer 1947). Kracauer also argues that the character of Dr. Caligari is symbolic of the 1920's German state because he uses his 'unlimited authority to violate all human rights.' (Kracauer 1947) Based on Weine's use of low angle shots, and props during the scene in which Caligari visits the clerk, I disagree with Kracauer's notion that he has 'unlimited authority' during this scene. The clerk is shot at a low angle and is sitting on an unusually high chair indicating he is of greater authority. The Clerk's dialogue in this scene also supports my argument, the repetitive use of the imperative 'Wait!' suggests that he does not see Caligari's needs as important.

To expand on the idea that this film is an attack on an over-controlling omnipotent state, we can look at the character of Cesare who, I believe, symbolises the brainwashed German public who had been told at the start of the war that it was their duty as men to fight for the fatherland. This discourse is emphasised by the fact that Cesare is a sleepwalker. Kracauer states that Janowitz and Mayer created the character of Cesare 'with the dim design of portraying the common man who, under the pressure of compulsory military service, is drilled to kill or to be killed.' We learn from Francis' narration that Caligari's first victim is the Town Clerk, in terms of narrative can be viewed as punishment for the Clerk's previous display of power over the doctor. This action, therefore, reflects the cut throat nature of Hitler when he sensed betrayal in his ranks. The non-diajetic orchestral soundtrack used during Cesare's awakening is typical of the Horror genre it's eerie tone unsettles audiences giving them a sense of threat. When Veidt's character steps out of the box his eyes are glazed over and he walks incredibly slowly. This juxtaposes him with the other characters in the film who move unusually quickly most of the time, due to the frame speed being increased. This connotes that he is in a state of trance, and only able to react to the commands of his master Dr. Caligari. The 'shot, reverse shot sequence between Cesare and Alan at the end of this scene is used to connote that there will be some connection between the two characters, and if this is combined with the dialogue 'How long do I have to live?' 'Till dawn tomorrow' the viewers can infer that Cesare will be Alan's killer. This is reinforced by Cesare's declarative statement in response to Alan's question. The repeated use of close ups showing Cesare's hypnotic face forces the audience to identify with this character and infer his significance as a symbol of tranced German society.

Dr. Caligari's control over Cesare and the whole town is evidenced from the beginning of this scene, when he is trying to amass a crowd to witness the awakening of his somnambulist. Here he is shot at a high angle ushering an all too willing mob into his tent. When talking to the crowd he always uses imperatives for example 'Step right in.' He never mitigates his commands. This conveys his desire to acquire status over others. Once again Dr. Caligari's control this time over a large number of people makes him easily comparable to Wilhelm, and Hitler. Although to evaluate this point all the murders that Caligari commits involve deception, to avoid being caught. This fact undermines his power somewhat because it means he is not above the law. Ideologically a 'preferred reading' (Hall, S. 1973) of this aspect of the narrative, from the writers point of view would be the idea that change is possible and that German society can improve. This discourse is reinforced when the narrative finally circulates back to the garden and Francis finishes the story by saying '...From that day on the madman has never left his cell.'

Of course, towards the end of the film we learn that Francis is insane which mitigates the political motivations of the film however Kracauer believes that this frame was not part of the original and was added later on. 'A change against which the two authors violently protested. But no one heeded them' (Kracauer 66).

Many academics argue that for the producers of this film the aim was to relate to an audience greatly affected by the traumas of World War I and re-instill 'faith in Man's power to feely (freely) shape society and nature.' (Kracauer 1947) Reimer says 'The World (was) created to seem both familiar and strange, speaks to the physical and psychological horrors Germans experienced after the end of the war (Reimer 2008). I partially disagree with this point. I interpret the expressionist, unrealistic visuals of this film as being there to create a sense of distance between the film itself and the very real issues it is dealing with. This means the audience will be less opposed to accepting the ideological messages of the film.

Inevitably there are many aspects of Weimer Germany which have been left out of this film. For example, the film focuses on what Mayer and Janowitz believed to be the cause of the depression, specifically the corrupt rule of the Fuhrer, and they leave out the current impacts of the hyperinflation crisis. However, in my mind, this omission provides audiences with a greater sense of 'diversion' (Bulmer, Katz 1974) taking them away from the financial hardships that surrounded the Weimer Republic. 'Mysticism and magic the dark forces to which Germans have always been more than willing to commit themselves, had flourished in the face of death on the battlefields... poverty and constant insecurity help to explain the enthusiasm with which German artists embraced this (expressionist) movement.' (Eisner, L. 1952) I would evaluate this statement by arguing that the artists and film producers of the time were tapping into a damaged German psyche in great need of escapism, however any allusions to the inflation crisis would make the people more unwilling to 'fork out' for these new forms of expressionist entertainments. 'Thomas Elsaesser, in his *Weimar Cinema and After*, claims that the purpose of the expressionism and peculiar style of *Caligari* is simply an attempt to sell itself. "As entertainment made for profit' (Doll, 2010)

In conclusion *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* fits into the Film Noir genre due to the fact that stylistically it makes use of chiaroscuro lighting. The narrative also includes elements of the physiological. These elements are imbedded in the characters of Dr. Caligari and Cesare in particular. The combination of these two characters forms the basis for Mayer and Janowitz's attack on Wilhelm's Germany and the Weimer Republic. The writers of this film, at least were attempting to revolutionise German thinking by presenting them with the discourse that they should blame Hitler's regimes for their current situation. This statement was encapsulated in the title of Kracauer's 1947 book '*From Caligari to Hitler.*' Unfortunately, as Eisner says, the garden scenes that is to say 'the prologue and epilogue were added as an afterthought...The result of

these modifications was to falsify the action and ultimately to reduce it to the ravings of a madman. The film's authors... had had the very different intention of unmasking the absurdity of asocial authority represented by Dr. Caligari.' However, the context of the inflation crisis is not encapsulated in the film because film makers needed to offer audiences a chance to escape from the real world, in order to make money. This is the main reason for the rise of the expressionist movement. The idea of having antagonists which reflected Kaiser Wilhelm and by 1925, Chancellor Hitler began with *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and went on to become a common trope in 1920's German film.



