

HISTORICAL NOTES ABOUT THE FILM

The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari was made in 1919. That was the year that the infamous Treaty of Versailles was signed, officially ending World War I. The film didn't premier in New York until April of 1921. There it met with critical acclaim. To the intelligentsia, Caligari was seen as a great achievement in the growth of cinema. (Some might liken its impact to that which Star Wars had in 1977 upon its release; nothing like it had been seen before and it inspired the rise of its genre.) Caligari received quite a different reception in its Los Angeles debut. There the film was advertised as a European film, since anti-German feelings were still strong after the war. The film's nation of origin was soon discovered though and many Los Angeles newspapers determined the film to be a threat to the American film industry. They dismissed it as a waste of moviegoers' money in support of a country that had just wrecked the world with war. The Los Angeles Examiner (owned by William Randolph Hearst) called for a ban on all German movies. A mob of two thousand people, the core of which was formed by the Hollywood chapter of the American Legion, marched on Miller's Theatre in Los Angeles when Caligari premiered there. The film was quickly removed from the theater.

Those decrying the film because it was made by the "German enemy", need not have been so up in arms. The film was anything but a showing of German nationalistic pride. Screenwriters Carl Mayer and Hans Janowitz (the later, a war veteran reputedly tortured by a military psychologist) were angry that the common people of their country had been dragged into a horrific war by their leaders and wrote the script as such (Caligari, representing the leaders, Cesare as the "sleep-walking" populace.) In the writers' view, post-war Germany was being destroyed by authoritarianism and they intended their film to be a warning. This theme was lost to most though, even by many of its avid admirers, who instead marveled at the brilliantly-conceived sets.

Of the 525 films released in the year 1921, only fifty still exist today, one of those being The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari.



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EXPRESSIONISM GERMAN STYLE

The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari is often referred to as one of the great German Expressionistic films (another famous one being Nosferatu.) But what exactly is meant by this term Expressionism?

Though difficult to describe, one might begin by saying Expressionism is centered upon the artist's vision rather than on the viewer's impression. Instead of creating an objective or realistic image, the idea is that the artist seeks to reflect an emotional or psychological state, or perhaps to provoke such a state through distortion and exaggeration of the image. It's less about what those viewing actually see and more about what they feel.

German Expressionism is filled with dark images, sharp contrasting figures, jagged geometry, and chiaroscuro. In Caligari, these artistic devices are thought to express the despair felt in Germany after the First World War. An interesting note about the expressionistic sets used in Caligari is that, because of the limited funds available to the filmmakers, they simply used flat cardboard cut-outs to simulate sets and cityscapes. Due more to post-war electricity use limitation than to artistic vision, shadows were painted onto many of the sets to avoid using extensive lighting.

It should also be noted that acting can be considered expressionistic. Werner Krauss (as Caligari) and Conrad Veidt (as Cesare) conform to the Expressionist conception by reducing their gestures to those almost exclusively linear (as opposed to sweeping or curving motions.) Thus their actions are largely congruent with the broken angles of the sets.

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