World War, German Expressionism and The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari: An Analysis of the Post-World War I German Art Movement

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***Abstract*—The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920) is the epitome of German Expressionism in cinema, and it gives a precise portrayal of the inner turmoil and horror that the masses experienced as a result of the First World War. During the years of the Weimar Republic, Expressionism became a dominant mode of expressing ideas across different art forms such as literature, painting and theatre. It departs from the prevailing idea of the time that art should be realistic and should imitate the daily lives of people; instead, German Expressionism portrays a bleak, distorted and violent reality. This paper is an attempt to analyse the film, its themes, its philosophy and its socio-political background, with particular attention to its portrayal of authority, its production design, its relationship with Edvard Munch's The Scream, and the meaning of its ending.**

***Index Terms*—Edvard Munch, German Expressionism, Mise-en-scène, The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, Weimar cinema, World War I**

I. INTRODUCTION

France, 1913. The painter Robert Delaunay exhibited *L'Équipe de Cardiff*, a work that depicted a future in which modern industrial capitalism appeared to be the quintessence of human civilisation [2]. The painting was hailed and praised for all the glory it attributed to a future that seemed about to be bestowed upon humanity. France, then a centre of innovation and artistic progress, embraced this creative achievement of Delaunay, for the painting looked ahead to a future that the whole of Europe was ready to witness.

Across Europe there was a race to develop as much technology and machinery as possible, and as fast as possible. In this race Germany was at first an underdog, and its rivals dismissed German machines and manufactured goods as inferior and subpar. In the decades before the war, however, Germany invested a large share of its fortune in establishing world-class institutions such as the Technical University of Berlin and RWTH Aachen University. These institutions collaborated closely and heavily with industrial firms, and this collaboration carried Germany's technological and industrial revolution to a new stage.

The future looked bright in the face of heavy machinery, an arms race and an oncoming war. Contrary to what Europeans believed, however, all of these things would become the prime causes of alienation, mental illness and trauma, and ultimately of the birth of Expressionism. Delaunay's painting was able to imagine only one dimension of the capitalist order. It portrays a warm, colourful and crowded scene: a Ferris wheel, the Eiffel Tower, an aeroplane, rugby players leaping for a ball, and walls adorned with brand names. This was the future that had been promised. Beneath Delaunay's delightful painting, however, lurked the horrors of war and alienation.

Within a year of the painting's exhibition, the First World War broke out. The machines that Delaunay had celebrated were turned towards destruction, and the same industrial power that had promised progress was used to produce weapons and to organise mass armies. Millions of soldiers died, and many of those who returned home carried psychological wounds that the society around them struggled to understand. The bright fairground of 1913 would reappear seven years later in German cinema, but in a darkened and

distorted form, as the setting for a showman who exhibits a man who kills on command. That film was *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* [1].

This paper attempts to analyse the film, its themes, its philosophy and its socio-political background. It first outlines the situation of German cinema after the war, and then examines the film's story and its portrayal of authority, its production design, its relationship with Edvard Munch's *The Scream*, and finally the meaning of its ending.

II. GERMAN CINEMA AFTER THE WAR

After the collapse of the German Empire under Kaiser Wilhelm II at the end of the First World War, the control of cinema and its authoritarian use as a means of propaganda came to a halt. The Weimar Republic, which replaced the Empire, was governed by a coalition in which the Social Democrats played a leading role. Its early years were a time of great instability, financial crisis and political violence in Germany's history. The nation had suffered a humiliating defeat, its economy was weakened, and opposing political groups fought one another in the streets.

For German cinema, however, the new republic brought the first breath of relief. Censorship was abolished in November 1918, and for a short period films were no longer expected to serve the government but could become a medium for expressing emotions, ideas and artistic vision. Although film censorship was reintroduced in 1920, this brief period of freedom allowed filmmakers to experiment with new forms and subjects.

Expressionism had already appeared in German painting, poetry and theatre before the war. Artists of this movement rejected the idea that art should simply copy the visible world. Instead, they distorted shapes, colours and perspectives in order to show the emotional and psychological reality that lay beneath appearances. After the war this style found a new and powerful audience, because it seemed to match the experience of a society whose old certainties had been destroyed. In February 1920, little more than a year after the republic was proclaimed, Robert Wiene, a director of Jewish descent, released his magnum opus, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. The film brought the Expressionist style to the cinema screen and soon became its most famous example.

III. THE STORY AND THE PORTRAYAL OF AUTHORITY

The film is thematically based on the real experiences of its two writers, Hans Janowitz and Carl Mayer, and on their experiences of the First World War. The war led to a great amount of disillusionment among the masses regarding institutions and authority. Its horrors caused people to lose their faith in the old world order, producing a kind of *fin de siècle* anxiety, a feeling that an entire civilisation had reached its end.

The film, with its beautiful and distorted production design, tells the story of Francis and his friend Alan, two young men who visit a fair in the small town of Holstenwall. There they meet a certain Dr. Caligari and his somnambulist, Cesare, a man who sleepwalks and who has supposedly been asleep for twenty-three years, waking only on the doctor's command to tell people their future. When Alan asks how long he will live, Cesare replies that he will live only until dawn. That same night Alan is murdered. Francis suspects Caligari and Cesare, and as he investigates, further crimes follow, including the abduction of Jane, the woman whom both friends love. Francis finally follows Caligari to a mental asylum and discovers that the showman is in fact the director of the asylum, a psychiatrist obsessed with the story of an eighteenth-century mystic named Caligari who used a somnambulist to commit murders.

Dr. Caligari can be read as a depiction of German capitalist and military authority, an authority that uses ordinary people as a means to experiment, perverting and distorting their minds into killing other ordinary people. This is very much like the war itself, in which the ruling authority never participated in the fighting but sent brainwashed individuals to fight a war that was not even theirs to fight in the first place. Cesare does not choose his actions. He is woken, displayed to the public, sent out to kill, and returned to his box. He has no will of his own. In this sense he resembles the common soldier, trained to obey commands and to kill people he does not know, on behalf of masters who remain safe at home. A similar reading of Cesare as the common man drilled to kill under compulsory military service was

proposed by the film critic Siegfried Kracauer [4, p. 65].

It is also significant that Caligari is a doctor. The person who is supposed to heal is the one who destroys. Many soldiers returned from the front suffering from what was then called shell shock, and they were placed under the care of doctors and institutions. By making the villain a psychiatrist and placing an asylum at the centre of the story, the film expresses a deep distrust of the very institutions that claimed to protect and cure the people.

The setting of the fair is equally important. Delaunay's painting presented the fairground, with its Ferris wheel and advertising, as a symbol of a joyful modern future. In *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* the fairground becomes the place where a man's loss of free will is exhibited as entertainment for a paying crowd. The promise of the modern world has turned into a spectacle of control and death.

IV. PRODUCTION DESIGN AND THE DISTORTED WORLD

The tragic distortion of the somnambulist's mind is precisely portrayed through the uncanny production design of the film. Expressionist filmmakers wanted to depict the fragmented mind of post-war civilisation, in which nature had become distant and the individual had become alienated from nature. To have complete control over the aesthetics of the environment, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* was shot entirely on studio sets rather than on real locations. The town of Holstenwall, its streets, its houses and even the countryside around it are painted and constructed.

The forests and trees are equipped with spikes, portraying nature as something evil and hurtful instead of something familiar and comforting. This gives the audience a sense of nausea and existential crisis, the same emotions that might have been felt by soldiers after the war. For a soldier who had seen landscapes destroyed by shellfire and barbed wire, the natural world could no longer be a place of rest. The film turns this experience into an image: even a forest has become a weapon.

Expressionism was concerned with striking, distorted imagery, violence and moral corruption, and this film succeeds in depicting all of these elements through its lighting and its uncanny sets. For example, in a normal setting a door is rectangular, but in the film the doors are trapezium-shaped; rooms taper at one end, giving them a trapezoidal shape; streets narrow to sharp points; and buildings lean at impossible angles. Windows are irregular, and furniture is unnaturally tall or narrow, as with the high stool on which the town clerk sits above Caligari. Thus, through the means of production design, the film evokes a sense of discombobulation in the audience.

The lighting adds to this effect. The film uses strong contrasts of light and darkness, in the manner of chiaroscuro, but many of its lights and shadows are not created by lamps at all: they are painted directly onto the walls and floors of the sets. The shadows therefore do not move as the characters move, and the whole world of the film looks like a painting come to life. This makes the environment feel unreal and unstable, as if it exists only in someone's disturbed imagination.

The actors are also part of this distorted world. Dr. Caligari moves with a bent, crooked walk, wearing a top hat, a cape and white gloves. Cesare, dressed entirely in black, with a pale white face and dark circles around his eyes, moves slowly and stiffly, sliding along the walls as if he were part of the set. The human body itself becomes distorted, and the characters seem to belong to the same nightmare as the buildings around them. Even the intertitles, the written text that appears on the screen, are drawn in jagged and uneven letters.

Taken together, these elements show that the distortion in the film is not mere decoration. The world outside the characters has been shaped to express the world inside them. This is the essential principle of Expressionism, and in this film it is applied to every part of the image.

V. THE INFLUENCE OF MUNCH'S THE SCREAM

The roots of the film's style go back even before Expressionism. Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (1893) can be seen as a great influence on the film [3]. Munch painted his masterpiece to show a terrifying sense of existential anxiety and horror. During a walk at sunset he sensed extreme isolation and dread, and felt as if the whole environment were screaming. *The Scream* is a visual representation of this inner

emotional state: the swirling red sky, the bending landscape and the twisted figure on the bridge all express a single feeling of terror.

Much the same happens in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. In one scene the doctor opens the cabinet to reveal his experiment, the somnambulist, and the camera takes a close-up of this walking-dead human being as he slowly opens his eyes. The image quickly reminds the audience of the figure in Munch's painting. Both share the wide, staring eyes and the distorted face, conveying an empty and deeply disturbed state of mind.

Both works also share a way of joining the human figure to the surrounding world. In Munch's painting the landscape seems to scream together with the figure. In the film the painted streets and spiked forests seem to share Cesare's lifeless terror. In both cases the inner emotional state is not kept within the person but spreads into everything around him. This is why *The Scream* is often regarded as a forerunner of Expressionism, and why its influence can be felt so strongly in the film.

VI. THE ENDING

The end of the film is very bleak and tragic. After the story of Caligari's crimes has been told, the film returns to the place where it began: Francis sitting on a bench, telling his story to an older man. It is now revealed that this place is the courtyard of the mental asylum and that Francis is himself a patient there. Cesare and Jane are also inmates. When the director of the asylum appears, Francis sees in him the face of Dr. Caligari and attacks him. Francis is overpowered, put into a straitjacket and locked in a cell. The director then examines him and announces that he now understands the patient's delusion, since Francis believes him to be the mystic Caligari, and that he therefore knows how to cure him.

This ending can be understood in two ways. On the surface, it suggests that the whole story was only the delusion of a madman and that the doctor is a kind and responsible authority. Yet the director has the same face as Caligari, and the painted, distorted sets remain exactly the same in the asylum courtyard. The audience is never returned to a normal and trustworthy world. It remains uncertain whether Francis is truly mad or whether he is the only person who has seen the truth. The final image, a close-up of the director's face, leaves this question unanswered.

The ending therefore indicates how heavily an atmosphere of doom and gloom weighed on the hearts of the people of Europe. The face of authority changes, from a sinister showman to a respectable doctor, but its power over the common people remains the same, and the one person who accuses it is declared insane. In the same way, an authoritarian order could change its face after the war and continue its persecution of the common people, making them fight wars that were not theirs to fight. By all means, German Expressionism and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* tell the story of the human condition in a rotten, war-ridden society.

VII. CONCLUSION

The meaning behind Expressionism is evident in its name. It is a highly psychological form of art that seeks not to record what is happening in the outside world, but to express what is happening inside, within the mind of the individual. Expressionism seeks to access an interior world characterised by garish and unnatural colours, jagged lines and sharp distinctions between colour spheres.

The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari reflects these aspects through its artistic use of mise-en-scène, its characterisation and its thematic portrayal of the horror of a war-ravaged, shell-shocked, disillusioned and dystopian society, as this study has attempted to show. The promised future of Delaunay's fairground is replaced by a fairground of manipulation and murder; the doctor who should heal becomes the one who controls; and the painted world of the film makes the audience see through the eyes of a damaged mind. Ironically, the film also foreshadows the imminent horrors that were to befall the nation. The influence and impact of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* on the Expressionist style was not only contemporary but has transcended time and context ever since.

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