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The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari: Mental Anguish for All

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Abstract

The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari uses set design, intertitles, and shadows to examine psychological trauma in Weimar Berlin. The well-incorporated set pieces not only contribute to the feeling of mystery regarding hypnosis but also speak to the psychological state of confusion of those living in the Weimar Republic at the time. Mental anguish, known as shellshock, plagued men returning from the war and helped shape Weimar culture. Hypnosis, while a potential solution to the issue, created problems as many worried it would lead to an uptick in criminal activity. Wiene uses hypnotic interest in the film as a way of exploring cultural issues through cinema and speaks to the power and promise of film in Weimar Germany as a coping mechanism. *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* faces the new psychological challenges of Weimar Berlin by depicting the trauma and uncertainty of a post-war society.

Keywords: *Weimar, Hypnosis, Shellshock, Caligari, World War I*

In the early 1920s, hypnosis re-emerged as a medical tool designed to treat shellshocked soldiers returning home from World War I. This practice inspired both wonder and apprehension for many Germans and bled into the newly emergent mass culture of the country as German filmmakers explored their anxieties about hypnosis through cinema. One of the first notable films produced in this setting was *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, directed by Robert Wiene. *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* examines psychological trauma in Weimar Berlin through the use of expressionist film elements to create a world reflective of post-war society.

The film uses intertitles as an element of hallucination. Caligari stumbles around confusedly in what appears to be a courtyard outside of the asylum. As he flounders, the words “Du musst Caligari werden” appear written in different directions, shapes, and sizes all across the scene (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* 1:00:04-1:01:02). This phrase, meaning “You must become Caligari,” evokes a sense of hallucination as it is chaotically written on the screen. The director of the asylum feels that he must transform into Caligari (Andriopoulos 2009 19). Even the font gives a spooky feel with rounded lettering, adding to the idea that the audience is in the “bizarre world seen through the eyes of Francis” (Barlow 39). Moreover, the use of capital letters aids in emphasizing meaning. An audience may view this capitalization as a shouted expression, as if the words were said aloud. The titles are “deliberately artless,” a choice related to the expressionistic advertising style (Barlow 39). The intertitle technique is an innovative cinematic effect in that even though the film is silent, these words thrown onto the screen nevertheless imbue the audience with a feeling of phantasmagoria. The hallucinatory effect is part of the mystery that comes with this fascinating idea of hypnosis and losing control. The film ties this same feeling of uncertainty to the Germans in Weimar. Post-war, there was an utter sense of loss of control. Economic despair caused citizens to question how they would meet basic needs such as nourishment: the crisis amplified by the current political controversy (Weitz 130). The imposition of the phrase “Du musst Caligari werden” on the scenery is a visual representation of delusion that is not only true of Caligari but also a facet of the Germans’ mental anguish in Weimar.

In addition to intertitles, the film also utilizes papier-mâché, both a technical solution to express a creative vision and a metaphor for the uncertain nature of Weimar

society. The film unfolds as Francis, the narrator, relays the story to a friend. As he begins his account, the scene opens with a town view and the words “The Annual Fair in Holstenwall” (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* 3:07-3:13). The city is made of small papier-mâché buildings all placed together to form a hill, as if the audience is observing the town from a distance. Throughout the movie, the village and other settings showcase this paper effect. Andriopoulos explains the use of this material by saying, “the pronounced artificiality of the set...undercuts realist conventions” (16 2009). Realism depicts the people and events as “somehow real” (Jerslev 93), while expressionism renders objects based on feelings. Paper is a flimsy material that tears easily, disintegrates in the rain, and is unreliable for permanent needs such as housing. The appearance of the material relates to its function, a common trait in expressionism (Elsaesser 39). The “lack of technical infrastructure” points to using ersatz goods or substituted materials due to wartime constraints (Elsaesser 26). The paper’s representative fragility is symbolic of the fragility of German society at the time. Expressionism’s focus on self-expression takes the horror of World War I and presents it to the public (Elsaesser 26). The paper walls point to the uncertainty of not only the hypnosis seen in the film but also the general mental state of the citizens of Weimar Germany.

After taking a closer look at the papier-mâché set, one notices various painted symbols on the walls. Heynen explains this use of the surroundings by saying that the “jagged sets” and “off-kilter urban landscape” are a hallmark of the expressionist movement, relaying the destabilizing of modernity further linked with madness (2018 688). These elements are representative of the psychological turmoil that the Germans faced following the many sufferings of the time, such as the Spanish Flu and World War I. As Caligari walks through the town, the lines and subtle shapes on the buildings’ walls have a spray paint effect. The representation of chaos is the focus more than the specific design; even the ground is this white paper material with dark markings (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* 6:30-6:37). Disorder is seen not just in the markings but even down to the broken windowpane in Alan’s bedroom (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* 23:58). The eccentric set immerses the audience in Francis’s mental madness (Wiene *et al.*). The sharp angles of leaning buildings with oddly shaped windows—which provide a distorted image of the town—again display antirealism.

Further analysis of the set design reveals the use of bare trees with only a few offshoots of what used to be leaves. As Caligari hallucinates outside the asylum, the bare trees line the building, invoking a sense of death and decay, an ever-present reality to those in post-war Germany (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* 1:00:04-1:01:02). The light-colored sky contrasts with these dark trees, enhancing the eerie feel of the scene. These odd set pieces create a sense of “paranoia and distrust,” correctly playing into the confusion of hypnosis and the plotline as a whole, as well as the distrust of a post-war world (Andriopoulos 2008 94).

Once the war ended, many Germans blamed their loss on the soldiers’ diminishing will to fight, which undoubtedly shaped how the public viewed these men as they returned home (Heynen 2016 111). Assuredly there was a sense of unity from having participated in the shared experience of war, but the soldiers’ mental and emotional reactions to the trauma differed (Heynen 2016 108). As men readjusted to life at home, they faced the damage of psychological and physical battle wounds. The mental anguish of attempting to survive another day while continuously seeing death all around greatly disturbed many German soldiers. Shellshock, now referred to as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), caused erratic behavior in veterans. Many of the common symptoms consisted of tremors, paralysis, nightmares, and flashbacks, summarized as “war neurosis” (Hans 19). Pinkert refers to the mental state of these wounded soldiers as that of “infants,” relying heavily on the care of their wives and mothers (123-124). Women were also beginning to work outside the home to fill vacant jobs left by the men. As they stepped into these new gender roles, Germany saw women as the reason for “masculine loss” (Hans 23). The soldiers faced not only a change in their own identity but also a shifting social structure as they returned home.

Men traumatized by war frequently exhibited symptoms of shellshock, or hysteria, which doctors previously believed to be a “woman’s” disease (Hans 19). Strong young soldiers represented the heart of the German nation, meaning hysteria was simply not an option (Prickett 68). Women, nonetheless, were generally seen as full of unreasonable emotions and likely to fall victim to hysteria. These stereotypical characteristics caused women to be associated with weakness and uselessness; femininity was “configured as a threat of negation and formlessness” (Heynen 2016 131). Soci-

ety saw women as frail objects, the opposite of the ideal German man; however, Heynen discusses how the crisis of war damaged this highly regarded masculinity (2016 305). The public did not know how to approach these valiant soldiers who now struggled with this feminine issue of hysteria.

The world initially thought of shellshock as a pre-existing condition rather than a result of the trauma of war (Heynen 2016 322). Medical practitioners first used hypnosis as a potential solution to treat female issues such as hysteria. It began to take hold in the general public once scientists realized they could hypnotize anyone, not just hysterical patients (Heynen 2016 107). Hypnosis became a source of entertainment, as seen in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. Caligari draws a crowd by saying that he will awaken a man in a death-like state (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* 13:28). He commands the somnambulist to awaken, and the crowd astonishedly watches his face begin to move and eyes open widely. At Caligari’s request, the crowd starts asking the somnambulist specific questions, such as how long they have left to live, demonstrating the somnambulist’s power (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* 14:25-16:15).

The film’s Weimar German audience was already aware of the connection between hypnosis and crime. In 1895, the state blamed a man for having convinced his wife to give him control of her assets while she was under his hypnotic spell. Germans commonly referred to the occurrence as the Czynski affair. The case forced the Imperial Health Office to investigate the consequences of hypnosis. Even though great benefits had been seen from a therapy standpoint, specifically in treating shellshock, the science behind the practice was not yet fully explored. Dr. Engelmann, a physician looking into the effects of hypnosis at the time of the case, explained that it might be possible for people to commit crimes while entranced or even in a “posthypnotic trance” if the hypnotist so intended. Since scientists were not entirely sure of suggestive influence’s repercussions, Dr. Englemann encouraged hypnotic practice to be limited to trained professionals only. The mystery surrounding unsolved cases such as this one, along with a ban of hypnotic public performances, piqued the interest of the public (Killen 108). The hypnotic crimes seen within *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* were relevant to the interests of people in Weimar Germany, as evidenced by the hypnotic medical and criminal accounts of the time.

For example, some professionals compared hypnotic trance to natural sleep, while others related it to a state of psychic suggestibility (Andriopoulos 2009 23-24). If hypnosis allowed hypnotists to implant an idea in the subject such as being unable to use their arm, convincing them to commit a crime was not entirely out of the question. Andriopoulos explains that the few medical cases related to criminal hypnosis do not provide substantiation; therefore, staged crimes are “the only ostensibly empirical evidence for the possibility of criminal suggestions” (2008 31). However, literary works also played a part in public perception of hypnosis. A prominent example is Carl de Prel’s *The Cross on Ferner*, a story of a countess killed by a man under a hypnotic spell, which includes scientific testimony. Claretie’s *Jean Mornas* also provides accounts of detailed hypnotic crimes (Andriopoulos 2008 31-33). Historically speaking, Kaes even goes as far as to say that the film plays out military aggression through the crimes (Heynen 2018 689). The film did not wholly base the hypnotic crimes on fact, yet their intrigue appealed to the people of Weimar Germany.

The people were not only captivated by hypnosis but also by the notion of madness as the concept of shellshock became more widely accepted. Questions about how to handle those deemed “mentally unstable” contributed to the shaping of Weimar culture. Men returning from war did not have a plethora of resources to aid in their struggles, but one solution was the use of asylums. These buildings not only housed madness, but also became madness (Heynen 2016 336). Germans were intrigued by the thought of a facility that harbored unexplainable psychological states—the asylum as a place of secrets. The film displays this mindset through the use of framing: the asylum has triangular-shaped large doors that capture attention as they swing open (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* 1:03:00). The people appear “too big for the small building, and the courtyard ground features a bizarre pattern, all of which represent the veterans’ damaged frames of mind” (Wiene *et al.*). In interior shots of the asylum, both the hallways and cells are very narrow—clearly sites of captivity with no outlet of escape for inmates (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* 1:02:43-1:05:42). Thus, the asylum walls contained the patients’ madness, as Weimar Germany attempted to contain threats brought by modernity (Heynen 2018 688).

German society’s fascination with madness and asylums grew as artists took a unique interest in the topic. Often, the public saw their abstract thought process as similar to madness while the artists related insanity to creative genius. Interestingly, artists used the concept of madness both in a positive light as “psychic freedom” and also negatively as a symbol of the brokenness of modernity (Heynen 2018 684). Heynen mentions the “transnational avant-garde’s fascination with asylums and hospitals” (2016 324). Their emphasis on asylums brought the concept to the public eye, adding to the intrigue.

Weimar society could not fully achieve containment of modernity, nor could asylums. However, by the end of the film, the audience sees that Caligari is not truly the asylum director but rather a patient himself. Caligari, in a psychiatric role, has been mistakenly entrusted with the well-being of patients. At this point in history, people held psychiatrists in authority due to their ability to work with the mind (Killen 134). This aspect of the film alludes to the Weimar fear of authority, as Caligari was not a reliable figure (Heynen 2018 687). As the German men returned defeated from World War I, their government was not supportive but instead blamed the men for the loss of the war (Weitz 23). Why would the German people trust an authority that falsely pins the loss on them? To add to the public’s distrust, the nation also used chemical warfare. Chlorine gas killed indiscriminately. It destroyed unprotected soldiers on the battlefield and civilians in nearby towns (Russell). It was also psychologically damaging due to the fear of the unknown with such a new and destructive weapon, referred to as “gas fright” (Russell). Chlorine gas was such a vile form of weaponry that it caused the German soldiers to question the necessity of its brutality and, thus, their country’s authority, leaving them with a sense of abused trust.

The film further looks into these threats by touching on male fear in combat through shadows. *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* is famously one of the first films to incorporate the use of shadows (Wiene *et al.*). The shadows are such a notable aspect that French filmmakers even referred to the technique as “le caligarisme” (Andriopoulos 2009 16). After the somnambulist predicts Alan’s death, the next scene opens with Alan in his bed. He sits straight up with jaw dropped and eyes wide open in an apparent state of fear. He looks to the edge of the room, out of view of the camera. The audience cannot

explicitly see a figure approaching; however, a large shadow appears on the wall behind him. The camera then cuts to a shot of Alan's shadow fighting with the unknown shadow. The mysterious figure reaches down to grab Alan and kills him with a dagger (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* 22:06-22:30). The movie continues shadow work when depicting Alan's alleged murderer. As the criminal sneaks through the night, his shadow jumps across the walls around him (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* 29:18-29:30). Villainous shadows appear under the cover of night, accentuated by the darkness. Humans often associate darkness with fear because they cannot clearly see their surroundings. The shadows in this film give the viewer hints of what is happening without explicitly showcasing murders or the murderer. From a logistical standpoint, the film is able to depict crimes without the use of advanced special effects. Shadows allow actions to appear more dramatic and larger than life, as technicians manipulate light to produce a shadow more extensive than the object itself, adding to the effect that everyone is suspicious in a film with continuous chaos (Wiene *et al.*). Shadows distort objects while making them even more frightening. The concept of darkness relates to World War I when analyzing settings in which men faced combat and ultimately death. Soldiers were often confronted by enemy troops during times of darkness, perhaps even at sunrise (Patterson and Clifford 96). Although shadows may have been present, a clear image of attackers and the situation were not. Shadows evoke a sense of fright; the shadowy crimes in the film evoke the fear faced during combat of World War I.

Shadow work is thus instrumental in enhancing the eerie setting. The film fine-tunes this technique by contrasting colors in scenes. As Alan's shadow appears, the bed and wall are white while the shadow is dark, thus having the desired effect of drawing attention. Franklin's work explains how, in general, as one focuses on a shadow, they "contemplate" the object itself (177). Shadows cause the viewer to focus more explicitly on the items making the shadows. In the case of this scene, the audience must pay close attention to Alan, the mysterious figure, and the weapon. Shadows are even painted onto the set walls, begging the question "what is making these shadows?" Shadows represent evil forces and are used as a "device of foreboding," as seen in the murderer approaching Alan's bed (Franklin 180).

In conclusion, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* uses expressionist film elements in creating a world reflec-

tive of post-war society and confronts the aftermath of World War I in Berlin in the 1920s. Wiene uses hypnotic interest in the film as a way of exploring cultural issues through cinema, speaking to the power and promise of film in Weimar Germany as a coping mechanism. The film specifically uses scenery, intertitles, and shadows to accentuate Weimar Berlin's psychological trauma. The well-incorporated set items not only contribute to the feeling of mystery in regards to hypnotism, but also speak to the psychological state of confusion of those living in the Weimar Republic at the time. This psychological state was in part due to the mental anguish, known as shellshock, that plagued men returning from war and led to the shaping of Weimar culture. Hypnosis, while a potential solution to the issue of shellshock, created its own problems as many worried it would lead to an uptick in criminal activity. Germans were further demoralized as they lost respect for the authority that promised prosperity and organization of social structures such as labor, believing that the war was "incited by the elites of Europe and Germany" (Weitz 11-12). *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* faces the new psychological challenges of Weimar Berlin by depicting the trauma and uncertainty of a post-war society.

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