

The 1920 German Expressionist silent film, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, directed by Robert Wiene, tells the story of a murderous somnambulist, Cesare, who is compelled through hypnosis by his evil master, Dr. Caligari, to kill locals of the small town of Holstenwall. This film is introduced as a frame narrative structure, with the protagonist Francis describing the events of the film to a man initially unknown by the audience. In the final minutes of the film, our protagonist is revealed to be an unreliable storyteller, as the viewer discovers that Francis is, in fact, a patient at an insane asylum who has seemingly imagined the entire thing.

The German Expressionist style is peculiarly consistent throughout the whole film with the jagged painted designs and tilted looming structures of the world present in both the interior and frame narrative. The continuation of the film's dreamlike set design from the delusional interior story into the supposed reality of the frame story subverts the viewer's expectation that the seemingly realistic frame story would be represented with more realistic mise-en-scène. In this essay, through an analysis of the mise-en-scène details of two scenes—one from the interior story and one from the frame story—I will argue that the use of a consistent style of mise-en-scène throughout the frame and interior narratives intentionally simulates a shift from objective reality to internal reality, in line with German Expressionist thought, in the viewer.

Caligari was an influential film in the German Expressionist cinema movement, a movement which centered the internal world of the artist and “attempted to develop an art which represented subjective experience”.¹ German Expressionism was born as a countermovement to the prior French Impressionist movement, a movement which had

¹ Tifford, John S. “Object-Subject Relationships in German Expressionist Cinema.” *Cinema Journal* 13, no. 1 (1973): 17. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1225056>.

in contrast focused on the external world surrounding the artist. As *Caligari* director Robert Wiene himself describes it, Impressionistic art is the realist depiction of the artist's personal "discovery" of the external world, while Expressionistic art is instead the "outward projection of inner states of mind".² While Impressionists are concerned with conveying their sensory interpretation of external reality, Expressionists experience an "indifference of reality" and instead "reflect the internal" and in some cases "choose" their own reality.³

In relation to *Caligari*, Titford has claimed that "Expressionist cinema is an impossibility" as "it can ultimately never avoid the paradox that for creation to take place, the inner experience must be externalized, and thereby partake of the world of objective reality".⁴ However, I would argue that *Caligari* is the film closest to achieving the Expressionist goal of conveying the internal subjective reality because through its final plot twist, the film is able to depart from the confines of an objective depiction of reality. Although the external physical world of the film remains consistent—the Expressionistic set—the viewer's internal understanding of what they have seen is altered with the final reveal, ultimately leaving them with an awareness that they are not experiencing an objective reality but rather a subjective experience, and forcing the viewer to turn inward, to question their ability to prove an objective reality.

The first scene that I will examine is that of the lockup of Dr. Caligari. This scene occurs within the interior narrative of the film, following Francis's discovery that the director of the psychiatric institute is, in fact, the bloodthirsty Dr. Caligari. Francis, along

² Wiene, "Expressionism in Film," 437.

³ Wiene, 437.

Titford, "Object-Subject Relationship," 17.

⁴ Titford, 17.

with the doctors who work in the mental institute, confront Dr. Caligari in his office, demanding him to “unmask” himself, and showing him the dead body of Cesare, his somnambulist. At this, Caligari breaks down in grief over the dead body and then, with a sudden outburst of anger, attacks his fellow doctors until he is restrained in a straitjacket and locked away permanently in a cell.

The hallway leading to Caligari’s office is an apt introductory setting for this scene, with its high ceilings creating a sense of liminality and slanted foreboding black door warning Francis and the doctors away. Claw-like painted designs on the floor and walls originate from the point where the group enters, almost resembling veins being poisoned by the group’s presence which contributes to the feeling that the space itself is alive. Ashmore describes the set design of the film in terms of “motion”, with the set creating “the effect of a threat to the collapse of balance”.⁵ This motion can be seen clearly in Caligari’s office which itself expands through multiple means from the central point where Caligari first stands; the walls are physically scrunched around the antagonist, rippling outwards, and the entire room is painted in a striped effect with lines again originating from Caligari’s initial position behind the desk. Combined, these details create both a sense of threatening energy pulsing outwards from the antagonist and an aggressive predisposition of the room itself, as if it were trying to swallow all within the room. In the first close-up shot of Caligari in this scene, he is framed by the “window” behind him, which is more a cut of fragmented shapes allowing gradients of light into the room. Situated behind him, the window evokes the feeling of an “elusive menace”,

⁵ Ashmore, Jerome. “The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari as Fine Art.” *College Art Journal* 9, no. 4 (1950): 413. <https://doi.org/10.2307/773704>.

threatening but not explicitly violent, which mirrors the character of Caligari who up to this point has successfully gotten away with his evil deeds.⁶

The human figure then becomes a prominent aspect of the mise-en-scène, as Caligari begins his climactic performance, beginning by recoiling in shock at the sight of his dead somnambulist. With a claw outstretched, he tiptoes forward gingerly before looking up to the heavens and collapsing on Cesare's corpse. Finally, he backs away from the group, looking from man to man accusingly before lurching forward and attempting to choke one of the doctors. This performance is a prime example of German Expressionist acting, a decidedly non-realist style of acting centered on the idea of the actor entering into an impulsive and emotional state in order to effectively become "representative of thought, feeling, or Fate".⁷ In compliance with the German Expressionist movement as a whole, this acting style was not interested in "complex Naturalism", but rather encouraged the actor to deeply connect with their emotions, becoming a manifestation of their own soul.⁸ The use of this Expressionist acting style, Titford argues, enhances the symbolization of the characters on screen. Through the erratic and extreme gesturing of Dr. Caligari, for example, he becomes the mad scientist archetype to the viewer. In this way, the expressionist acting style is dehumanizing to the characters on screen as they "have their humanity subsumed to the abstract concepts they represent".⁹

As the characters become less alive to the viewer, the setting increasingly becomes more alive as we watch a straitjacketed Caligari dragged into a dynamic cell.

⁶ Titford, "Object-Subject Relationship," 20.

⁷ Mel Gordon. "German Expressionist Acting." *The Drama Review: TDR* 19, no. 3 (1975): 36. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1144991>.

⁸ Gordon, 36.

⁹ Titford, "Object-Subject Relationship," 19.

The outer walls framing the entrance to the cell are adorned with dark splotches, appearing almost as ghostly figures observing the scene. The slanted walls of the cell itself once more create a claustrophobic swallowing effect, and as the cell closes, trapping Caligari inside, the door is revealed to have a dark swooping claw-like design upon it, signifying the fate of Caligari, ensnared permanently in the claws of the mental institute.

The second scene that I will examine is that of the lockup of Francis. This scene occurs within the final moments of the film, this time within the frame story. After finishing his tale (the interior narrative), Francis enters the insane asylum with the unknown man, and begins to give him a tour of the many characters inside.

Inadvertently revealing to the viewer that he is a patient of the hospital, he guides the unknown man, now assumed to be a psychiatric doctor, through the main hall, first cowering at an unassuming alive and awake Cesare, next begging Jane, who believes herself to be a Queen, to marry him, and then finally lunging at the director of the psychiatric hospital while shouting that he is the insane Dr. Caligari. Following this attack, the doctors of the hospital swarm Francis, placing him in a straitjacket and locking him away in a cell eerily similar to the one Caligari was placed in in the previous scene.

As Francis finishes his tale and we re-enter the frame narrative at the beginning of this scene, we find ourselves back in the assumed park in which the tale-telling began. The scene is tinted a cool green shade (in the restoration version that I am using for this essay) which conflicts with the next scene's warm amber coloring.¹⁰ This

¹⁰ Barbara Flueckiger. "COLOR ANALYSIS FOR THE DIGITAL RESTORATION OF *DAS CABINET DES DR. CALIGARI*." *The Moving Image: The Journal of the Association of Moving Image Archivists* 15, no. 1 (2015): 24. <https://doi.org/10.5749/movingimage.15.1.0022>.

“clashing of colors” as director Wiene himself describes it, elicits a stark emotional reaction in the viewer, which the viewer then associates with the shock of discovering that Francis is an unreliable narrator.¹¹ Entering the main hall of the insane asylum, the audience is first shown a wide shot of the space, which is identical to that of the one within the interior narrative except that this time it contains patients. The floor is painted with lines shooting out in every direction from the center of the room, as if exploding into the space. This motion foreshadows the later explosion of Francis upon seeing Dr. Caligari. Out of the characters that Francis encounters, Jane’s appearance is most notable, as she is dressed in a long, all white, flowy garment. This detail has enhanced her apparition-like physicality within the frame narrative, a physicality mirroring the apparition-like imagery found in the painted designs and shadows on the walls. Additionally, the mere presence of the three large archways at the edge of the hall, each with their own set of stairs leading into a seeming abyss, implies the entrance of an unwelcoming figure. That figure comes in the form of Caligari, appearing now without his signature glasses, and switching out his cape and top hat, he now wears a more professional-looking suit. Additionally, Caligari is without his long frazzled hair and beard, giving him a more trustworthy appearance, shifting his archetype from mad scientist to a more paternal healing scientist.

After attacking Caligari, Francis is straitjacketed, carted away, and returned to the cell framed by shadowy figures. Once more we return to the “intangible threat” which surrounds the characters at each turn, haunting and following them through the tale.¹² The audience watches the scene unfold again, this time with Francis imprisoned. The

¹¹ Wiene, “Expressionism in Film,” 438.

¹² Tittford, “Object-Subject Relationship,” 20.

cell walls are now more smudged and faded but the figures continue to be anthropomorphised, creating the consistent effect that the “division between objects and living organisms is broken down”.¹³ This morphing of the human figure and physical world reflects the German Expressionist emphasis on the subjective reality of the individual. The lessening of this divide between human and reality allows for the self determination of reality that Expressionism calls for in the artist, wherein the individual centers their internal reality instead of being an observer of the external world.

Throughout the two scenes examined, one from the interior story and the other from the frame story, the mise-en-scène observed is consistently compliant with the German Expressionist style. Donahue argues that this continuation of the “Expressionist decor” conflicts with the surface-level interpretation that Francis is insane and imagined the interior narrative.¹⁴ This however implies that the Expressionist-style setting is a part of the diegesis and the dream-like, delusion charged decor is actively experienced by the characters in the frame story. Though this may be the case, I would propose that the “Expressionist decor” is not being actually experienced by the characters but is instead included for the sake of the audience, for both the purposes of emphasizing Expressionist ideals and simulating an Expressionist experience in the viewer. This would facilitate a situation in which though the physical setting of the world stays consistent throughout the interior and frame narratives, the viewer’s understanding of the world is entirely shifted by the end of the film, literally forcing the viewer to impose their own shifting internal reality onto a consistent external world. Film director Carl Dreyer evokes this Expressionist phenomenon through his corpse analogy:

¹³ Tittford, 19.

¹⁴ Donahue, Neil H. “Unjustly Framed: Politics and Art in ‘Das Cabinet Des Dr. Caligari.’” *German Politics & Society*, no. 32 (1994): 83. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23736328>.

Imagine that we are in a very ordinary room, and that someone suddenly tells us that a dead body is behind the door. Immediately, the room in which we find ourselves becomes totally transformed; everything in it takes on a different appearance. The light and the atmosphere will seem to change, though they remain physically unaltered. All this will come about because we shall have changed, and objects are what we conceive them to be.¹⁵

Similarly in *Caligari*, though the mise-en-scène is unaltered between narratives, the final reveal that Francis is insane forces an internal change in the viewers, pushing the audience to impress their shifting internal experience onto the physically unaltered screen.

¹⁵ Spadoni, Robert. "Carl Dreyer's Corpse: Horror Film Atmosphere and Narrative." Essay. In *A Companion to the Horror Film*, Firsted., 161. Wiley-Blackwell, 2014.

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Filmography

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