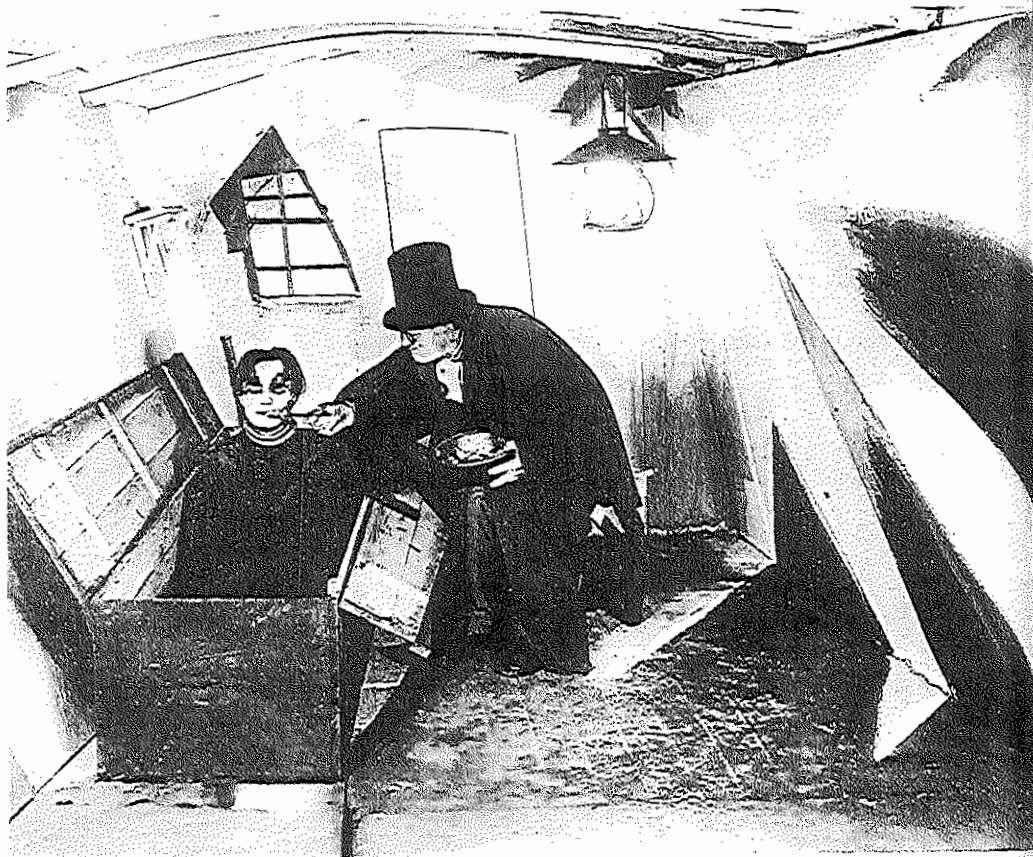


The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari

(1920)



PAUL COATES

Radical Modernism or Commercialism?

Context

For much of the twentieth century a fixture in critics' lists of the most significant films ever made, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (*Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, 1920)¹ is often described as the founding film of "art cinema," imbuing a form of cultural production—the popular cinema—with both the critical currency and the narrational uncertainties of modernism. In *Caligari*, a tale of horror and detection becomes in the end an object lesson in the untrustworthiness of narration. As embodied in the film, art cinema was able to ensure its success in Germany by launching an imaginative publicity campaign that lured prospective spectators with the enigmatic slogan "You must become Caligari!"—a campaign that lent an extrafilmic, mass-audience dimension to a line drawn from the film. At the same time, *Caligari's* international success came as the result of product differentiation strategies that intended to establish German cinema's distinctiveness from other national cinemas, particularly the increasingly dominant American one (Elsaesser, "Film History" 71–73; Kracauer 65).

Caligari gave Weimar German cinema a reputation for imaginative studio-art direction combined with themes of the fantastic and the uncanny. Directors interested in developing this combination would beat a path to Germany in their turn—the most famous being Alfred Hitchcock. The film would acquire mythical as well as prototypical status when Siegfried Kracauer's 1947 analysis of the interrelationship of Weimar cinema and society posited a connection between the ambiguous authority of Caligari and that of Hitler, of whom Caligari could be deemed a prophetic anticipation. Although often seen as far-fetched,

¹The world premiere of *Caligari* was at Marmorhaus in Berlin on February 26, 1920.

this thesis may be supported by Caligari's stubbornly awkward gait and his malevolent expression, both of which breathe *ressentiment* while suggesting the genealogy of repression in envenomed compensation for a sense of impairment. Allegorical readings such as Kra-cauer's, which strive to scratch beneath the surface of the text, have dominated the exegesis of Caligari. This approach begins with Hans Janowitz, one of the script's authors, who presents it as an allegory of the older generation's sacrifice of the young in World War I (Janowitz 224–25). Complex and compressed, the film has proved particularly attractive to the form of allegorical decipherment practiced by psycho-analysis, and critics have enjoyed drawing parallels between Dr. Caligari and Dr. Sigmund Freud (Clément). Impressions of the film's possible pathology have been further reinforced by critics who describe it in terms that echo its subject matter: as a freak, a work that "stands almost alone" (Kael 142) or "led nowhere" (Laqueur 234). Nonetheless, its popularization of the Expressionist placement of the spectator within a radically distorted environment, its demonic fair-ground, its use of shadows and the striking images of its two main actors (Werner Krauss and Conrad Veidt) have all proved profoundly influential. If *Caligari* is freakish, then so perhaps is cinema, which also originated in the fairground.

Script and Production

The script for *Caligari* was cowritten by Hans Janowitz and Carl Mayer. Siegfried Kracauer's account of its gestation offers fascinating insights into how their separate contributions came together. Janowitz's prewar intuition that he may have witnessed a sex crime, and later his anger at the conduct of World War I, interacted with Mayer's experiences as a wandering actor and his resentment of a military psychiatrist who once examined him (61–63). Accounts of the script's production are confusingly contradictory, however. The difficulties involved in ascertaining intentionality in the collective art of making films loom particularly large in the case of *Caligari*, the first film to offer the very kind of narrative enigma that would come to characterize individualist modernism. The roots of these difficulties appear to be a mixture of self-promotion, poor memory, and deliberate mythmaking on the part of the film's major players.

The most conscientious effort to unravel the *Caligari* myth from reality has been that of Kristin Thompson. She tersely notes some of the disparities between the three main accounts: "[Fritz] Lang claims to have suggested the frame story, yet none of the three accounts credits him with the idea. ([Hermann] Warm claims [Robert] Wiene was responsible.) Janowitz says the Expressionist sets were based on a misunderstanding, [Erich] Pommer says he agreed to the stylization upon his first meeting with Mayer and Janowitz, and Warm attributes the film's look to a conference among the three designers when the script was already going into production" (132–33). Primary responsibility for the mythologizing rests with Erich Pommer, the best-known producer of the German silent era, who colorfully attributes the painting of light and shadow onto the sets to a need to compensate for unreliable electricity supply in the immediate postwar period, and maintains that he envisaged the film as "a comparatively inexpensive production" (qtd. in Thompson 128). Pommer also claims to have been aware even at this stage of an issue deemed problematic by later aestheticians and film reviewers: the possible mismatch between three-dimensional actors and flat sets.

Hermann Warm, however, the artistic adviser at Decla, declared that the film was produced not by Pommer but by Rudolf Meinert, whom Pommer did not replace as Decla production chief until 1920. Thompson argues convincingly that contemporary evidence confirms most of Warm's account, with German trade papers describing the film as in production by the end of 1919, and *Film Kurier* attributing production to Meinert. Since its lighting conforms to contemporary practice, the ascription of the Expressionist sets to electricity cuts is unlikely, while Pommer's suggestion that the film was not supposed to be a major one is undermined by its description in Decla advance publicity as belonging to its "*Welt-Klasse*" (world-class) production category (Thompson 136). As a result, it was perhaps Rudolf Meinert, and not Pommer, who was primarily responsible for the film—though myths and contradictions remain.

Expressionism

For Walter Laqueur, "to try to define Expressionism is a thankless task, given the inchoate character of the movement" (113). Some of the main features of the movement—embracing painting, drama, writing,

and film—can be enumerated nevertheless. It was a youth movement, extending roughly between the years 1905 and 1925, characterized by a pursuit of stylistic dissonance and intensity, and it took individual madness, social chaos, and apocalypse as its primary themes. Stylistically, Expressionism was animated by a rejection of the conventional-ity of late-nineteenth-century realism. This antirealist reaction could yield either a hard-edged, experimental modernist dissonance (as in the poetry of August Stramm) or naively direct, emotional appeals for human renewal, as in a host of minor dramatists and, most famously, in the Thea von Harbou novel that was the basis of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927). The experiments led away from registration of the external to an inward voyage in search of the soul, its protagonists more the fragments of a single mind than anything approaching realistically conceived characters.

Expressionism took to heart Edgar Allan Poe's death sentence on the long poem ("I hold that a long poem does not exist" [889]): the world's condition was far too urgent for the luxury of prolixity. This urgency was figured in the Babylonian corruption of the city, with its industrial dehumanization and social polarization, writ large a few years later in Lang's *Metropolis*—that decadent summa of Expressionism. A putrefying reality gave the lie to the nineteenth-century aesthetic of Beauty and mellifluousness in narrative and visual style, which was replaced by ugliness, angularity, and jagged diagonals. The truth of ugliness "depicted man in all his weakness and spiritual poverty" (Laqueur 114), and only an aesthetic of shock could remove society's blinkers and disclose its true state to itself. Aesthetics and eschatology thus became commingled, and the artist was figured as a haggard prophet, driven mad either by the world's blindness to its faults or by the power of his own visions. The "free-floating, aimless militancy" attributed to Expressionism by Laqueur (113) corresponded to its status as more a mood, a reaction, and a negation than a postulation of alternative possibilities. Expressionism's scream originated in a heart of whose reasons reason knew nothing. Its practitioners' febrile production of numerous manifestos further showed their lack of any unanimous sense of how to elevate their aesthetic protest into an effective political strategy. It is thus hardly surprising that both left-wingers and Joseph Goebbels (Hitler's minister of propaganda, who authored an Expressionist novel) could be numbered among its none-too-kindred yet shaping spirits.

Expressionism in the cinema, meanwhile, may be defined either as a set of themes or as a set of visual strategies. Conceiving it in terms of the former yields a broader definition than does the latter and may help account for the movement's hold on an entire generation. Friedrich Murnau's *Faust* (1926), for example, may not employ those visual strategies associated with Expressionism (and in *Caligari*, in particular, this extends to the use of distortion to render an image of a single mind buckling under stress), but certain themes do relate *Faust* to Expressionism. Above all, the idea of the divided self and the double, of which I will say much more later, is significant here. Originating in Romanticism, this "divided self" theme becomes even more intense and urgent in Expressionism. Doubling reflects and helps manage ambivalence, often with regard to an authority that can be at the same time rejected and feared. Doubling also effects dispersal, even evaporation, of responsibility. Automaton-like, other characters carry out the desires for which the protagonist fears punishment. This structure is clearly present in Murnau's *Faust*, where Mephisto is both Faust's pander and his parody, his movements echoing the main protagonist's to a far greater extent than in Goethe's early version. Since this figure of parody is also a kind of shadow, this thematic element of Expressionism is closely linked to one of its key visual strategies, the use of shadows—and one of its key films is called just that, *Schatten* (*Warning Shadows*, 1922).

The shadow can become larger than the self, an image of the protagonist's engulfment by desire, his (and these usually *are* male fantasies) submergence in a dreamworld of desire. For example, the multiplicity of doubling relationships in *Caligari* is hinted at by the depiction of the murderer Cesare as a shadow: a device that suggests a conventionally teasing thriller, yet also functions to suggest a hidden interchangeability. That is, as the shadow waxes larger than the person casting it, it at once might recall an image of the Nietzschean Superman (*Übermensch*), while paradoxically revealing that to step beyond ordinary consciousness is to move not toward the Superman's Godlike control, but toward the dissolution of identity, since power is effectively an illusion achieved through regression to the infant's belief in what Sigmund Freud called "the omnipotence of thoughts" (240).

Expressionist *mise-en-scène* strives to objectify the state of mind of the modern viewer, where the world becomes a mirror or projection of an isolated central figure with whom the viewer identifies. This central

figure's world is under the sign of death because isolation generates a continual sense of vulnerability to an ever-present threat of authority, and because though Expressionism is postreligious—the inheritor of a world emptied of God by Nietzsche—it is also haunted by religious yearnings. Expressionism's father figure is no longer a signifier of a caring God but the death-dealing punisher of those who would desire his abolition. (Expressionism's sense of the father as punitive corresponds to the popular notion of "the Old Testament God," an element of its ideology that, in condemning a view associated with Judaism, may therefore be compatible with the anti-Semitism later propagated by a former Expressionist like Goebbels.)

In Expressionism, the spiritual becomes homeless. Thus in *Caligari* a world full of walking spirits is evoked by Francis's neighbor at the outset: "There are spirits everywhere. They are all around us. They have driven me from hearth and home, from wife and child." Even the oblique lines of the sets have been read as pointing to the metaphysical (Eisner 21). The small-town world of Holstenwall should be cozy but is in fact jagged and alienating, as if the traumas of city experience—that theme of so much contemporary literature, responding to the rapid growth of Berlin in particular—had been projected onto it. In these respects, then, *Caligari* is thematically Expressionist. But whereas other Expressionist works that are, like *Caligari*, modeled on the Strindbergian *Stationendrama* (drama of the Stations of the Cross) pursue a single omnipresent individual throughout and employ image distortion to simulate the extremities of his experience, no such figure is found in *Caligari*. Francis may be telling the story, but he is not present in every scene. The framing device, however, may permit a retrospective impression of his omnipresence through a distortion that declares the madness of his unreliable narration.

Thus although *Caligari* is visually Expressionist throughout, it only becomes Expressionist in the other sense—that of the thematization of isolation—if the main body of the narrative is considered from the vantage point of the ending. The result is a film that is itself ambivalent vis-à-vis its parent, that is, the Expressionism that extends to the other arts. The film's partial extraterritoriality in relation to Expressionism is further apparent, for example, in its distinctive mixture of naturalistic acting styles with the more extreme, pathos-laden ones associated with the Expressionist theater. Hence, many contemporary

commentators saw only Werner Krauss's Caligari and Conrad Veidt's Cesare as characters that were truly in accord with the film's Expressionist sets. The text's attempt to associate horror with them alone may also be read, however, as an index of the depth of its desire (mirrored in that of Francis) to recover a sense of normality that, paradoxically, is established as irretrievable only at the film's end.

Analysis

Oedipus and the Double

To speak of "Oedipal revolt" in the context of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* may appear strange. For the scriptwriters Janowitz and Mayer, the father/son conflict so central to the texts of Expressionism is here present as an allegory, in that Caligari represents the mad forces of authority that sent young men to their deaths in World War I. Cesare is the hapless, helpless victim of authority, recalling the biblical son Isaac who was actually sacrificed, rather than saved, by Abraham in Wilfred Owen's poem "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young." But because such a multileveled reading of Francis's central story in *Caligari* is not immediately apparent to spectators, emerging only when one decides (or is instructed) to allegorize it, the necessity of an additional "sense-making" element seems to justify the decision to surround this story with a framing device. (Janowitz decried the later addition of the frame story, however, and suggested that its imposition was a form of submissiveness to authority, and could be seen as the commercial concealment of his script's avant-garde and political convictions.)

Of course, Oedipal revolt is widely present in any story of a youthful challenge to an older figure, not just Expressionist works. Since the mother figure is crucial to the Oedipus story, an Oedipal reading might see her absence from *Caligari* as potentially significant. It would suggest that this particular father/son (Caligari/Cesare) struggle concerns power rather than sexuality; it might also underline the tyranny of a father whose lack of female companionship betokens his lack of compassion (the phrase "no female beside him" could be reconfigured as "no female side to his character"). Indeed, though Caligari is seen "feeding" Cesare, the act might be interpreted less as one of mothering than of appropriating and controlling the feminine. This extreme gender imbalance may generate chaos.

Indeed, if the film is as ambiguous as Kracauer has maintained (rebellious yet submitting its revolt to a neutralizing framing device), the same ambiguity might extend to its presentation of authority. Despite Kracauer's argument, the figure of Caligari is not the sole locus of authority, as is shown by his humiliating encounter with the high-handed, high-seated town clerk. The staging of this meeting may recall Franz Kafka's *The Castle*, but its upshot is no Kafkaesque impotence before authority: Caligari will later avenge this enforced obsequiousness. Kracauer's conception of a unified "authority" in the film is therefore misconceived, as the film splits a notion of authority between the categories Max Weber would have called "legal/bureaucratic" and "charismatic" authority. As Weber puts it, "in its economic substructure, as in everything else, charismatic domination is the very opposite of bureaucratic domination" (249). (Weber's isolation of these two categories indicates their importance for the early-twentieth-century German system of social organization, of which he was the pre-eminent sociologist.) Indeed, some further remarks by Weber concerning charismatic authority seem particularly apposite to the figure of Caligari: thus, "the holders of charisma, the master as well as his disciples and followers, must stand outside the ties of this world, outside of routine occupations, as well as outside the routine obligations of family life" (248). If, according to Weber, "by its very nature, the existence of charismatic authority is specifically unstable" (248), this may also suggest the Expressionist preoccupation with instability of all kinds.

Illustrating the distinction between bureaucratic and charismatic authority, then, the clerks may occupy high chairs in the film, but they are not in themselves imposing; their image alone is not arresting, as is Caligari's. It is the split marked in *these* figures of authority—and not any precise or even metaphoric Kracauerian equivalence between Caligari and Hitler—that makes the film uncannily prophetic. Legal authority as embodied by the clerks depends entirely on its artificial aids: the elevating stilts here render it absurd.

Caligari, meanwhile, has the authority of the outlaw, the fair-ground, and the photogenic (his appearance is based on a photograph of the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer). The last of these categories—the power of the photogenic—is of particular interest to the film theory of the 1910s and 1920s (Abel 138–39): it is linked to early film theory's interest in clearly separating film from theater, and

prescriptively deriving the tasks facing the arts through a cataloging of their putative "specificities" (the best-known example of this practice being that of Rudolf Arnheim). By inscribing Caligari's power, and the power of his charismatic authority, Caligari's image is film's haunting revenge on the theater to which it seems to owe so much: it transcends the fairground and its theatrical amusements to assert the uncanny authority of what Lotte Eisner called "the Haunted Screen." The photogenic runs for office.

The story of Oedipal revolt widely considered central both to *Caligari* and to Weimar film in general is one of male-male relations. Feminists, meanwhile, have sought to re-vision this story by elevating the female figures it marginalizes. The strongest such reading has been that of Patrice Petro, based on the theories of Linda Williams. If traditional (Freudian) psychoanalytic theory sees works of horror as generally motivated by a male castration anxiety, the signifier of the possible loss of male sexual definition, Williams seeks to replace the image of "woman as lack" with one of simple difference—women possess power of their own rather than merely maintaining the status of a sign of impotence within a male fantasy. She argues, "the female look—a look given pre-eminent position in the horror film—shares the male fear of the monster's freakishness, but also recognises the sense in which this freakishness is similar to her own" (qtd. in Petro, "Woman" 211). Thus, for Petro, "the monster" Cesare becomes a double for the woman Jane (210–14). Building on this idea, one may argue that the elements of homosexuality present in Cesare's depiction and his association with the feminine (for example, his lack of independent agency, his leotard outfit, his lily near the end of the film, and his inability to murder Jane) combine with his relationship with Caligari to suggest a repression of the image of the woman, a repression that also involves the absorption into his character of one of the textual positions that would logically belong to her. This absorption is not sovereign but recoils on the male figure who embodies it, imbuing him with a different sexuality as well.

At the same time, Jane's marginality within Francis's story paradoxically corresponds to her centrality within the asylum he inhabits: a dreamlike concealment by inversion. If "the monster" Cesare threatens Jane, perhaps it is because she herself threatens the place Cesare occupies: at the side of the doctor, who is the dark, repressed, sexual, and powerful equivalent of her own anodyne, near-anonymous doctor

father. The genuineness of her threat to Cesare can be gauged by her centrality in the asylum. Male fear of castration can dictate the psychic and textual displacement of the female who inspires it. There are of course good textual grounds for linking Jane and Cesare, quite apart from the more generalized theoretical one given by Williams. The Jane of the opening frame is a somnambulist, as is Cesare, and at the film's end he clutches that feminizing lily. His leotard sexualizes his body in a manner culturally coded as "feminine," and he—like Jane—sports intense eye shadow. The regal authority inscribed in his name (that of the emperor Caesar) matches that of Jane, "the Queen of Hearts." His sparing of her life indicates one of the many subterranean linkages of characters that crisscross the film; premature death of the double would end the story, just as the student's killing of his reflection encodes his own suicide in Hans Heinz Ewers and Stellan Rye's 1913 film *Der Student von Prag* (*The Student of Prague*). Furthermore, the doubling of Jane and Cesare, like all doublings, suggests a link between the pleasures of narcissism and a sense of horror, like the myth of Narcissus himself: self-absorption concludes in the loss of selfhood. The inhabitant of the waking dream—the somnambulist—is in effect drowned in the self, insane.

As my remarks about the two doctors—Caligari and Jane's father—should indicate, however, Jane and Cesare are not the text's only doubles. The extent to which *Caligari* is a dizzying whirl of doubles has been suggested by Thomas Elsaesser ("Social Mobility" 181–87), who also mentions the connection between Francis and Alan, suggesting that Cesare is the unacknowledged executor of the dreams of both Caligari and Francis (Francis's dream is of the rival's destruction). Doubling becomes the repressed of the story, for the narrative's eschewal of explicit doubling permits the superimposition on, and dissolution into, one another of a series of doubles that remain implicit. The linchpin is surely Cesare, who doubles for Caligari and Francis, as well as Jane. The doubling of Francis by Caligari is the only clearly visible doubling relationship, as both are straitjacketed in otherwise identical images; and although Caligari is told of the circle closing around him, it is Francis who appears in the middle of the circle outside the asylum. Doubleness is inscribed in the very appearance of Caligari, whose glasses pushed up onto his forehead or (most often) slipping down below his eyes uncannily double them. Caligari also doubles for the doctor; Francis doubles for Alan;

while Jane, as well as doubling for Cesare, reflects Caligari's alienated "female side" and his inability to recognize it as female and other (it is cast instead as a passive, semifemale male). Jane also doubles for the crucially absent mother of the Oedipal triangle.

All of these doublings may also be described as a multileveled set of scapegoatings that set aside blame. In the ideology of Expressionism in general, the source of doubling lies in the conviction that there is a double nature to the bourgeois, whose staid exterior is really demonic: the sign of the castrating, life-denying father. In *Caligari*, though, the two identities lie on opposite sides of a sheet whose folding conceals their interrelationship. Indeed, it may be argued that this critique of the bourgeoisie is so deeply concealed that Jane's father, Dr. Olsen, who is *Caligari's* most bourgeois figure, is also the most marginal to the story, however much his image may echo that of Caligari when the two of them stand together by the latter's caravan. Thus *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* is a dream of Oedipal revolt in more senses than Kracauer may have guessed, as it scrambles that revolt exactly in the manner of what Freud called "dreamwork," filtering it through oneiric mechanisms of condensation, displacement, and secondary revision. Insanity pervades the text itself, not just the story it recounts. And it is far from certain whether insanity is dispelled by the doctor's benevolent statement that he thinks he knows how to cure Francis: his stating "I think," rather than "I know," suggests the patient as victim of possibly ineffective and even cruel experimentation. The "sane" doctor's final donning of glasses resuscitates the specter of "Caligarism" by re-creating the mad doctor's image, whose possible retention of power at the end is reinforced by the persistence of the cultural stereotype of the mad scientist. Paradoxically, though, the primary avenue through which insanity enters the narrative is the very device that, on the surface, seems to assert order and control by subordinating one plot element to another (Francis's story to the impersonal storytelling of "the film itself"): the highly controversial frame.

The Framing Device

There are various accounts of the source of the framing device (*Rahmenhandlung*). Hans Janowitz attributes it to Robert Wiene, and reports that he and his fellow scenarist, Carl Mayer, were outraged by its craven transformation of an intended protest against the manipulation of the

young by the old during wartime into a safely apolitical account of a young man's insanity, thus implying a vindication of authority (Janowitz 237–38). Other accounts attribute the frame story to producer Erich Pommer. Fritz Lang, who was slated to be the film's director before Wiene, later claimed the dubious credit for himself. Frank D. McConnell comments: "Lang is not a director many would accuse of moral cowardice or of capitulation to considerations of censorship or box office. And with his authority, we may ask if the frame in *Caligari* does not tell us something important not only about the particular film but about the medium itself" (28). Regardless of whether or not one accepts Lang's claim, McConnell's willingness to take the frame seriously is worth pursuing here. Meanwhile, even Janowitz's claim that it was an unwarranted addition is complicated by the existence in the archives of the Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek (German Cinematheque Foundation) in Berlin of a version, owned once by Werner Krauss, that also possesses a narrative frame (albeit not the one ultimately filmed) (Praver 168–69).

Whatever its source, the framing device does not so much defuse political dynamite (after all, the original script itself was allegorically encoded and required deciphering to function subversively, and so may be called always already defused, i.e., veiled) as replace political subversion with a far more unsettling spectatorial experience of modernist, Pirandellian vertigo. As Kracauer notes, the Expressionist stylization of the central story invades the frame, and this perpetual vertigo undermines belief in the possibility of any "return to normality" (70). This vertigo affects every level in the hierarchy of narrators, and makes us just as suspicious of the film's own invisible narrator as it has persuaded us to be of Francis, the "visible" narrator. We may even suspect that there is no unified or stable narrative position at all: after all, as *Caligari* implies, a collaborative art cannot have a single narrator. Subverting transparent narration also subverts authority, albeit in a manner different—and deeper—than the one envisaged by Janowitz and Mayer: authority and authorship suffer a simultaneous demise. This radical conclusion seems to counter critical suspicions that *Caligari* merely commodifies Expressionism (Budd, "Cabinet" 25–26), a movement whose general social domestication is apparent in the shift from the shocking, startling beginnings of fourteen years earlier (1905) to the first museum purchases immediately after World War I and its utilization in café (or film set!) decoration.

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If a domestication of Expressionism does indeed occur here, it may of course anticipate the transformation of modernism into "art cinema," as described by David Bordwell (61–62). The commodification argument may also describe the relationship between taste-making elites and mass society, and between major and minor artists, with widespread adoption of a once-radical style marking a shift in what is truly innovative. In this case, the shift is from Expressionism to a position located way beyond the thought horizon of *Caligari*, that of the New Objectivity: the stylistic and intellectual realism—even cynicism—that followed Expressionism in the mid-1920s. Following this argument, the conventionality of the unfiled framing device surrounding the Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek script would indicate that the naively protest-driven Expressionism of Janowitz and Mayer could not envisage the more complex Expressionism of split selfhood and radical epistemological uncertainty. Thus, *Caligari* may bear the hallmarks of an "art-cinema" commodification of the modernistic, but in its framing device, it nevertheless retains a modernist capacity to unsettle. The film's dialogue between Expressionist tenets and a popular cultural form—the cinema—may be deemed either modernist (as a text that itself critiques the linearity on which it is parasitic) or even anticipatory of the postmodern (as the erasure of distinctions between "high" and "low" cultural forms: after all, it was also conceived to be as much a detective thriller as anything else). The possibility of classifying *Caligari* in either of these two ways may itself indicate the dubiousness of any watertight modern/postmodern distinction.

Caligari's strangeness, though, is partly lodged in us, its spectators, for whom "it is difficult to imagine a time . . . when an avant-garde feature, to get made at all, had to go through the same procedures and mechanisms as any standard commercial film" (Thompson 124). As if to corroborate Thompson's point about the fusion of the avant-garde and commerce, the visual radicalism of the moment when words overrun the film image to instruct the head of the institute, "Du musst Caligari werden!" ("You must become Caligari!"), is at the same time the moment of revelation to spectators of the meaning of the key line of the film's publicity campaign. The film's capacity to unsettle us, to invite us into the psychological frame and leave us there, unresolved, moves beyond the possible gimmick of a transposition of Expressionist painting to film sets, or a more felt Expressionist protest against a

patriarchal, child-sacrificing authority. Furthermore, the way the narration slips out of control is reflected in the film's capacity to spawn legends of attribution, in its lack of a strong *auteur* in Wiene as director, and in a general uncertainty over responsibility for the framing device and what it was meant to achieve (a mere intriguing twist of the plot taken too far?). Such extensive and fruitful incoherence transcends and defies calculation, and the shape finally assumed by *Caligari* arguably owes as much to chance as to the works of that other immediate postwar protest phenomenon, the Dada movement, which deliberately embraced randomness.

In the context of criminal investigation, of course, the activity of framing has dubious connotations. If a suspect's framing diverts attention from those who were truly responsible, framing becomes an extension of doubling, which has a similar effect. Thus Francis's story shuffles off responsibility by attributing evil to Caligari and Cesare, while Caligari in his turn acquires what a later American military figure (Oliver North!) would call "credible deniability" through the invocation of Cesare. Furthermore, Cesare's doubling in one scene by a doll in a box parodies his lack of real agency and the inherent implausibility of anyone being in two places at the same time. (This last consideration may either prompt questions concerning Caligari's ability to spend so much time at the fairground while not being missed at the asylum, or repress them by permitting their formulation only in connection with Cesare.) "The circle closes"—to quote Francis's words to Caligari—not just around the mountebank himself but around storytelling, as the doctor (like a psychiatric version of Don Quixote, obsessed by what he reads) is driven mad by the reading of an outdated book. Could the text itself be modernist in the sense of commenting self-consciously and self-satirically on its own textuality, and in suggesting that the inherent outdatedness of all texts fatally unfits their readers for contemporary reality?

"While Father Was Away": A Close Reading

"Anxious about the prolonged absence of her father . . .," an intertitle tells us, Jane goes to the fairground. The sequence that follows is perhaps the film's most enigmatic. Jane proceeds to Caligari's tent, where he leaps out at her—apparently catching her unawares—and she says that she thought she might find her father, Dr. Olsen, there. Caligari

draws her in—spider courting fly—by inviting her to come inside and await Dr. Olsen, deferentially removing his hat (which simulates harmlessness) when she hesitates to move. After flicking open the doors of the coffin containing Cesare, he hops aside mincingly and then stands motionless, authoritative, baton in hand, observing the spectacle's effect on the perturbed Jane. As Cesare stares at her, she leans forward to peer at him, then recoils and flees. What is the meaning of all of this?

Unsurprisingly, the scene has attracted a good deal of psychoanalytically influenced interpretation, though this interpretation has usually ignored the most obvious thing (perhaps because it goes without saying): that Caligari's presence during Jane's father's absence implies a connection inaccessible to Jane's conscious awareness. In Clément's analysis, the display of Cesare renders Jane hysterical (one could say, like the Alan who laughed hysterically on learning of his own imminent death) and so casts her as an early Freudian patient. For Elsaesser, Caligari's procedure with Jane figures as more simply sexually exhibitionistic, as "Caligari's powers compensate a kind of impotence" ("Social Mobility" 183). For Petro, meanwhile, the scene marks the entry of a female point of view. Its visual composition places Cesare between Caligari and Jane. Cesare may be weapon or buffer, a "tool" (Elsaesser, "Social Mobility" 183), an offering, or sign of the seductive father's access to youthfulness (which may also mean sexual potency); he may be the hypnotist's amulet, a means of terrorizing Jane, or all of these things at once, to a greater or lesser extent. However, Caligari may merely be using a favored method of acquainting Cesare with his next victim. In terms of the work's Oedipal concerns, Cesare's subjection indicates a crushing of revolt—the lobotomization of Oedipus—and suggests that any threat to Caligari would meet a similar fate. Perhaps Caligari wants Jane to take heed of his power and warn her menfolk? There is also a suggestion of Jane's being overwhelmed by a malevolent male solidarity between Caligari and Cesare that is an infernal doubling of the solidarity between Francis and her father. (If the males go in pairs, though, could this indicate their unacknowledged fear of division and hence rule by a Jane who is, after all, "the Queen of Hearts"?) But if Cesare is readable as the unconscious of Caligari, could Cesare's instability be a seismograph of the conflicts within his master? After all, Caligari might seek Jane's

death to demonstrate a scientific hypothesis about the relationship of somnambulism and free will, but it appears that his libido simultaneously desires her and therefore he needs to keep her alive. Unlike the scene in which Alan hears his death foretold, this one is utterly wordless, completely enigmatic, susceptible to all the readings given above, and perhaps even to some others. This is surely why it has attracted a degree of critical attention that may itself be explained as seeking to explain it away—for its riddling quality places it very near “the heart of [the] mystery” (*Hamlet* 3.2.336) that is *Caligari*: a film that poses a challenge to all critical authority.

Conclusion

Legacy

If, as noted in the opening section of this essay, *Caligari* has been declared a film that “led nowhere,” and is without descendants (in this sense giving the lie to the title of S. S. Prawer’s book *Caligari’s Children*), it may well be because of the framing device’s effect on the narrative it encloses. For although, as we have seen, this device is not the simple subversion of revolutionary intent described by Janowitz and Kracauer, Weimar reviewers’ general perception that the film established a linkage between Expressionist style and insanity (Kracauer 70–71) allows one to see *Caligari* as genuinely anticipating Hitler, in that he also categorized Expressionism as insane or “degenerate” art. This is, of course, ironic, as *Caligari* itself can be seen as the degenerate, final gasp of Expressionism. Its ending may be read on one level as an allegory of the displacement of the Expressionist aesthetic by the emergent one of the New Objectivity. The Expressionism that presents itself as the image of mental derangement does indeed have a double attitude to itself. Perhaps that is why *Caligari* displays a dialectical, fruitful tension between modernity and mass culture, a tension that would later collapse as the pole of modernity was subsumed under that of mass culture.

Even if it does lack easily identifiable “children,” it is clear that *Caligari* influenced both the avant-garde and the commercial cinema: including such key avant-gardists of the 1920s and 1960s as Marcel L’Herbier, Louis Delluc, and Kenneth Anger (Prawer 166). It also had progeny in horror movies and pockets of the shadowy world of *film noir*. But the ambiguous and simultaneous conservatism and radicalism of its uncanny framing

would give way to conventionally told tales of split selfhood on the one hand (the horror movie) and an excessive avant-garde stylistics divorced from the thematics of the divided self on the other. Few subsequent films would replicate *Caligari*’s characteristic combination of narrational ambiguity, horror, and mainstream storytelling conventions, its uneasy balancing act of the commercial and the radical. One possible candidate is Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* (1976), whose nightmarish New York is associated with the troubled mind of Travis Bickle, and whose ambiguous final scene suggests closure through a framing fantasy, though no such fantasy is evoked explicitly. Far more explicit is David Fincher’s *Fight Club* (1999), which echoes both *Caligari* and *Taxi Driver* in reserving its revelation of narrational uncertainty for its ending (its primary address being initially to a mass-cultural audience it is loath to alienate through an earlier disclosure of its ambiguity): only at the end do we learn that Brad Pitt’s character is a projection of the protagonist. Even this narrative, though, may be deemed to end conventionally, since as buildings crumble in the background a happy ending is ensured through the unification of the romantic couple.

In all three films, the most durable legacy of Expressionism is its tracking of an isolated male character whose delusions, in the absence of any countervailing account of events, become welded to the impression of reality. That protagonist’s projections are signaled as such only by their excessiveness, which furnishes an excuse for stylistic violence and eccentricity. The striking style becomes commodified, though, as a way of attracting attention: no longer a sign of the damage an older generation has inflicted on the mind of the young, Expressionist protagonist, this style becomes the spectacular announcement of the arrival of a new gun in town.

Credits

Germany, 1920, Decla-Film Gesellschaft, Holz & Co.

Director: Robert Wiene

Producers: Rudolf Meinert and Erich Pommer

Screenplay: Hans Janowitz and Carl Mayer

Cinematography: Willy Hameister

Art Direction: Walter Reimann, Walter Röhrig, and Hermann Warm

Music (for Berlin première): Giuseppe Becce

CAST:

Dr. Caligari	Werner Krauss
Cesare	Conrad Veidt
Francis	Friedrich Feher
Jane	Lil Dagover
Alan	Hans Heinrich von Twardowski
Dr. Olsen	Rudolf Lettinger
A rogue	Ludwig Rex
Landlady	Elsa Wagner

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