

Expressions in horror: dr caligari and nosferatu



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Two of the earliest examples of German Expressionism in film, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and *Nosferatu* are classics remembered as some of the best horror films of all time. These two films, directed by Robert Wiene and F. W. Murnau respectively, share several key aspects in common, while still retaining their own uniqueness that has left people debating which film is paramount, even nearly a century after their releases. This paper will examine these similarities and differences, and will seek address them in light of the German Expressionist movement they each resonate.

The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari and *Nosferatu* both tell the story of a young German man's subjection to the madness of a dark overlord with seemingly supernatural powers. In *Caligari*, a young man named Cesare, who is a somnambulist (or sleep walker) is controlled by the powers of a crazy doctor, who orders him to kill innocent victims. In *Nosferatu*, a young man named Thomas Harker is sent to sell property to Count Dracula, a vampire who comes to haunt his life and town after becoming obsessed with Hutter's wife, Nina.

Though while these films share some key components in common, no one could ever call the two films the same. Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* is defined by the film's stage-like quality, due mostly to the unique set it is shot on. An example of German Expressionism, the director creates a world of stark lines, sharp angles, darkness, and shadows bringing the viewer into a surreal world. Unnaturally angled houses line crooked cobblestone roads. Misshapen rooms contain demented furniture. Rooftops are acutely angled to the sides.

It is radically warped scenery, and helps create a genuine expressionist set. F. W Murnau's *Nosferatu*, however, is shot in real world environments, but employs shadows to make small rooms appear larger than life, adding suspense and a feel of supernaturalism to the movie. The Count's castle perhaps best conveys the expressionistic form, with its gothic architecture and abundance of shadow. Or, better still, the Count himself embodies the expressionist form, with his exaggerated features. His ears, chin and teeth are all pointed, and his stature is unique, hunched and very thin of frame.

His eyes, much like Wiene's *Cesare*, are darkly shaded, and his nails are long giving him a distinctly monster like quality. Both films successfully impress a dark mood by exaggerating the film's dark aesthetic, drawing viewers into the mindscape of German Expressionism. The films also share in common a sleepwalking theme, and perhaps it was just Murnau paying homage to Wiene's *Caligari*. Partway through *Nosferatu*, Harker's wife Nina is described as being in a sleepwalking trance, specifically calling it "somnambulistic".

In fact, the character Nina looks surprisingly similar to how the character Jane looks in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. I don't believe it is too extreme to suggest that perhaps Murnau played off certain motifs created by Wiene in wanting to create a horror film. However, Murnau's depiction of Count Dracula is unsettling to this day, and many still believe that it remains the most terrifying portrayal of the character ever on film, perhaps only second to the iconic Dracula played by Bela Lugosi. Murnau certainly created his own sort of horror, so it could not be suggested *Nosferatu* is unoriginal.

The use of shadows, especially when it comes to scenes involving the Count, create a horrifying image on the screen. While having never seen

Nosferatu before deciding to write this paper, I immediately recognized a scene towards the end of the film, when the Count ascended a staircase to Nina's room. Perhaps one of the most iconic scenes of early horror films, you see the shadow of the Count as he makes his climb up the staircase, hunched form, long fingernails, offsetting movement and all. It is his shadow you see climbing the steps, never his actual form, which may possibly hint at a metaphor.

The German Expressionist movement was born out of the anguish following the Great War and before the birth of Hitler's Germany. Perhaps, as suggested by James Franklin in "The Shadow in Early German Cinema", shadows acted as a sort of "visual metaphor for evil or for the dark and threatening forces that allegedly lurked in the pre-Hitler German psyche or soul". Both films use music to add suspense to the plot, however each film approaches its use in separate ways. Caligari is distinctively jazzy in nature, where as Nosferatu is more classical. Both films, however, create music that mirrors and changes with the action on the screen.

In Nosferatu, music creates a terrifying feel to the movie, shaping the most horrific scenes remembered from the film. There are several instances throughout the film where silence is broken by a quiet sound, almost like a heartbeat in the background, yet more off putting. While I am in no position to argue which film is the better, both have come to be the best examples of horror films to come out of this time period. Classic examples of German Expressionism at work, The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari and Nosferatu play with the presence of shadow, the distortion of nature, and the imaginations of audiences, even today.