

# Sample essay on expressionism in the cabinet of doctor caligari

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## **Essay for Lesson 3: German Expressionism and Dadaism**

### Introduction

Revolutionary forms of art have dominated much of Germany, apparently as a reaction to the First World War. The era in which the First World War took place – throughout the 1910s, featured artists coming together against what they think the pointless aggression said major conflict brought. German artists, in particular, protested against the social structures prevalent during the 1910s, within which the social structures of the Second Reich were prevalent. German society initially saw film, in particular, as quite an inelegant alternative to the bourgeoisie-associated theater. Such is due to the inability of the domestic film industry in Germany to develop films due to two reasons – the mass importation of foreign films from other nations with more advanced film industries and the consequent notion that films are associated with the lower classes (Kellner 3-39). Such impressions, however, changed with the rise of German expressionist film, with the seminal example being *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* by Robert Wiene.

*The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* evokes an expressionist form characterized by notions of fear and anxiety duly connected to the situation of Germany during the 1910s. Albeit released in 1919 – the time when the Weimar Republic succeeded the Second Reich, which collapsed after the defeat of Germany in the First World War, *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* nevertheless delivered a strong criticism against the German war effort that time. Using a series of thought-provoking themes and symbolisms rotating around a macabre plot that consequently brings forth anxious feelings to audiences,

The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari stood out in its time as an expressionist departure from notions against German film that time. Expressionism is highly apparent in The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari. The representations of the characters alone – Doctor Caligari as the hypnotizing German government and the somnambulist Cesare as the droned German population that enlisted for the imperial military, provides the subjective view of Wiene and writers Hanz Janowitz and Carl Mayer on the involvement of Germany in the First World War (Kracauer 61-76; Wiene). Wiene, Janowitz and Mayer portrayed through The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari their notion that the German war effort that time was a highly grotesque one complete with mind-controlling propaganda and objections against dying in the name of German imperial dominance, with the intent to shock audiences with the highly macabre features of the film. In contrast to the propaganda-promotion agenda of Germany during the 1910s, which stood as the reason for banning foreign film importation in the nation, The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari serves as a groundbreaking example of Expressionism that time – a complete opposite of German government propaganda due to its shockingly subjective anti-government message (Kellner 3-39; Kracauer 61-76; Wiene).

Ironically, however, Siegfried Kracauer noted that the narrative frame in The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari was an undermining factor to the expressionist nature of the film. Such is perhaps due to the ascendancy of the fear and anxiety factor imbued within The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari, which is supposed to provoke the emotions of audiences. After all, it is the main point of expressionist art to subject audiences to emotionally provoking scenes, which in turn reflect the subjective views of artists. Therefore, one could note

that the narrative frame in *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* limits Expressionism in the film, in that it somewhat leads audiences to focus on what the narrator says as they fixate on the emotionally provoking scenes the film contains. Had Wiene, Janowitz and Mayer decided to do away with the narrative frame in creating *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari*, audiences would have totally focused on the emotionally provoking scenes of the film, thus fulfilling the intent of Expressionism in the film. Yet, perhaps it is noteworthy to state that Wiene, Janowitz and Mayer may have chosen to apply the narrative frame as a matter of sending the intended message of the film more directly to audiences, so that they could emphasize their opinion against the involvement of Germany in the First World War (Kracauer 61-76).

### **Conclusion: The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari as an Expressionist Sociopolitical Critique of Germany in the 1910s**

Wiene, Janowitz and Mayer intended *The Cabinet of Doctor Cagliari* to serve as their subjective representation of their thoughts against the involvement of Germany during the First World War. Set against the backdrop of German government propaganda supporting its involvement in the First World War and its permeating effects on the film industry, particularly as it caused the ban on foreign film importation in Germany, *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* stands as an expressionist film that is anti-propaganda in nature. As German artists were particularly concerned with the pointlessness of the German war effort that time, which has caused catastrophe throughout Europe and great risks to lives – particularly in terms of enlistment to the imperial military, *The*

Cabinet of Doctor Caligari served as a fitting rendition of their frustration towards the status quo they confronted.

## **Works Cited**

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