

# [Subversion and discontent: the distinctive themes of modernism in the cabinet of ...](https://assignbuster.com/subversion-and-discontent-the-distinctive-themes-of-modernism-in-the-cabinet-of-dr-caligari/)

In the film The Cabinet of Dr Caligari (1920) directed by Robert Wiene, distinctive themes of modernism including expressionist, experimental techniques of contrasting colours, unnaturalistic sets that enhance the emotional state of characters, heavy make-up and overly theatrical movements created by the actors, the utilisation of innovative themes including violence, destruction, unrealistic depiction of humanity and the dead and focus on psychological reality, are reflected. The historical allusion to the First World War, where the somnambulist, Cesare, is represented as the “ blind” soldiers, and Dr Caligari as the dominant government causing radical creativity and financial difficulties and the influence of German Expressionism in the 19th century, which created self-expression and evoked themes of destruction for the claustrophobic and fearful atmosphere experienced by society in the breadth of war, further highlights modernist attitudes. The artificial sense of reality and psychological illnesses experienced by soldiers after the war is conveyed through the utilization of visual techniques, including mis en scene, lighting, color, circle vignette, contrast and film techniques, including camera angles and shots.

The German expressionist film contradicts the conception of classical art and literature in Ancient Greece and Rome, engages with psychological horror and serves a negative and disturbing atmosphere in the opening scene “ Introducing Cesare”, where the somnambulist is displayed to an audience at a circus and controlled by Dr Caligari to tell the future of individuals and the “ kidnapping scene”, in which, Cesare has captured an innocent lady and sparked an outrage by the community. An intimate moment with the audience and Cesare is captured, through a circle vignette and close-up and the long duration of the eyes opening up, generates tension, which is never to be resolved, thus achieving a sense of intimidation and anxiousness. A social hierarchy is formed between, similarly, the German government and soldiers. It is evident where; Caligari is cut from a long shot into a close-up and cries “ I am calling you I. Dr Caligari – your master. Awake for a moment – from your dark night”, a demanding and manipulative character is highlighted and “ your dark night” is ironic for the Cesare falling into sleep and foreshadows the sinister deed of murdering a fair lady to be conducted in the evening; unconsciously. In the long shot of Cesare walking on the cliff face, the trees and bridge are depicted by angular and sharp black shadows, while the lighting is dark, to suggest the distorted madness and nihilistic emotions embodied by German expressionist artists and society, when they struggled to comprehend the impediment of traditional monarchical society and ultimate economic hardship and destruction and death of individuals. Similarly, Cesare possesses a disorientated and artificial state of mind as he is unable to control and thereby, determine what he is doing and becomes internally conflicted. Therefore, through the use of innovative themes including death and violence and experimental techniques of contrast, lighting and circle vignette, the film depicts distinctive themes of modernism.

Wiene’s film enhances modernist attitudes through the introduction of a historical allusion to the “ blind” soldiers, who obeyed the superior government body in the endings of World War I and the key focus on psychological reality, emphasizing a negative and intimidating murder acts that Cesare conducts. The unrealistic depictions of the surroundings create a nightmarish perception of reality and can represent the painful and broken German society after World War I and the doomed rise of the Nazi party. The distrust in authority and distress amongst the audience is exemplified, through the cruel and morally incorrect task of murdering, controlled by Dr Caligari. The heavy ebony eyeshadow dragged from the somnambulist under eye to the high cheekbone portrays the individual’s deprivation of sleep and is reminiscent to post-war soldiers and families, who have countless hours of not sleeping, due to personal anxiety and alienation. This was much to do with the economic difficulties, social unrest and rapid industrialization experienced by German society. The film focuses on psychological reality through questioning the audience how frightening individuals may come to be, under the dark clouding of insanity and unconsciousness. The disruption of harmony and modernist themes of death and violence are glorified when Cesare kidnaps Jane. Jane is colored in white to symbolize innocence and peace and her body is outstretched upon the bed to suggest the character of “ damsel in distress”. This heightens ultimate sympathy and vulnerability for Jane, therefore increasing the severity and horrendous nature of performing acts of murder. Thus, the German expressionist film recalls modernist attitudes that reinforce the dread and mysterious nature of the German interwar period.

The Cabinet of Dr Caligari thus reflects distinctive themes of modernism including a focus on psychological reality derived from Sigmund Freud, experimental techniques, and innovative themes. The end of traditional monarchical society and the introduction of social democracy led to the contradiction of classical Greece and Roman art and literature, as there was a period of financial hardship and mental deterioration of individuals. The genre of psychological horror is also a modernist aspect, thus conveying the dark ideas that build from unconsciousness and insanity. Therefore, the film suggests distinctive innovative themes of modernism including destruction, alienation, and violence.