



THE CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI

1920 (GERMANY)

Director Robert Wiene **Producers** Rudolf Meinert, Erich Pommer

Screenplay Hans Janowitz, Carl Mayer **Photography** Willy Hameister

Music Alfredo Antonini, Giuseppe Becce **Cast** Werner Krauss, Conrad Veidt, Friedrich Feher, Lil Dagover, Hans Heinrich von Twardowski, Rudolf Lettinger

Is cinema an art form? The answer to this question might appear quite obvious nowadays, but in the early 1900s German intellectuals were fervently debating it. Produced right after World War I, Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (*Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*) offers its own solution to the problem by bringing various expressionistic techniques to the screen.

Co-written by Carl Mayer, an important figure of the German film industry in the 1920s, the film relies upon an aesthetic of fragmentation that manifests itself first through the use of a framed narrative. Francis (Feher) tells the story of an old man named Caligari (Krauss) who holds a show at the local fair: he presents Cesare (Veidt), a cadaverous somnambulist who can supposedly predict the future. Meanwhile, a series of seemingly random murders—as well as an attempted kidnapping—occurs in town and everything leads to Caligari, but, as we go back to Francis, we learn that things aren't always that clear-cut. In fact, as the story unfolds, the spectators soon realize that each and every shot is conceived as a unity. Some of the most striking visuals in cinema history largely compensate for a

◀ *Caligari* undoubtedly offers a dark mirror image of German society, maybe even one of the darkest. Ranging from post-war American *film noir* to contemporary Goth bands, its influence has been wide ranging to say the least.

somewhat static *mise en scène*. We witness fractured lines and *chiaroscuro* lightings combined with shadows drawn on the ground and walls, oversized objects and extremely distorted perspectives that plunge us into a nightmarish world.

Derived from the theatre and produced under economic constraints, *Caligari's* artificial look is much indebted to the two-dimensional painted settings that three artists belonging

“... I MUST KNOW EVERYTHING. I MUST PENETRATE THE HEART OF HIS SECRET! I MUST BECOME CALIGARI!” DR. CALIGARI

to the famous Berlin magazine *Der Sturm* designed. The acting in the film, which also introduced the world to Conrad Veidt, is on par with its hysterical aspect, with outrageous make-up and clothes dating back from various decades over a century.

Even if German expressionism tries to escape from that country's then sinister reality, and is more concerned with fantastic visions issued from disturbed minds, it nevertheless strongly reflects its time. Hence, film critic Siegfried Kracauer considered *Caligari* and other movies made from 1920 to 1933 as foreshadowing the coming to power of nazism, through the repeated presence of menacing figures who manage to successfully manipulate the masses. But *Caligari* also tackles what is at stake in a lot of horror films: how a victimized monster's actions arguably act out very distinctive repressed feelings, according to the point of view we choose. **SJ**

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The town's vistas are both sinister and striking as the somnambulist, Cesare, carries Jane away, refusing to commit the murder ordered by Caligari.

