

# Expressionism and the Real Cabinet of Dr. Caligari

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I want to consider all of the film of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), not simply the original story--of a Caligari finally exposed by Francis--which was housed by director Robert Wiene in a framing story that exposes *Francis* as a madman. Most critics, Siegfried Kracauer significant among them, view the original story, a script by Hans Janowitz and Carl Mayer, as truly "expressionistic," as an exposure of "the madness inherent in authority."<sup>1</sup> Kracauer goes so far as to call it "an outspoken revolutionary story...whose meaning reveals itself unmistakably at the end, with the disclosure of the psychiatrist as Caligari: reason overpowers unreasonable power, insane authority is symbolically abolished" (p. 9). Kracauer feels, as did Janowitz and Mayer, from whom he got his information, that Wiene perverted, if not reversed, the expressionistic intentions of the original story; that, in answer to mass desires or commercial instinct, "a revolutionary film was turned into a conformist one--following the much-used pattern of declaring some normal but troublesome individual insane and sending him to a lunatic asylum" (p. 11). I want to go against that view here, and I want to do so by a careful consideration of what happens in the original story as well as what happens outside it, in the "frame," and by showing a more than superficial relationship between original story and framing story.

Kracauer's opinions about the final film of *Caligari* rest on two erroneous assumptions. Number one, the doctor in the original story, or the story that the insane Francis tells to his older companion seated next to him on a bench, is *not* revealed to be Caligari, as Kracauer believes; he is revealed to be the Director of a mental hospital *posing* as one Dr. Caligari at fairs so that he can carry on his experiments with the somnambulist Cesare. The real Caligari is a doctor/mystic from the year 1703 who set out to discover whether a somnambulist, or one in a trance, can be driven to murder; the Director wants to see if he can duplicate the real Dr. Caligari's experiments. This is not a

small point, because what it indicates is that the "historical"<sup>2</sup> Dr. Caligari is known to the student/artist Francis through his readings, as well as to the actual Director of the mental hospital to which Francis has been committed. The one-time student/artist Francis, now insane, makes up a story about the Director of his mental hospital in which the Director takes on the identity of Caligari in secret to carry out his experiments with Cesare. In the story, the somnambulist Cesare murders the Town Clerk, who reluctantly granted "Caligari" a permit to exhibit Cesare at the local fair, and Alan, Francis' best friend. He almost murders Jane, the young woman whom both Francis and Alan love, before his master is exposed by Francis and the local authorities to be the force behind the murders and the Director of the area mental hospital. "Caligari" himself goes crazy at the sight of the dead Cesare (who dies, oddly, of exhaustion--more on this later), and is forced into a straitjacket and placed in a cell in the very hospital he once ran. This is the end of Francis' story, or hallucination, told to a companion within the insane asylum.

What happens shortly thereafter, back in the "real" world of the insane asylum where Francis resides, leads us to the second of Kracauer's erroneous assumptions. At the end of his story, Francis says (on title), "And since that day the madman ['Caligari'] has never left his cell" (p. 96). Then he is astonished to locate Cesare, who dies in his story, among the crowd in the hospital courtyard, and he is overjoyed to find Jane, whom he claimed to love in his story and whom he still claims to love, but who ignores him totally. But to see the Director again, strolling among his patients, is too much for him. In his story, Francis had confined Caligari to a cell, and now here he is out and free again! Francis goes berserk and grabs the Director, shouting, "You all believe I am mad. That is not true. It is the Director who is mad. He is Caligari, Caligari, Caligari" (p.99). He is finally overcome by a group of attendants, placed in a straitjacket, and dragged into the same cell in which the "Caligari" of his story had been incarcerated. As the film ends, the Director turns from Francis' bed and says, "At last I understand the nature of his madness. He thinks I am that mystic Caligari" (p.100). Now Kracauer claims that director Wiene made Francis a "normal but troublesome individual" who, by virtue of the story he concocts, shows why he has been confined to an insane asylum. The Director of the asylum at last understands the case of his patient, and feels he will be able to cure him. "With this cheerful message," states Kracauer, "the audience is dismissed" (p. 11). But Kracauer misunderstands the Director's understanding of Francis' case. Francis is not simply a lunatic who makes up terrible stories about nice people. Yes, he is insane, but he is an insane *murderer*. That is what the Director's line, "He thinks I am that mystic Caligari," tells us. Francis knows who the historical Dr. Caligari is, and so does the Director of the insane asylum. Francis is a murderer, and the nature of his "mad murdering," which the Director now understands, is that he believes the Caligari of his student reading has made him, or hypnotized him to murder. Why else would the Director say that the nature of Francis' madness is that he thinks he, the Director, is the mystic Caligari? Would that alone make a man a candidate for madness, and even if so, could such a deviation

alone, and absolutely, explain the *nature* of his madness? I think not.

Seeking to rationalize his murdering (his companion on the bench has apparently not yet heard his story), to give it, however misguided or unconsciously, the sense or order that it did not have while he was committing it, or to exorcise the demon (the mystic Caligari) who, he insanely believes, has driven him to commit murder, Francis, in the confined world of the asylum, has chosen the Director to play the part of, or pose as, Caligari, Cesare to be the murderer (himself) under Caligari's spell, and Jane as the object of his affections. His two victims--two people he probably murdered at random in his insanity, but who take on special "expressionistic" significance in his story--Alan and the Town Clerk, are conspicuously missing from his company in the hospital courtyard at the end of the film. Francis does not play himself, for he must be free in his mind to capture and imprison the demon Caligari who is the source of all his problems. What unites the real Director, Cesare, and Jane is the fact that all three are the very opposite of what Francis makes them into in his story. Cesare, all timid and tidy, gazes raptly at a flower throughout the final framing scene. Jane, enamored of Francis in the original story, does not even acknowledge him in the first framing scene (Francis with the older man on the bench, about to begin his story) or the last. And the Director is a meticulously dressed, kind and gentle man, hardly the dishevelled, evil, scheming "Caligari." If Francis turns these three into their opposites, then it follows, if my theory about his being a murderer is correct, that he should turn himself into his opposite: a perfectly sane, intent (in his pursuit of Alan's murderer as well as his studies), upright and peaceful young man. He does. He must be so to be able to pursue his "Caligari" with impunity. He chooses Cesare to play himself, because Cesare, as signified by his identification with a white flower, is in real life what Francis thinks himself to be: peaceful, sensitive, loving. And like Francis, he is *not* a somnambulist (he becomes one, in Francis' story, even as Francis believes he himself must have become one to commit murder). Indeed, it is not even clear his name is Cesare: when Francis calls him this upon locating him in the hospital courtyard in the final "frame," his older companion is somewhat astonished and hurries away. "Cesare" is the name *Francis* has given, in his story, to the real Dr. Caligari's somnambulist; that is, "Cesare" is the name he has the Director in the story use for his somnambulist.

"Caesar" is also the name of the madman kept in "the Doctor's" household in the first expressionist drama, Strindberg's *To Damascus* (1898). This "Caesar" functions, naturally, "as the leitmotiv of the hero's megalomania," according to Walter Sokel, while "the Doctor appears as the hated and dreaded leitmotiv of the hero's guilt."<sup>3</sup> I do not think Janowitz and Mayer could possibly have been unaware of this when they wrote their original draft of *Caligari*, given the high regard in which Strindberg's play was held by the dramatists of German expressionism. I also do not think they failed to see the similarity between "Caligari," the name of an Italian officer Janowitz pulled from his reading in *Unknown Letters of Stendhal* for use as the name of the imaginary mystic from 1703 (Kracauer, p. 7), and "(Gaius *Caesar*) Caligula," the name of the Roman emperor from

37-41 A.D. Listen to this description by Siegfried Kracauer of Caligari's character, and then think of Caligula's senseless cruelty: "The character of Caligari stands for an unlimited authority that idolizes power as such and, to satisfy its lust for domination, ruthlessly violates all human rights and values" (p. 9). My point is not to make a connection between Caligula's Rome and Germany before the rise of Hitler. I am trying to suggest that Cesare and "Caligari" are aspects of Francis' own insane murderous self (if you pronounce the last "e" in "Cesare" like the last "i" in "Caligari," you will hear a similarity in the names that is not so apparent to the eye), that Robert Wiene saw this in the original script of *Caligari* given to him to direct but did not see it sufficiently embodied, and decided to do something about it. In short, rather than pervert or reverse Janowitz and Mayer's original intentions, Wiene was serving those intentions, was carrying them to their logical conclusion. If Janowitz and Mayer were now denying the intentions inherent in the script, that was, apparently, as far as Wiene was concerned, their problem.

Francis' very name is an expressionistic projection or externalization—"expression"—of what he thinks is his essence: the brotherly love of St. Francis. No one calls him Francis in the framing story; by way of having others call him Francis in the story he tells, *he* calls himself that. "Caligari" has Cesare murder the Town Clerk for his arrogance and inefficiency. In his will to unlimited authority over another, he cannot tolerate anyone else's limited authority over him. In the expressionist hero Francis' will to unlimited freedom and self-expression, he cannot tolerate the small-mindedness of the bourgeoisie and its omnipresent bureaucracy. So he kills the Town Clerk. "Caligari" has Cesare murder Alan for his naivete and boyish enthusiasm. Alan is described by R.V. Adkinson in the script of *Caligari* as "a young man of aesthetic pursuits...[and] high ideals. He affects the style of the Nineties aesthete—a loosely-tied, flopping bow-tie and hair parted in the centre in the style of Aubrey Beardsley" (p. 44). If he is not Francis' double, then he is only a slightly exaggerated, or condensed, version (the duplication of the "an-" in Francis' name, in Alan's, and in Jane's, is not accidental). When Cesare is stabbing Alan to death in the latter's room, we see *Francis'* shadow, not Cesare's, hovering over Alan. Francis murders in Alan what he hates in himself. He is, again, the consummate expressionist by Walter Sokel's account: "A deep conviction of unworthiness runs as a constant theme through the works of the Expressionists. In fact, Expressionism can be viewed as the attempt of a generation to come to grips with and somehow transcend the calamitous self-contempt that has overtaken the modern poet" (p. 83). I add the following, also Sokel's, only because it seems particularly descriptive of Francis' confinement in an insane asylum in the film, and because it suggests the peculiar absence of warmth and love from the world of the film, the coldness and severity which are all it consists of: "The [Expressionist] poet stands on the margin of life, longing to be in the center. But something in himself bars him from ever reaching it, from ever partaking of the world's warmth and love" (p. 83).

"Caligari" has Cesare attempt to murder Jane for her unusual beauty and charm as much as for her poking her nose into his affairs.

Cesare gets all the way to the point where he is standing over Jane's body, knife in hand, but he cannot stab her. Something in himself makes him suddenly stop, "his shoulders move jerkily several times [and] an almost benevolent expression spreads over his face" (p. 76.). He then attempts to take her away for his own. The something in himself that makes Cesare stop is the animus of Francis. Francis attempts to destroy what he loves but has been unable to attain; when he cannot, he makes one last try at reaching Jane, at "partaking of the world's warmth and love." Here is Sokel on the expressionist in love: "His relation to the opposite sex reflects his general feeling of inferiority. If he is not altogether unable to gain a woman's love, he is incapable of holding her affection for any length of time" (p. 83). Francis does not love himself; therefore, he cannot expect the love of another. He kills his double, who is also in love with Jane. For much of the time in the two framing episodes, "he gazes wistfully at [Jane] and thinks that if she only condescended to love him she could redeem him..." (Sokel, p. 83). Cesare dies of exhaustion from his efforts to carry the prostrate Jane away. In his role as Francis' alter ego, he can do nothing but collapse and, literally, roll out of the picture. Right after he does, we see Francis looking through the window of "Caligari's" trailer at Cesare's own "double"--the dummy, modeled in the exact likeness of Cesare, lying in the "cabinet" for all to see, in order to allay any suspicion which might fall on Cesare while he is off committing another murder. The "real" Cesare collapses, and Francis, eyeing his "double," is immediately disturbed, even though he cannot know of Cesare's death yet and thinks that it is in fact Cesare at whom he is staring. What happens to his alter ego happens, *mutatis mutandis*, to him.

Alan and the Town Clerk are dead, Cesare has abducted Jane, and Cesare is dead. The path of Francis' storytelling consciousness, of his "Ich," can only lead to "Caligari." Jane tells Francis it was Cesare who almost killed her. Francis reexamines the criminal whom the inept police are convinced is the murderer of Alan and the Town Clerk. He is as puzzled and disbelieving as he was when the suspect was first presented to him as the murderer--naturally enough, since he recognizes no aspect of himself in this bearded, gnarled individual (like Francis and Alan, Cesare is pale and gaunt, an aesthete in any other life). Francis returns to "Caligari's" trailer, goes inside, and discovers that what he thought was Cesare lying in the "cabinet" asleep was really a dummy replacement. "Caligari," who has resisted Francis' attempts to enter the trailer, is now implicated, and runs away. As "co-dramatizer," with Cesare, of Francis' murderous self, "Caligari" can only take the escape route through expressionist landscape that Cesare took with Jane. Francis follows him, and at one point appears in silhouette in the background as "Caligari" races through the foreground: Francis is the dark consciousness that is responsible for this tale. "Caligari" returns to the insane asylum where he is Director. Francis finally convinces the doctors there, after the Director's books and notes on somnambulism are found, that the Director has been assuming the role of Caligari on the side to carry out his investigations with Cesare. The body of the dead Cesare, found in the fields, is returned to the asylum. (Significantly, Francis

has not been eye-to-eye with Cesare since the night the latter predicted Alan's death, at the fair.) "Caligari," faced with the dead body of his other half, as it were, loses all control. He is exposed. After he is straitjacketed and locked inside a cell, we see Francis standing outside the huge door to the cell, very bewildered. He is *very bewildered*, not overjoyed, because it is not so much "Caligari" he has succeeded in exposing as himself. That is why he must be straitjacketed in the same way "Caligari" was and returned to the same cell, once his story ends and we are back in the "real" world of the insane asylum: he *is* Caligari, or Caligari is an extension of himself.

So, I go against the grain of most *Caligari* criticism in that I imagine the film less as Janowitz and Mayer's expressionistic exposure of "the madness inherent in authority" perverted by Wiene than as Wiene's own exposure, aided unwittingly by Janowitz and Mayer's original story, of *the madness, excess, and ultimately self-destruction inherent in expressionism itself*. This interpretation becomes more compelling once one considers that *Caligari* was produced at a time when dramatic expressionism was beginning to exhaust itself as a movement. Wiene uses Francis' insane murdering as a *device* to investigate expressionism. In no way, do I believe, is he attempting to equate, even remotely, the real Francis with the real-life expressionists. Wiene gives this away in the final framing scene; he shows that his concern is not with the criminally insane Francis but with the vision he has been able to extract from his Francis' mind. The hospital courtyard at the end of the film looks the same as it did during the previous expressionistic sequences: even though we are back in "conventional reality," perpendicular lines have not replaced oblique ones. The implication is that Francis is more the expressionist imprisoned by his own vision than the madman imprisoned for murder. In the final "frame," the Director now appears as the "Caligari" of Francis' story when he puts his spectacles on, now does not when he takes them off. There is nothing expressionist but that "vision" makes it so. Wiene is not suggesting that the real Director of the insane asylum is Caligari-like in the power and authority he wields over human minds. That would be facile. The Director says, right before the film ends, "At last I understand the nature of his madness. He thinks I am that mystic Caligari. *Now I see how he can be brought back to sanity again*" (emphasis mine; p. 100). That *itself* is facile: thinking Francis can be cured (of his expressionism? the expressionists were to plod on for four more years, until 1924) so easily. Wiene pokes fun at the facileness and ineptitude of the bourgeois mentality, perhaps the human mentality itself, in its search for simple answers to complex questions (recall the Director's self-satisfied, foolishly smiling face staring out at the camera for the final iris-out). He manages to give a good swift kick in the pants to the bourgeois power structure so detested by the expressionists at the same time he burlesques or overthrows, in Francis' story, the naiveté and extremism of much of dramatic expressionism itself.

That naiveté and extremism are represented to an unparalleled degree by Janowitz and Mayer's original story, taken alone: a fairly melodramatic Francis exposes almost singlehandedly "the madness inherent in authority"; he crushes "Caligari," and he himself

is not directly or personally affected (aside from what happens to Alan and Jane) one bit. That is pure *silliness*, and perhaps Robert Wiene's real achievement in *Caligari* is to have laid bare the silliness, the dead end, more than the madness, inherent in authority, in *formulation*, of any kind, political, social, or artistic. He did something on film that the expressionists were never able to do on stage: criticize, or laugh at, themselves at the same time they scored their points.

Tellingly, the expressionist experiment in film largely ceased with the advent of sound: things were too much like the theater again, where the word was primary. The word ultimately destroyed dramatic expressionism because within the form it tended to lack variety, subtlety, and ambiguity: *richness*. It destroyed cinematic expressionism because, speaking, its characters, before their painted sets and artful lighting, were somehow less real, even ridiculous. There was nowhere to go from Wiene's criticisms. Wiene meant, I think, to enrich or improve expressionism. Instead, he has come to represent the final word on it.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Siegfried Kracauer, "Caligari," in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, a film by Robert Wiene, Carl Mayer and Hans Janowitz, trans. R.V. Adkinson (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), p.11. All subsequent page references will be to this edition. Kracauer's essay (pp. 5-26) precedes the script, which includes not only Adkinson's translation of dialogue, but also his running description of the action.

<sup>2</sup>Historical for the purposes of this film. There is no such figure as Dr. Caligari in actual history. He is the screenwriters' invention, if his name is not. This issue is discussed further on p. 6 of this essay.

<sup>3</sup>Walter H. Sokel, *The Writer in Extremis: Expressionism in Twentieth-Century German Literature* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1959), p. 36. All subsequent page references will be to this edition.

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