

Expressionist Mise-en-scene in The Cabinet of Dr Caligari

The Cabinet of Dr Caligari uses stylised sets, with strange, distorted buildings painted on canvas backdrops in a theatrical manner. Caligari showed how studio-built sets could approximate the stylization of Expressionist painting. Performance works hand-in-hand with the other elements of mise-en-scene. Conrad Veidt's dance-like portrayal of the sleepwalker Cesare makes him blend in with the graphic elements of the setting. According to David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, "the graphic design of the scene where Cesare's body echoes the tilted tree trunks, typifies the systematic distortion characteristic of German Expressionism."

The extract listed below from Mike Budd's commentary on the Eureka DVD release of The Cabinet of Dr Caligari explores one of the most famous scenes from the film. This clip is not available on the website.

Scene Analysis: (00:40:08 to 00:40:49)

"One of the most famous and memorable scenes in the film begins with Cesare creeping along the wall. One critic has said, "it is as though the wall exuded him."

The extract listed below from Mike Budd's commentary on the Eureka DVD release of The Cabinet of Dr Caligari explores the connection between mise-en-scene and character. This clip is not available on the website.

Scene Analysis: (00:42:52 to 00:43:06)

"In this shot of Cesare carrying Jane across the deranged perspectives of the town's rooftops, character, action and setting seem to fuse into a simple, but powerful expressionist image."

The extract listed below from Mike Budd's commentary on the Eureka DVD release of The Cabinet of Dr Caligari examines the visual representation of the character of Cesare in the film.

Scene Analysis: (00:43:52 to 00:44:24)

"David Borwell and Kristin Thomson have noted that an actor is always a graphic element in a film, but a stylised film, like the Cabinet of Caligari, underlines this fact. They point out, "Conrad Veidt's dance-like portrayal of the somnambulist Cesare makes him blend in with the graphic elements of the setting. His body echoes the titled tree trunks. His arms and hands, their branches and leaves."

The extract listed below from Mike Budd's commentary on the Eureka DVD release of The Cabinet of Dr Caligari explores the relationship between character emotion and an expressionist mise-en-scene. This clip is not available on the website.

Scene Analysis: (00:26:24 to 00:26:59)

“At this point Francis is walking down the stairs from the police station and his path of light is painted directly onto the steps he walks on. Crazy patches of painted light adorn the walls. And if we reflect that this character is about to begin the logical and rational process of solving a murder mystery, the bizarrely irrational nature of his surroundings becomes even more striking.”