

## The Cabinet of Dr Caligari

**In the chapter 'The Moments of Caligari' from the full study of The Cabinet of Caligari: Texts, Contexts, Histories, Mike Budd argues that although the film is often thought of as a modernist or avant-garde work of art, in many ways it is very conventional. He contends that we need to understand the unconventional aspects of the Cabinet of Caligari as transgressions of the norm of an otherwise commercial narrative film.**

According to Mike Budd, "Caligari is famous in large part precisely because its techniques draw attention to themselves: the setting and the acting, costumes and make up of Werner Krauss as Caligari and Conrad Veidt as Cesare, and the uncanny narrative reversal at the end. But these strange elements are so effective, I believe, only because of more familiar, less visible elements of realism and continuity that have received little attention."

Budd points out that much of the film is constructed as a conventional search, a kind of detective story with Francis looking for the murderer of his friend Alan. The search gives the central character a goal and drives narrative forward. The film is structured as a conventional, classical narrative relying heavily upon the continuity device of crosscutting to weave together two or more narrative lines.

The expressionist settings of Caligari are the first and most important way in which the film deviates from the realist norms of classical narrative cinema. They seem insistently to force their attention on us, to refuse the subordination of "background" to narrative action and character demanded by classical cinema. But, according to Mike Budd, "the strong narrative momentum generated by the protagonist/narrator's search works against this and tends to put the settings back in their place."

The extract listed below is from Mike Budd's commentary on the Eureka DVD release of The Cabinet of Dr Caligari explores the film's role in introducing modern art to the cinema. This clip is not available on the website.

**Cinema's first art film:** (00:05:23 to 00:08:53)

"Caligari was made within the German Studio System and was first shown in commercial theatres. Later it was shown in art theatres, film societies and film courses. It became famous as the film that introduced modern art – expressionism specifically – into the new medium of the movies. Modernist art is often difficult for many people to understand. Caligari helped bring this new art into the larger world of popular culture..."

This extract listed below from Mike Budd's commentary on the Eureka DVD release of *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* explores the use of Classical Hollywood Style in the one scene from the film. This clip is not available on the website.

**Scene analysis: Framing and Frame Cuts:** (00:27:00 to 00:28:06)

"Following the rules of the continuity system, Francis exits one shot, then enters the next, thus perceptually, our eyes will follow the movement of the central character. The first shot in this next scene, establishes the whole space of Jane's garden. Then cuts into a closer shot at the point in the scene where the audience is likely to want to see the character's faces more closely. In particular, the film director wants us to focus on the emotions of the characters as Francis tells Jane of Alan's murder. The editing, as with other film techniques, follows the dictates of the story. This shot eliminates the space around the characters, emphasising their gestures and facial expressions. Like the previous scene with Francis on the steps, the shot ends with the characters leaving the shot. And the next shot begins with the characters entering the shot. These are called frame cuts."

The extract listed below from Mike Budd's commentary on the Eureka DVD release of *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* explores the relationship between Expressionism and Classical Hollywood Narrative in the film. This clip is not available on the website.

**The Classical Narrative Style:** (00:01:07 to 00:05:23)

"The key to understanding this film is to understand the two broad and opposing cultural traditions operating within it. First, the popular, commercial tradition of story continuity and realistic imitation of the world. And second, the artistic, non commercial tradition of discontinuity, modernism and active transformation of the world....the narrative and continuity style was a major popular and commercial success."

This extract listed below from Mike Budd's commentary on the Eureka DVD release of *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* explores how the makers of *Caligari* combined Expressionist techniques with the continuity style. This clip is not available on the website.

**Expressionism meets Classical Narrative:** (00:14:42 to 00:16:361 )

"The makers of *Caligari* carefully selected those elements of expressionism that would fit into a popular and commercial context. Rejecting the most radical elements, they appropriated certain themes, settings and other elements. Whereas the story and editing continuity in *Caligari* is thoroughly conventional and untouched by expressionism, the settings introduced the most disturbing and modernist elements. Make-up, costumes and acting are also stylised and expressionistic.....The angular, splintery shapes, the titled houses, leaning walls and distorted spaces seem to infuse the world of the film with strangeness and dread. These uncanny shapes came from the artistic world of the expressionist avant-garde. But when they became part of a story told in the continuity style, they also became part of the popular tradition of the horror film, exemplified by *Frankenstein* and *Son of Frankenstein*. Both disturbing and familiar, *Caligari* is

caught between the innovations of an artistic avant-garde and the reassuring familiarities of commercial culture.”