

# The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920)

Robert Wiene. (1873-1938)

## OVERVIEW

*Auteur:* Robert Wiene (1873-1938) was a writer and film director of the silent film era of German cinema. He is particularly known for *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) which is considered to be one of the finest examples of German expressionism. He is also famous for *Raskolnikow* (1923), an adaptation of Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*; *The Hands of Orlac* (1924), a silent horror film; *One Night in Venice* (1934), an operetta film. He was born in Breslau as the elder son of the successful theater actor Carl Wiene. Following the rise of the Nazis to power, he fled Germany as he was of Jewish descent. Wiene died of cancer at the age of 65.

*Film:* *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* is a 1920 German expressionist, silent horror film written by Hans Janowitz and Carl Mayer, and directed by Robert Wiene. The film focuses on the themes of insanity, madness, crime, and greed for power. In the film, the hero Francis recounts his experiences with Dr. Caligari, a mysterious man at the fair who controls a somnambulist called Cesare and commits secondhand murders at night. After his friend Alan is cruelly murdered, Francis is determined to investigate the crime and find out the truth about Dr. Caligari.

*Literary/Historical Background:* Expressionism is an art form “in which the image of reality is distorted to make it expressive of the artist’s inner feelings or ideas”. Thus, emotions and the inner world of the subjects are brought to the forefront. German expressionist films were prevalent in the 1920s. German expressionist movies included *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1920), *Nosferatu* (F.W. Murnau, 1922), and *Sunrise* (F.W. Murnau, 1927). These films were characterized by the play of light and shadows or the contrasts between dark and light, stylized visuals, and silhouettes. The visual style of the films matched the somber mood of the films the themes of which were insanity, betrayal, disillusionment, and other philosophical and psychological topics. The gruesome experiences that the German nation went through during WWI contributed to the crystallization of the expressionistic style and its philosophically significant themes. *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* may thus be said to communicate the deep emotions that the German nation felt on a conscious and sub-conscious level regarding the madness of authority, the madness of war, and greed for power. Moreover, the movements of the actors in the film are exaggerated, overly theatrical, and unnatural. These movements manifest more the emotions and the subjective inner realities of the characters rather than an objective reality that is amenable to the measurements of the sciences.

## CHARACTERS

- Francis:* The heroic protagonist of the film who investigates his friend Alan’s murder  
*Dr. Caligari:* The man at the fair who uses a somnambulist both for his show and for committing murders  
*Cesare:* The young somnambulist, a puppet of Dr. Caligari, who commits murders  
*Jane:* The lady loved by both Francis and Jane  
*Alan:* Alan is Francis’ best friend. His curiosity about his future brings his downfall.  
*Dr. Olsen:* Jane’s father helps Francis with solving Alan’s murder.

STORY (The story consists of six acts.)

## **ACT I**

**The park** The story begins with two men sitting in a park, where the old man talks about how the spirits have driven him away from his family. Then there appears a woman in white whom the young man called Francis calls his bride. Francis tells the old man that what they have been through together is much more interesting than what the old man has. From this point on, the main story is a flashback of past events. The park where Francis and the old man are sitting, is a place characterized by dark and greenish colors, catching our attention with what seems like thousands of branches of trees intertwined in complex and twisted ways, already reflecting the irrational and scary atmosphere of the story to us as-of-yet unaware viewers. The town where Francis was born, Holstenwall, a dense area with bizarre and twisted buildings, has a town fair. Alan, Francis' friend, tells Francis about the fair.



**Dr. Caligari appears** Meanwhile, a man named Dr. Caligari is visiting the town. He asks for a permit from the town secretary to showcase his spectacle which features a somnambulist called Cesare. The secretary behaves rather rudely towards Dr. Caligari. Dr. Caligari is irritated by the secretary's berating him. He waits impatiently. The secretary ultimately gives him the permit. Dr. Caligari presents Cesare to the public.



## **ACT II**

**Somnambulist predicts** That night the town secretary is murdered with a sharp instrument. During the day, Francis and Alan are joyfully touring the fair. Meanwhile, Dr. Caligari continues to present Cesare to the public. The somnambulist has been sleeping for twenty-three years. Dr. Caligari tells the public that Cesare knows all the secrets about the past and the future, and can answer any question. Despite Francis' efforts to stop Alan, Alan asks Cesare how long he will live. Cesare responds that Alan will live until daybreak. Returning from the fair, Francis and Alan read the news of a murder in Holstenwall. Later, they run into Jane, for whose affection both are competing on friendly terms. That night Alan is murdered in his room with a sharp dagger.



## **ACT III**

**Murder investigation** In the morning, Francis learns that Alan has been murdered. He is devastated by this news. Then he remembers Cesare's prophecy about Alan. He runs to the police authorities, swearing that he will not stop until he solves these murders. Afterward, Francis visits Jane, who is likewise devastated upon hearing the news of the murder. Francis investigates Alan's death with the help of Jane's father, Dr. Olsen, who has permission from the police authorities to investigate Cesare the somnambulist. Nevertheless, Dr. Caligari is unwilling to let the men investigate. That night, a man is caught attempting to murder an elderly woman.

## ACT IV

**Cesare kidnaps Jane** The suspected person confesses that he doesn't have anything to do with the first two murders, but he wanted to murder the elderly lady with a similar dagger as was used in the first two murders to deflect blame from himself. On the night following Alan's burial, Cesare sneaks into Jane's house to murder her. As he is about to commit the crime, he changes his mind and abducts her. However, Cesare cannot go far on his own without the help of his master, Dr. Caligari. He eventually lets go of Jane and collapses as he tries to run away from others trying to catch him. When Jane tells Francis and her father about what happened to her, Francis cannot believe her, as he had observed Cesare sleeping in the cabinet for hours.



## ACT V

**Dr. Caligari is at the Mental Hospital** Francis asks the police officers whether the man who was caught is still in his cell to make sure that he was not Jane's attacker. The police officers come to the cabinet of Dr. Caligari upon Francis' request. When they search the box in which Cesare sleeps, they find a dummy of him instead of the actual somnambulist. Meanwhile, Dr. Caligari escapes. Francis follows him and sees that he enters a mental hospital. The director of the mental hospital turns out to be Dr. Caligari. Francis tells the hospital staff about what has happened and Dr. Caligari's true identity. At night, while the director is sleeping, they investigate his study room and find his books on somnambulance and his letters. They learn that the actual Dr. Caligari was a mystic from 1703 who, with a somnambulant called Cesare, toured Italy and committed many murders in different cities. They read in one of his diary entries how overly excited Dr. Caligari is that a somnambulist is finally coming to stay in his asylum and that he was long fixated on the idea of experimenting with a somnambulist to see whether they can be turned into a murderer.



## ACT VI

**Dr. Caligari is a mental patient** Cesare is found dead in the woods. Francis confronts the hospital director, saying that he is Dr. Caligari, and brings Cesare's dead body to him. Dr. Caligari attacks one of the hospital staff, but then staff members restrain him in a straitjacket, put him in a cell, and he becomes a patient of his own asylum. From this point on, the main story is finished, and we go back to the present. In the present, Francis turns out to be a patient of the asylum along with Jane and Cesare. Cesare is not a somnambulist or a murderer, but rather a silent figure with flowers in his hand. Jane has the delusion that she is a princess. Dr. Caligari of the main story turns out to be the director of the asylum. Unlike the character in the main story, he seems to be genuinely interested in the well-being of his patients. Francis is shocked and horrified at his sight. He attacks the director but is stopped by staff members and put in a straitjacket himself. Francis is put in the same cell that Dr. Caligari was put in in the main story. The director finds out that Francis believes him to be the mysterious Dr. Caligari. The director says in the end now he understands Francis' delusion and knows the way to his healing.



## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**FRANCIS** (Agreeable)

Francis is the heroic protagonist of the main story. He recounts his tragic experiences to an old man through flashbacks. These flashbacks build the main story in which Francis symbolizes the questioning and investigative spirit that dares to rise against tyrannical authority. In the frame story, however, he is no

more the heroic protagonist, but an inmate of the asylum. It turns out that the main story the viewers have been told was the product of Francis' deluded mind.

*Loyal* In the main story, Francis is a loyal and protective friend to Alan. At the beginning of the film, we see Alan visiting Francis to tell him of the news of the fair in the town. The happiness that is derived from their friendship is a silver lining among the series of events that befall them. The scene where Alan joyfully visits Francis to tell him about the fair is one of the most heart-warming scenes in the film, as it emphasizes the strong friendship, camaraderie, and happiness of the two men. Moreover, even though both Francis and Alan are in love with Jane, they do not let their friendship get damaged because of their feelings toward Jane. After Alan's gruesome death, Francis is determined to find the murderer, which shows us the degree of loyalty he has towards Alan even after he has passed.

*Determined* Francis is investigative and determined to solve Alan's murder. He is someone who strives for justice and clarity. He is not afraid to question the authorities, observe Cesare in his cabinet, and follow Dr. Caligari to the asylum. When Francis first sees Dr. Caligari enter the asylum and reads the sign of 'Irrenanstalt', the German word for asylum; he is shocked and disturbed. This is a scene that creates a lot of suspense for the viewers and foreshadows Francis' deluded mind. Later on, Francis examines Dr. Caligari's letters and belongings with the help of the hospital staff. He is akin to a beam of light in a corrupt and twisted town.

*Delusional* In the frame story, which comes with a twisted end, Francis is a patient of the asylum and is deludedly holding to the idea that the director of the asylum is the mysterious Dr. Caligari. He is no more the hero who rises against irrational and tyrannical authority but is a paranoid patient lost in the maze of his own mind.

#### **ALAN** (Agreeable)

Alan is a warm-hearted friend of Francis and is in love with Jane. He is kind and curious by nature. His friendship with Francis constitutes a heartening aspect of the film.

*Warm-hearted* Alan is first seen in the film while he is reading a book in this room. The news of the fair makes him elated. He is joyous and jubilant as he goes to tell the news of the fair to Alan. His warm-heartedness is seen in his facial expressions and his kind behavior toward Alan.

*Curious* Alan is curious by nature, as seen in his enthusiasm about the fair. He is also curious about Cesare's talent for prophesying. However, his inquisitiveness about how long he will live and asking Cesare the somnambulist about this brings his downfall and death in the main story. Oddly, there is no trace of Alan in the frame story.

#### **JANE** (Agreeable)

Jane is the daughter of Dr. Olsen. She is loved both by Francis and Alan. She has a rather passive role in the main story where she is abducted by Cesare. In the frame story, she is one of the inpatients of the asylum along with Francis and Cesare.

*Passive* In the main story, Jane doesn't play an active role. She is loved by both Francis and Alan. However, the viewers do not get to learn about her feelings. Although she is deeply devastated at the news of Alan's death, she does not participate in the investigation of the case as Francis does. Later on, she is abducted by Cesare and again subjected to the effects of the actions of others, but she does not initiate actions herself. She can escape only because Cesare lets go of her.

*Delusional* In the frame story, Jane is an inmate of the asylum where she has the delusion of being a queen. When Francis asks her when they will finally marry, she answers him by saying that queens cannot marry according to their hearts' desires. Overall, she seems to have built up an illusory world of delusions in her mind like the other patients of the asylum.

## **CESARE** (Disagreeable):

The somnambulist is the obedient puppet of Dr. Caligari, committing crimes according to his orders. He is a trained murderer whose power and strength are dependent on his master. In the frame story, he is a rather nonviolent and peaceful person. The contrast between the murderer in the main story and the non-violent Cesare in the frame story is striking.

*Obedient* Cesare is twenty-three years old and has been sleeping for twenty-three years. He has been trained by Dr. Caligari to be his obedient slave or puppet. He is used by Dr. Caligari to work at the fair and prophesy the future to the public.

Cesare has an iconic face as he foretells what will happen to Alan, that he will not live long. There is a sharp contrast between the black makeup surrounding his eyes and his very fair skin which adds to the dramatic effect. Meanwhile, in the night, Cesare commits secondhand murders, the morality of which he never questions. He symbolizes the unquestioning, submissive, and yielding masses who likewise do not question the actions of tyrannical authorities.

*Violent* Cesare is violent as he commits the murders of both the town secretary and Alan. He is also sent to murder Jane; however, he changes his mind. When he abducts Jane and moves away from his master, he loses his power and strength and collapses. Thus, we see that even though he is trained to be a violent murderer, his destructive power is entirely dependent on his master, Dr. Caligari. Because of his dependence, he is nothing without Dr. Caligari.

*Peaceful* In the frame story, Cesare is not a somnambulist, but an inmate of the asylum. He is a rather silent and nonviolent person as he is seen caressing the flowers that he is holding in his hand. His peaceful nature builds a sharp contrast to the violent character we have seen in the main story. However, he looks like a submissive and passive person which can be seen as similar to his obedience in the main story where he was someone who blindly followed whatever orders he was given by Dr. Caligari. This similarity regarding the passiveness and submissive nature of Cesare makes us question the truth of the two stories once again.

## **DR. CALIGARI** (Disagreeable)

He is the director of the asylum in both the main and frame stories. In the main story, he uses Cesare the somnambulist to commit secondhand murders through him. He is the evil master of Cesare, a power-hungry madman. In the frame story, he is the benevolent director of the mental hospital.

Dr. Caligari's outlook is reflective of the German expressionistic style of the time, as seen in the black strips on his hands and hairdo, underlining his inner world that is comprised of greed, ambition for power, and fixations.

*Greedy* Dr. Caligari is a man greedy for power. It is his greed that causes him to be obsessed with the idea of controlling a somnambulist. He has complete disregard for the well-being of others. A flamboyant and ambitious showman, whose greed is visible in his facial expressions and gestures, he exploits and manipulates Cesare. As he presents Cesare to the public, has his eyes wide open, reflecting the high degree of his fixation on the somnambulist and on controlling him. He also deceives the public and the hospital staff. Nonetheless, his actions do not cause him to feel any remorse or guilt. His greed for power overrides all other concerns. His greed for knowledge is reflected in his speech: 'I must know everything. I must penetrate his secret. I must become Caligari.' These sentences show us Dr. Caligari's fixation on the mysterious hypnotist figure Caligari from a few hundred years back and reflect his ambition to emulate him, and gain the same powers he had.

*Obsessed* Dr. Caligari is obsessed with the idea of becoming like the mysterious figure of Caligari from northern Italy around the 1700s who had 'successfully' controlled a somnambulist and committed murders through him. His obsession and racing thoughts control his mind. Thus, even though Dr. Caligari is the evil master of Cesare the somnambulist, he is a slave to his own mind.

*Evil vs benevolent* Although Dr. Caligari is the evil character in the main story; In the frame story, he is the rather benevolent director of the asylum, apparently concerned with the well-being of his patients. The contrast between the evil and benevolent characteristics of the asylum director in the main and frame stories is vivid and striking.

## THEMES

PHILOSOPHY (Sanity vs Insanity – Authority: Obedience or Uprising – Duality)

**Sanity vs Insanity** An overarching theme of the story is the juxtaposition between what is real and what is unreal. From the beginning, we are led to believe that the story Francis tells us the viewers is something to be relied upon as he presents himself as a rather insightful, investigative, and sane person. However, in the twist ending of the story, we shockingly realize that Francis is an inmate of the asylum, and all that he has told us was his hallucination about a series of events that never occurred. In the twist ending, the main characters, Jane and Cesare also turn out to be inmates of the asylum. This twist ending raises the question of who, if anyone, can be trusted and how what is real can ever be distinguished from what is unreal. An interesting fact, however, is that Dr. Caligari is the director of the asylum in both the main story and the frame story, which makes the viewers skeptical as to whether the frame story is entirely trustworthy and if there is some truth in the story told us by Francis. Moreover, the visual design of the film is distinguished by its dark, strange, and eerie atmosphere. Twisted and distorted streets and buildings; sharp forms and angles; the uncanny play of light and shadows make us question whether this is a world of truth and reality; or a nightmarish world, reflecting the delusions and hallucinations of an insane person. Thus the visual atmosphere of the film is another marker of the contrast between truth and falsity or sanity and insanity. Also, there are two more aspects of the film which make us, the viewers, doubt whether the frame story is entirely true: First, nightmare-like visual elements and bizarre architecture are employed both in the main and frame stories. Second, Alan and Jane's father Dr. Olsen are absent in the frame story. All these points make us question what the truth about the story is, or whether there is any truth at all.

**Authority: Obedience or Uprising** The main story presents a form of authority that is corrupted, malicious, insane, and exploitative. The viewers learn how power can make authority corrupt. Dr. Caligari is a man of greed, using the obedient Cesare for his vicious aims through whom he commits secondhand murders. Cesare represents the passive, weak, obedient spirit who can be manipulated into committing heinous crimes. Francis, on the other hand, is a symbol of the questioning, investigative mind or spirit that dares to question those in authority. Thus, the themes of obedience and investigation or uprising are juxtaposed against one another.

Another compelling side of authority that can be seen in the film is represented by the positions of authority figures, such as clerks and police officers who sit atop high chairs and perches in opposition to the public who are physically closer to the ground, symbolizing the powerlessness of the public compared to officers ranking higher in the social hierarchy. Even Dr. Caligari is in a desperate situation when, in the main story, he first comes to Holstenwall to obtain permission from the officials to showcase his spectacle, but is berated by the arrogant clerk who is rather dismissive of him. Thus, the inequality between people from different social classes and occupations is underlined, which causes disruptions in human communication and bitter feelings among those in the lower ranks of society.

Looking at the historical period when the film scenario was written, we see Germany as a country defeated in the war and people distrustful of irrational authority. The writers of the film, Hans Janowitz and Carl Mayer, were both pacifists who met after the end of WWI. Therefore, it is possible that irrational, insane, and power-driven Dr. Caligari reflects the writers' own experiences and ideas about the irrationality of the war and how the people in authority waging wars against enemy states are as power-driven as Dr. Caligari.

**Duality** The film is characterized by various dualities related to concepts, themes, visual effects, and people. One overarching duality is the contrast between the main story and the frame story. From what is told to the viewer, the frame story is supposed to reflect the truth or reality versus the main story, which is

supposed to reflect the falsity comprised of hallucinations and delusion or unreality. However, given that the viewers were deceived once by Francis' tale, our trust in the truth of events is broken; it is uncertain whether we can believe the truth of the frame story either. Therefore, the lines between what is supposed to represent the truth and falsity are blurred.

Another duality is about being active or passive regarding life circumstances. In the main story, Francis is investigative and questions authority, as particularly exemplified in his investigation of Alan's murder. Thus, he is someone who actively responds to the calamities around him. On the other hand, Cesare, the somnambulist, is a passive character who is trained to obey his master, Dr. Caligari under all circumstances. He does not have an active reaction to what is occurring in his environment. The only time where he makes his own decision seems to be when he decides not to kill Jane but abduct her. Nevertheless, even in that exceptional case, Cesare's attempt at abducting Jane fails as he loses his strength if he goes physically too far away from his master. After people run after him to catch him, Cesare runs into the woods. Before he is about to collapse, we see bizarrely shaped trees in the background. It cannot be overlooked that Cesare with his bizarre posture, looks like one of the trees. He is tied to his master Dr. Caligari as the trees are tied to, and dependent on the earth beneath them. This can be interpreted as Cesare not having enough strength to carry out his own decisions because he is utterly dependent on his master. Cesare cannot achieve anything or even survive if he is physically too far away from his master, Dr. Caligari. Considering this contrast between the mindsets of Francis and Cesare, we can conclude that, at least in the main story, Francis represents those with a mind and decisions of their own, taking an active approach towards life; whereas Cesare represents rather passive people who have to follow or obey authority, and who cannot rise against them. Thus, the duality between an active versus passive approach toward life is carefully delineated throughout the film.

The third duality is between good and evil. As Cesare is about to kill Jane with a dagger, we see a visual contrast between the white sheets that Jane is sleeping with versus the black outfit of Cesare which might be interpreted as a duality between good and evil, innocence and malice, and so on.

The fourth kind of duality is that which is seen in the visual design of the film. Sharp geometric shapes, spiraling streets, and eccentric-looking places jostle for our attention. The bizarre and powerful facial expressions of the actors are all unnatural and reflect the German expressionist style. Thus the visual aspects of the film, taking on a nightmarish quality, present a sharp contrast to the natural world we see around us and present a dualism between the natural and the non-natural. The expressionistic style of the film reflects the emotions and the inner world of the characters rather than an objective presentation of the world as it is.

## SOCIETY (Identities)

**Shifting Identities** Is one's character a stable entity, or is it amenable to change according to the circumstances one lives under? Can we maintain our rationality under all conditions?

Francis is the heroic, rational, brave protagonist in the main story who is unafraid to question the overpowering authorities. However, his character turns out to be a production of his deluded mind. In the frame story, he is a paranoid person with unreasonable suspicions about the director of the asylum being the mystic Dr. Caligari. There is an abrupt change in Francis' character that makes us, the viewers, doubtful as to which Francis is the real one. We see how identity is something malleable and unstable.

Dr. Caligari is the antagonist of the main story. He is a greedy and tyrannical megalomaniac. But, ultimately, he is a mentally afflicted person because of being under the control of his mind's obsessive thoughts. Dr. Caligari turns out to be the director of the asylum in the frame story just as he was in the main story. In the frame story, however, we see an abrupt change in him as he turns out to be a benevolent doctor who seems interested in and caring for his patients. This abrupt change in the identity of the director makes the viewers uneasy. Can we trust that he is indeed benevolent? In the main story, we had witnessed Dr. Caligari's malevolent intentions regarding his patients, and how his greed caused him to use Cesare as a means to commit secondhand murders. Given this evil behavior in the main story, his benevolent character in the frame story does not seem to be reliable, trustworthy, or stable. Once again,

this incredible shifting in identity demonstrates to the viewers how identity is not something steady, solid, or moored. It can change following the changes in one's mind and the world one finds oneself in.

Therefore, it seems that we cannot entirely find the director trustworthy, and we have rightly many reservations about him. The stairs towering behind him in this scene can be considered a symbol of our doubts regarding the director's true intentions. The film ends with a close-up of Dr. Caligari, or the director of the asylum, leaving the viewers uncertain about many things, including what was real or unreal about both the plot and the identities of the characters in the film. Thus, the ending leaves us with a feeling of uncertainty.

#### PSYCHOLOGY (Fixation)

**Fixations** If we put aside the dreamlike and bizarre elements of the story, we see that at its most basic *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* is about the fixations of a doctor that ultimately consume and turn him into a power-greedy madman. The asylum director's fixation on attaining the knowledge possessed by the mystic Dr. Caligari from the 1700s makes him forget about the well-being of his patients, including the somnambulist Cesare, whom he views only as a means to an end, which is to gain power over Cesare and commit secondhand murders by controlling him. Dr. Caligari is overly zealous and manic as a new somnambulist is admitted to the mental hospital who is to become his Cesare. His wide-open eyes betray his madness and ambition. Dr. Caligari's greed for attaining power over people can be likened to the greed of power-hungry authorities during wartime who do not consider the well-being of individuals who get harmed or killed. Thus, it can be concluded that greed and fixations can cause disasters both to the affected individual and those around him or her. Nevertheless, Dr. Caligari is a victim of his mind as the repeating phrases in his mind and his fearful reaction to them show us that sometimes thoughts can be overwhelming and uncontrollable. This is the nature of mental illness as it might devour a person, metaphorically speaking.