Jackson Chandler

German 2320

Lesson 3

Expressionism of The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari

Robert Wiene’s *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* is a post, World War 1 film, filmed in Germany that had a new and unique way of delivering a political message. This expressionist film style directly benefitted from the mindset of the post war German people, in which it helped influence and related their loss of World War 1. The films expressionism and political undertones mirrors the German people’s feel of tragedy from the loss. This German expressionism movement was a huge emotional outlet for a new and uneasy German people.

Expressionism is part of an artistic movement known as modernism that started in the mid nineteenth century. This movement attempts to express disappointment with the modern western culture and civilization and was adapted into the new growing technologies of this time period such as telegraph, radio, film, and etc. This movement is spurred on by the growing urban sprawl of the western world and was mostly a movement centered around Germany, potentially due to their quick rise to a world power and the effects of defeat in the first world war. The movement took several mediums and used extremes to convey their points.

The German post war expressionism sought to use film and cinematography in particular to instill confidence back into the German people by the display of intense visuals to drive an emotional response from the viewer as well as reject the fanatic individualism. The German people had a split personality syndrome going on after the war, this is from the strong nationalism that was felt prewar and the label as warmonger given to them after the war. Doctor Caligari hints at this and is aided by the films use jagged surfaces and dark, chilling colors to tell the story of a murderer, but as the film shifts to show what is really going on the scenes change back to straighter and smoother lines with brighter colors. This split highlights the Jekyll and Hyde of self the German people were experiencing. Francis is the German people, he thought he was fighting the good fight, he thought he was right accusing Doctor Caligari, and he thought he was sane, but as the audience came to learn he was not, he was a patient of Doctor Caligari and in asylum. This twist at the end was added later in the films development and it highlights the confusion and disillusion of the German people, but also changes the message the film originally wanted to portray.

The portrayal of Doctor Caligari as a powerful force with a complete disregard for the human-self foreshadows a future of the tyrannical role of Adolf Hitler the atrocities committed by him. Caligari’s control of Cesare and using him to kill people makes the connection to Adolf Hitler noticeable if for nothing else, hindsight, and continues the political under tones alluding to the coming fascist movement. Caligari embodies this expressionism movement and personifies a political message to the German people, authority will not the defeat chaos. This show of control and authority again foreshadows the fascist movements to come, but speaks to the German people looking and needing a stable rock to hold onto. The film attempts to dissuade the viewer from falling into this police state, this loss of freedom, and self. It promotes to the viewer to think critically of their world around them and not just fall in line. *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* uses these expressionist undertones to drive the message, but the attempt seemed to have failed to sway enough people after the edit was made to show Caligari as the asylum head instead of the murder the narrator led us to believe he was.

The film *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* embodies the current feeling of the German people in their new post war lives. The destruction of life, jobs, and property along with the humiliation of war reprimands left the German people in a disillusioned state. The overt nationalism led to a superiority complex and a sense of righteousness, the film reflects this confusion and loss through its overt expressionism and use of cinemograph techniques. The film attempts to convince people to think critically and analytically and not fall into to a blind trust with an overwhelming authority, because this is the perfect situation for tyranny to flourish and grow. Based on the major events to follow *The Cabinet of Doctor* Caligari it appears to have made valid points about the state of the German people and the German state. Films such as this were used to express the feelings of the German people and the expressionism movement blossomed under this period of German history.