

# Characteristics and Influences of German Expressionist Films in the Early Twentieth Century

Jiamu Yi

Art College of Sichuan University, Chengdu, Sichuan, 610065, China.

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**\*Corresponding author:** Jiamu Yi, Art College of Sichuan University, Chengdu, Sichuan, 610065, China.

## Abstract

As an avant-garde film movement in the early 20th century, German Expressionist film had an undeniable influence in world film history. Expressionism, as an artistic genre that emerged in modern art, continued to develop through the popular art of film. This article starts from the birth of Expressionism and the advent of German Expressionist films, combined with the analysis of the most representative German Expressionist film, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, to expound the basic characteristics in art design, performance and subject matter of German Expressionist films. After the German expressionist films withdrew from the historical stage, with the development of Hollywood genre films, some of the basic characteristics of German expressionist films had a profound impact on horror films and noir films in the period of classic Hollywood films. With the development of neo-noir films and sci-fi noir films in recent years, German Expressionist films are influencing modern films in a unique way.

## Keywords

German Expressionist films, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, Contemporary films

## 1. Introduction

After World War I, Germany inherited the artistic style of Expressionism and developed Expressionist films, which promoted the formation of Hollywood genre films such as horror film and film noir. Attribute to this.

## 2. The origin of German Expressionist films in the early twentieth century

### 2.1 The birth of Expressionism

In the history of contemporary art, Expressionism emerged in the late nineteenth century, developed from Post-Impressionism. Expressionism is defined in the Oxford Art Dictionary as follows: "Term in art history and criticism applied to art in which traditional ideas of naturalism are abandoned in favour of distortions and exaggerations of shape or colour that urgently express the artist's emotion, subjective reactions above the observation of the external world." (Ian Chilvers, Harold Osborne, & Dennis Farr, 1994)

During the Post-Impressionist period, none discovered it more than the Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890). He took a subjective approach, painting not just what he saw, but how he felt about what he saw, and he started to distort his images to convey his emotions (Will Gompertz, 2013). Van Gogh painted twisted trunks and uglified branches in bleak tones to convey extreme cruelty, Within three years of Van Gogh's death, Edward Munch (1863-1944) used a distorted method to produce *The Scream* (1893), influenced by Van Gogh. *The Scream* is considered to be a representative work of Expressionism. The main body of the picture is a human with a distorted figure, unknown gender and skeleton-like face, screaming by covering his ears by the sea, which make viewers directly feel the anxiety

conveyed by the picture effectively.

## 2.2 The advent of German Expressionist films

German expressionist film, specifically referring to the expressionist film genre that emerged in Germany in 1919, the first film of this genre is clearly considered to be *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* directed by Robert Wiene (1873-1938) in 1919. In the terms of film art design such as costumes and film-set, it uses the basic elements of expressionist painting such as distortion and ugliness, with horror and grotesque and other themes in the terms of subject matter and text, which is the succession of Expression is minother art categories.

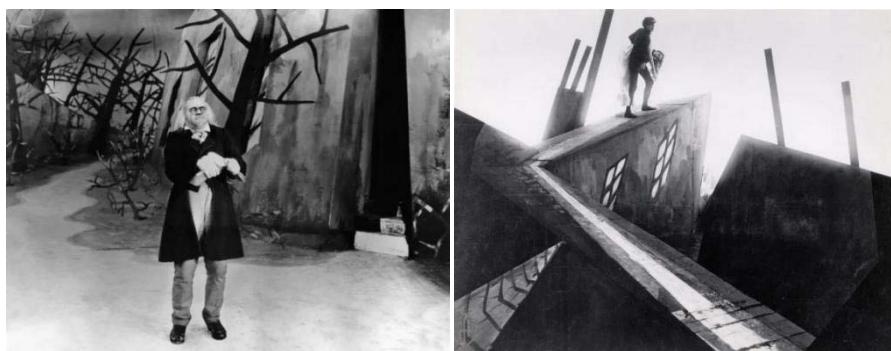
German expressionist film emerged after World War I. As a defeated country, Germany faced, economic depression, social unrest, and other factors after 1918. It made a significant impact on German artists' mind and mental, causing them to feel helpless, anxious, and filled with a general sense of loss and crisis towards reality. Therefore, the expressionist had become the mainstream of art in an environment where pessimism and depression were the dominant forces. The film industry, naturally followed this trend. Expressionist film was born in this way.

After the release of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, German Expressionist films were booming. Among the most representative are *Genuine: A Tale of a Vampire* (Robert Venet 1920), *From Morning to Midnight* (Karl Heinz Martin 1920), and *Destiny* (Fritz Lang 1921), *Nosferatu, a Symphony of Horror* (F.W. Murnau 1922) etc. However, film historians hold two opposing perspectives about the last expressionist film. In a broader sense, Fritz Lang's 1927 *Metropolis* marked the end of expressionist film, while Paul Laney's *Waxworks*, shot in 1924, considered to be the last expressionist film.

## 3. The essential characteristics of German Expressionist films in the early twentieth century

### 3.1 The features of film art design in German Expressionist films

Among the art design in Expressionist films, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* stands out. The production designer, Walter Lehmann, is a member of the expressionist organization Der Sturm and believes that the film should be extraordinary in form and its sets should have an unrealistic, fantastical expressionist style (Teng Guoqiang, 1995). To achieve the effect of expressionism, they replaced real-life scenes with expressionist-style sets, ditching location shooting favor of studio shooting. In addition, by distorting, and unstable transforming all natural scenes in reality, they are displayed on the set two-dimensionally, with even light drawn on the background through line and shape.



As shown on the picture, there are bare trees pointing to sky distorted, the house in the background does not follow the principle of realism perspective, and the windows are placed in different sizes and shapes on the house, there is no depiction of the character's path on the roof of the house, since its curved spire points to the sky, With the pale sky, the large light ratios portrays a pessimistic social image to the audience, there seems to be no hope.

In terms of costumes, the actors wear stylized and odd-shaped costumes. A hypnotized person's pale face is smeared with extremely unnatural dark circles under the eyes due to anti-naturalistic, exaggerated and distorted make-up techniques, which make his facial figures such as those in Edward Munch's expressionist paintings.

### 3.2 The performance characteristics in German Expressionist films

The performances in Expressionist films were mostly influenced by Expressionist theatre, exaggerated performance techniques are used to express the inner distortion of the characters, and the movements of the characters are matched with the figures in the expressionist paintings.

An exaggerated performance of auxiliary characters as well as costumes and makeup are in fact integrated into the set of the entire film, creating a mood of pessimism and anxiety. And this kind of expression is just in the “uncanny valley” theory, the characters seem to appear in the form of human beings, but they are separated from human actions, and deepen the audience's sense of fear.

### 3.3 The subject matter of German Expressionist films

*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari tells an absurd fantasy story full of key points such as sleepwalking, hypnosis, murder, and more. In the following German Expressionist films, expressionist artists took on the key points in The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, looking for themes such as negativity, loneliness, and fantasy from reality. (Kristin Thompson & David Bordwell, 2002)*

In Nosferatu, a Symphony of Horror (F.W. Murnau, 1922), the vampire figure appeared for the first time in the film, and also used death and fear as key points. In the course of the development of the film, the fate of the protagonist Boot is threatened by the ghost and devil, and thus shows the theme of violence and death. Metropolis (Fritz Lang, 1927) also has key points such as fantasy and religion, but the way of expression is closer to expressing the soul between tyranny and chaos through a pessimistic imagination of which is the extension of Expressionism.

## 4. The influences of German Expressionist films in the early twentieth century

### 4.1 From horror film to film noir

In the late 1920s, Expressionist films gradually declined under the stable economic and political development of Germany. Expressionism lost its social soil, and some German directors went to Hollywood one after another. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, war increased and anti a considerable number of European filmmakers and technicians fled to America, more particularly Hollywood. This period, the genres most influenced by Expressionism were horror film and film noir (Susan Hayward, 2017).

In film themes, horror films and film noirs directly inherit the subject matter characteristics of German Expressionist films. Moreover, crime, violence, thriller are the main themes of film noirs. In film art design, horror films and film noirs often use the lighting and setting styles from Expressionist films, with the help of large light ratios to form strong chiaroscuro contrasts.

For example, Frankenstein (James Whale, 1931) and The Bride of Frankenstein (James Whale, 1935), two classic American horror movies, selected human experimentation combining death, science fiction as the theme, and focus on the inner shaping of the protagonist. In addition, the director processed a large number of expressionist scenes such as cramped spaces and steep stairs in the environment, with the large light ratio displayed on the protagonist's face, and expressed the fear in the psychological state.

In the popular film noirs from the 1940s to 1950s, the distortion in film set gradually transformed into the distortion and instability in cinematography composition. The slashes are used extensively in the composition to divide the picture into different shapes to create a shaky picture, the use of slashes even exceeds the horizontal lines. Besides that, the large light ratio of expressionism is directly adopted in the image to make a large area of shadow appear in the picture.

### 4.2 Expressionist features in modern films

In modern films, the term of Expressionism has been long invisible to describe the characteristics of a certain film. However, with the development of horror film and film noir, the characteristics of Expressionist films have gradually penetrated into the viewing habits of ordinary audiences and become an institutionalized way of film-making.

Among the neo-noir films in recent years, *The Wild Goose Lake* (Yinan Diao, 2019) is a representative sample. The theme of the film is still dominated by crime, using high-contrast and low-key lighting, and integrating realism in the film sets to express the distortion in real life through the cluttered feeling of urban architecture. The characters are still disappointed, lonely and hopeless, in line with the basic expressionist theme of “soul in chaos” of expressionism.

The features of sci-fi noir movies are more likely an extension of the film characteristics of Metropolis. Specifically, compared with traditional noir films, the subject matter has added science fiction elements, which are linked to futurism, dystopia, cyberpunk, etc. Nevertheless, the characterization is still pessimistic, and it is the extension of expressionism in science fiction.

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