



BFI FILM CLASSICS

DAS CABINET DES  
DR. CALIGARI

DAVID ROBINSON



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The exhausted Cesare (Conrad Veidt) lays down the abducted Jane (Lil Dagover)

# Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari

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David Robinson



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## Foreword

Historically, *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* can fairly be reckoned as the beginning of German Expressionist cinema. In terms of the gothic – the potent blend of horror and romance with intent to thrill – it represents only a milestone in a vigorous early century revival of a genre which had somewhat faded since the romantic era. Three seminal manifestations of the new gothic were British: Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and W. W. Jacobs's *The Monkey's Paw* (1902), all of which have captivated film-makers ever since. The ghost stories of M. R. James began to appear in 1904, those of Algernon Blackwood in 1906. Gaston Leroux wrote *Le Mystère de la chambre jaune* – the first of several adventures of Detective Rouletabille – in 1907 and *The Phantom of the Opera* in 1911. Most influential for German cinema, however, were the novels and stories of Hanns Heinz Ewers (1871–1943), later to be notorious as the biographer of Horst Wessel, who portrayed himself in the hero of the Frank Braun gothic trilogy (*Der Zauberlehrling*, *Alraune* and *Vampir*).

Before *Caligari*, German film-makers had already seized on the new gothic. The first version of *The Phantom of the Opera* was directed by the young dancer-choreographer and Reinhardt collaborator Ernst Matray in 1916. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was filmed seven times between 1910 and 1918, in Denmark, Russia, Hungary and America, as well as in Germany, where it was directed by Richard Oswald. *The Student of Prague*, freely adapted by Ewers from Poe's *William Wilson*, was filmed by Paul Wegener and Stellan Rye in 1913; Ewer's own *Der unsichtbare Mensch* (*The Invisible Man*) was filmed in 1916, and the scandalous *Alraune* – frequently to be adapted in later years – in 1918. Old Jewish myth gave Paul

Wegener and Henrik Galeen a gothic theme for *Der Golem* (1915). In Britain the first of at least ten adaptations of *The Monkey's Paw* appeared in 1915. America seemed slower to feel the new mood, but turned back to an earlier era with two adaptations of *Frankenstein*, in 1910 (Edison) and in 1915 (Joseph W. Sunley's *Life without Soul*).

The marriage of gothic and Expressionism achieved by *Caligari* was nevertheless a major step for cinema, even if some critics have echoed Blaise Cendrars's complaint that it 'casts discredit on modern Art because the discipline of modern painters (Cubist) is not the hyper sensibility of madmen but equilibrium, intensity and mental geometry'. It is a criticism that fails to recognise that film-makers were influenced by Expressionist theatre rather than the pure plastic arts of Expressionism which the theatre had borrowed and processed to suit its own forms and purposes. Karlheinz Martin's *Von Morgens bis Mitternacht* (1920) was in fact directly based on the stage production of George Kaiser's Expressionist play. Wiene made three more films in the Expressionist manner, *Genuine* (1925) and the more successful *Raskolnikov* (1923) and *Orlacs Hände* (1925). Other significant titles that belong to the new gothic-Expressionist school were *Nosferatu* (1921), Murnau's unauthorised interpretation of *Dracula*, Fritz Lang's *Destiny* (1921), Arthur Robison's *Warning Shadows* (1923), Paul Leni's *Waxworks* and Henrik Galeen's *The Student of Prague* (1926). An intriguing title from the group now lost is *Das Haus des Dr. Gaudeamus* (1921), co-written by Thea von Harbou, based on her novel *Haus ohne Tür und Fenster*, and directed by the multi-talented Friedrich Feher, who plays Franz in *Caligari*.

\* \* \*

This monograph was written in 1997. Its innovation was the forensic examination of then recent documentary evidence – notably the original screenplay – that conclusively discredited Hans Janowitz's 'story of a famous story' that had been trustingly

accepted and passed down for fifty years since it was endorsed by Siegfried Kracauer in *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947). Academia moves with caution and some recent English-language books still perpetuate the old myths. A fuller and more detailed account and analysis of the Janowitz and Mayer screenplay than is possible here is afforded by the essays of Uli Jung and Walter Schatzberg, and the late Siegbert S. Praver, in the Stiftung Deutsches Kinemathek's 1995 publication of the complete script (see Bibliography).

Viewed afresh, *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* remains, after nearly a century, a staggeringly effective film. Very few feature-length films of its period are so compellingly watchable. It makes a dazzling merit of its tiny stage and shoestring budget, thanks to its crazy cubist/expressionist decors, and the impudence of the spinning umbrellas which masquerade as a fairground and the descending flight of steps which magically conveys us there from the city. The story is economically told, with its own jagged rhythm and coherent performances. The painted landscapes, the menacing Caligari and the uncanny Cesare – vanishing into his own shadow; agonisingly, mesmerisingly opening the great enchanted eyes – have bequeathed some of the most haunting images of the gothic cinema.

The 'story of a famous story' has obscured the ultimate responsibility for this remarkable achievement. It was undoubtedly a happy combination of talents. The writers provided the skeletal story; the designers supplied the setting and the look; Conrad Veidt, Werner Krauss, Lil Dagover inhabited it; Meinart was a sympathetic supervisor; the absentee Pommer gave the OK. The contributor who is least often mentioned – because he died too soon to get into the credit-claiming contest – is the director Robert Wiene. With the unravelling of 'The story of a famous story' and the restoration and revaluation of Wiene's oeuvre, we can perhaps begin to establish a more impartial balance of credit among the variously gifted but often combative contributors to the marvel that is *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*.