

Friday spotlight: The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari

Generally thought of as the first effort in the horror genre, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* directed by Robert Wiene goes back to the basics...of the basics. Made in 1919 while most films were “trying to make the audience forget they were watching a movie,” *Caligari* tore out a page from Georges Méliès’ book and his approach to the early film “*Le Voyage Dans La Lune (A Trip to the Moon)*” with stylistic, magical, and even otherworldly filmmaking techniques. As described by the writers, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* exists in its own “out-of-joint world,” implementing jagged angles in the set design, which the usage of harsh angles went on to become common in German Expressionist film. Every visual is skewed somehow, though the camera movement remained simplistic, usually being fastened to a middle point with a wide shot and allowing the characters and story to unfold within that view. Fritz Lang was originally set to direct and he donated a concept which eventually went on to be one of the reasons the film earned its “horror” title. He suggested that the film be told as a recollection from a character the audience could relate with, for he felt the film’s approach artistically was so extreme that it would be too much for the audience to handle. This idea allowed for the now infamous “twist” ending and also revolutionized the “flashback” method. During that time the expressionist viewpoint was being belittled by higher society figures and by revealing that the expressionist world the film takes place in is actually the insanity of a madman, the film became digestible to everyone, even the more conservative movie-goers of the time.

Caligari became something of a blueprint for other filmmakers such as Tod Browning, going on to be so admired for its concept and set design, which truly is the most striking element of the film, the elementary, theatre-inspired camera movement is all but forgotten. *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* is a bizarre, frightening and in many ways beautiful film experience; a mandatory viewing for anyone interested in the origin of horror film and film in general. It has a rare quality: to this day no film has attempted a set design as radical or in the same vein as *Caligari*, making it a true original.