

Robert Wiene, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920)

Abstract

Critics and scholars often consider the 1920 silent film *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* [The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari], directed by Robert Wiene, as the finest cinematic example of German Expressionism and a critical contribution to cinema's establishment as an art form. Presented as a lengthy flashback, the plot begins with Franzis (Friedrich Feher) and his friend Alan—competitors for the affections of a young woman named Jane—attending a carnival show together that is put on by the sideshow hypnotist Dr. Caligari (Werner Krauss) and his somnambulist (sleepwalking) assistant Cesare (Conrad Veidt). A series of brutal murders occur in the village at the same time as the carnival is in town, including the killing of Alan, and local authorities have no clues and no suspects. Franzis, however, suspects that Caligari has hypnotized Cesare into committing the crimes. In this scene, Cesare abducts Jane, and Franzis tries unsuccessfully to expose Caligari. In a series of twists that conclude in a nearby asylum, the film causes viewers to question the sanity and the intention of nearly every character. The ending reveals Franzis as a patient in the facility and Caligari as its director, but the film hints that this, too, affords only an incomplete picture of reality. The visual aspects of the film, especially the sets designed by Hermann Warm, have contributed at least as much to *Caligari's* reputation as the story line has. Wiene and his team created a fantastical world of tilted windows, jagged buildings, and strange trees, all of which serve to accentuate the anxious psychological states of the main characters.

Source

Intertitles:

Night

[Cesare sleep walks into Jane's home. He raises a knife to stab her but then abducts her instead. He is pursued and eventually releases Jane.]

Jane: Cesare!

Franzis: It cannot have been Cesare... Cesare was asleep during this entire time... I watched him for hours!

End of Act IV.

Act V.

[Franzis enters the police station]: Is the prisoner secure in his cell?

I'd like to see him.

[...]

[Franzis chases Caligari. He enters a building whose sign reads "insane asylum"]

Source: *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, dir. Robert Wiene, Decla-Film, 1920. [wikimedia commons: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Cabinet_of_Dr._Caligari](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Cabinet_of_Dr._Caligari)

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