

M, the Cabinet of Dr. Caligari and the Prophesized Rise of the Nazi Party

Legendary director [Fritz Lang](#) took a gamble when making [M](#), which tells the story of a child murderer in Berlin, as the film has been credited with forming two different genres: the serial killer movie and the police procedural. Lang's earlier silent films including *Metropolis* were all worldwide successes, and by the year 1931, the Nazi Party were on their march in Germany. Lang lived in Berlin where the left-wing showed the plays of Bertolt Brecht, and although the Nazi Party were not yet in full control, Lang's own wife would eventually become a member. I don't know what Lang's personal feelings of Germany were at that time, but the images in *M* were angry, vile, and extremely grotesque. It was as if Lang knew there was something brewing deep beneath the surface of German society, an evil that he felt he needed to express.

Most of the sequences in *M* are of dirty smoke-filled conference rooms, disgusting dives, and corrupt unmoral men committing secret conspiracies in the shadows. The German people Lang casted in the film were highly unattractive caricatures, as if they were some part of a sick decaying society, greatly reminding me of the demonic faces of the accusing judges in Carl Dreyer's silent *The Passion of Joan of Arc*. What I find highly fascinating is how identical the criminal and police worlds look from one another, as their business meetings are both shot in

dark dreary rooms, their fat fingers clenching their cigars, creating such thick smoke that it's difficult to visually make anyone out.

M was Lang's very first sound film and that new instrument is brilliantly put to use right from the very first frame, as you hear on the soundtrack the disturbing chant of a children's elimination game being played in a Berlin courtyard. That scene is immediately followed by a heartbreaking sequence involving a mother pathetically waiting for her little girl to return home from school, all the while the mother frantically calls out her daughter's name, while Lang cuts to images of an empty dinner plate, her daughter's ball rolling through a patch of grass and the balloon that was bought for her ensnared in some telephone lines. Sound is also brilliantly used when implicating the presence of the killer, especially by hearing him compulsively whistling the tune from *Peer Gynt* over and over again, until the notes stand in for the murders.

And yet Lang's sparingly use of sound has never been better put to use than it had in the thrilling conclusion of the film, when actor Peter Lorre, (In one of his first screen performances) gives one of the greatest speeches in all of film history. *M* was a film which explored many controversial themes that many artists at that time wouldn't dare tread, most importantly when asking audiences to try and understand the killer. Not sympathize with him but to understand him, as the child murderer pleads in his own defense, sweating in terror, crying out on how he cannot control or escape the murderous compulsions that consume him.

Lang's *M* is a film that came out of a revolutionary film movement called [German Expressionism](#). German Expressionism is a cinematic style that was largely confined to Germany due to the isolation the country experienced during World War I and usually involved surreal set designs with wildly non-realistic, geometrically absurd sets. Most films that helped categorize German Expressionism include films like *The Golem*, *Metropolis*, *Nosferatu*, *The Gambler*, *The*

Blue Angel and most famously *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* is one of the most visually frightening and bizarre horror films of all time and the quintessential film that started the German Expressionism movement in early German cinema. No other film was as expressive and abstract as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, with its bizarre sense of style which puts the viewer under its eerie and creepy spell. Many artists over the years have taken from this visual style and yet no other film has equaled *The Cabinet of Caligari's* haunting poetic power of horror and hypnotizing seduction.

When first viewing *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* the first thing you will notice is its bizarre German Expressionistic style. The world that these characters inhabit are full of sharp hostile landscapes and environments of abstract shapes, bizarre angles, twisted shadows and distorted sets. The building architecture is off kilter and many of the props seem to be painted on floors and walls to represent light and shadows that are geometrically off-balance. This ghastly visual look is intentional off course to give the viewer a feeling of inner emotional reality rather than realism. It's unsettling sets of instability gives the feeling of claustrophobia and space collapsing around the viewer as its actor's wear heavy make-up, and their acting and movements are greatly exaggerated, jerky and unnatural to blend in with the stylistic and abstract environment.

German Expressionism's odd and distorted style are as unrealistic as the dilution of its main character who's narrative is a good contrast to its style as it revolves around psychology, madness and murder. The film is not only considered one of the first major horror films of the cinema, but the zombie like characteristics of Cesare clearly influenced the Universal monster films of the 1930's, most famously Boris Karloff as the iconic *Frankenstein*. The film was also one of the first major films to establish a twist ending, which was something never really seen

before in the movies and quite shocking for its time. And yet similar to the claims Fritz Lang would later receive for *M*, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* was famous for its prophetic theories that the film foreseen the upcoming rise of Nazism in the later years of Germany. The way Lang portrayed the visuals in *M*, presenting grotesque images of an unmoral and decaying society that had an evil brewing beneath the surface, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* portraying a frightening world of unbalance, delusions, murder and madness. Siegfried Kracauer suggested in his book *From Caligari to Hitler*, that the character of Caligari actually symbolized Hitler, and the German people were the sleep-walkers hypnotized under Caligari's wicked spell.

Both *M* and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* present themes such as mob mentality, brainwashing and people illegally taking the law into their own hands. When viewers watch these films today such themes can ironically give audiences the frightening thoughts of the gradual rise of the Nazi Party. The one film that immediately comes to mind which does obviously hint of the Nazi Party affect in Germany is Fritz Lang's *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*. That film is actually a sequel to an earlier film titled *The Gambler* and tells the frightening tale of a criminal masterpiece who even when incarcerated knows how to hypnotize his men to carry out horrific murders. The film was released in 1933 and had several anti-Nazi slogans in the film for which Joseph Goebbels Ministry of Enlightenment and Propaganda delayed the film and ordered changes to be done.