

# The Cultural Significance Found in German Expressionism

Alyssa Phillips

## *Faculty Introduction*

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Blake Tritico

Alyssa Phillips' paper deals with the complex film movement of German Expressionism in the 1920s and early 1930s. This movement was based in Germany, yet had far-reaching effects across Europe. While there have been similar undertakings in exploring this movement, this represents a unique view done by an undergraduate. Phillips has done a masterful job in identifying the key elements of this movement and deeply investigating how these films were used to explore the depths and complexity of the human subconscious. Phillips has summarized each film and done an excellent job on the treatment of each archetype. This level of investigation and summary is typically addressed in graduate level courses and the depth and analysis done by Phillips is rare for an undergraduate.

## *Abstract*

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German Expressionism gained popularity in the 1920s and early 1930s. The films within this movement explored the depths and complexity of the human subconscious. These films also reflected the uniquely Germanic cultural mindset by using recurring character tropes. This paper analyzes six films in their original forms, ranging from the beginning of the movement in the 1920s to the end in the early 1930s. All secondary sources used are dated after the year 2000. The paper includes a summary of each film, along with an emphasis on the similarities and differences found for each archetype. I argue that the monsters repeatedly shown are the symbolic representations of the protagonist's sexual repressions. I also argue that the female victim was used as a call for a return to chastity. Later in the movement, each role becomes more ambiguous, as the lines between them blur. This adds a level of complexity not seen in the earlier films.

After its defeat in World War I, Germany was left in a state of confusion. The empire had been replaced with a democracy and financial debt burdened the new republic. The violence from the war had seeped into the everyday lives of ordinary Germans. According to Rüdiger Suchsland, in his documentary *From Caligari to Hitler*, “pure chaos reigned; people were hunted in the streets. Revolts, hundreds killed, mainly among liberals and the Left, a civil war which kept flaring up.”<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the public was flooded with new innovations, such as the improvement of public transportation, which made life change at a neck-breaking speed. Regular people could now leave their villages of origin and visit the big cities of Europe. In the midst of these massive changes, ordinary Germans had to deal with the fears that surrounded this new Germany, while still dealing with the national shame of losing the war. The art and film movement known as German Expressionism emerged as a result. Directors such as Fritz Lang, F. W. Murnau, and Robert Wiene used their Germanic heritage to blend the lines between the surreal and reality. They depicted the inner turmoil of the common people through their use of three distinct character types: the protagonist, the predator, and the prey. Analyzing the relationships between these seemingly different roles, provides an insight into the German mindset during the period between the two world wars.

## An Analysis of the Protagonist

The protagonists of early cinema were often quite simple. They were the heroes that fought against evil and protected the innocent. These characters were often relatable, common, and moral. In German Expressionism, the protagonist appears to follow this traditional formula, but over the course of the story they are often revealed to be unstable, easily manipulated, or morally ambiguous. These characters reflected the duality of German life at the time. Even though society appeared to be progressing, underneath the surface it was actually falling apart. According to Rüdiger Suchsland, even though the public tried to move forward, they faced riots, recession, and the psychological trauma that comes from war.<sup>2</sup> This is reflected in the complexity of the main protagonists as they strive to fight against the

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<sup>1</sup> *From Caligari to Hitler: German Cinema in the Age of the Masses*, directed by Rüdiger Suchsland, performed by Rüdiger Suchsland and Hans Wöhler, Looks Filmproduktionen, 2015, film.

<sup>2</sup> *From Caligari to Hitler*, 2015.

darkness that threatens their loved ones. In the film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* by Robert Wiene, the protagonist, Francis, retells a story about him and his lover to a man on a park bench. As he recalls the events, the audience is shown what seem to be flashbacks. Francis is shown to be well-dressed, articulate, and stable.<sup>3</sup> He comes across as the typical dashing young man found in many stories. Because of his demeanor, the observer is lured into believing his story, even when it becomes highly unrealistic. It is later revealed that he, along with many of the characters of the story, are inmates at an insane asylum. At this point, the trust of the observer begins to vanish. It is unknowable what parts of Francis' story are true, because the protagonist is revealed to be an unreliable narrator.<sup>4</sup>

F. W. Murnau, the director of *Nosferatu* and *Faust*, and Karlheinz Martin, the director of *From Morn to Midnight*, were both fond of moral characters that could be manipulated. In Murnau's film *Nosferatu*, the main protagonist Hutter is assigned to sell a house to Count Orlok in Transylvania. When he informs his wife Ellen, her instincts alert her to the danger that awaits him. Due to his good nature and naïveté, Hutter ignores her reactions and that of the Transylvanian natives. When the carriage arrives to take Hutter to the castle, nature itself reacts violently to his course of action. The animals flee in terror, the wind howls, and a sense of panic follows the carriage as it descends from the mountains. The protagonist is undeterred from his mission. From this moment on, he is in the snare of the monster. His actions eventually bring calamity to his own home as Count Orlok moves in next door.<sup>5</sup>

In *Faust* the main character is an educated righteous old man who exchanges his soul with the Devil for power, youth, and pleasure. Unbeknownst to him, it is a scheme set up by a demon, Mephisto, who has made a wager with an angel of God. If Mephisto can extinguish all of the divinity from Faust, then God will give the Devil all of mankind. Mephisto easily does this by striking the village with a plague. He offers Faust, who is the village doctor, the power to save the dying. He takes the offer. This seemingly good deed swiftly

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<sup>3</sup> *The Cabinet of Caligari*, directed by Robert Wiene, performed by Werner Krauss, Conrad Veidt, and Friedrich Fehér, Decla- Bioscop, 1920, film.

<sup>4</sup> *The Cabinet of Caligari*, 1920.

<sup>5</sup> *Nosferatu*, directed by F. W. Murnau, performed by Max Schreck, Gustav von Wangenheim, and Greta Schröder, Prana Films, 1922, film.

transitions him into being tempted with eternal youth. It is at this point that he signs a permanent bargain with Mephisto, and gives up his soul.<sup>6</sup>

In Karlheinz Martin's film *From Morn to Midnight*, the protagonist is painted as an everyday man. He is a bank cashier, husband, and father who provides for his family

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dutifully. While at work, the cashier becomes mesmerized by a foreign woman who comes in to withdraw money. Without a hint of interest from the woman, the bank teller develops grandiose ideas about running away with her to

live in luxury. Out of this delusion, he decides to rob the bank and abandon his life. Even after the woman rejects him, the cashier runs off to France and abandons his loving family without remorse. The average German citizen could certainly understand his desire for a better life, even as he actively destroys the one he already has.<sup>7</sup> These protagonists are not only important because of their ambiguity, but they also serve as the crucial link between predator and prey.

## An Analysis of the Monster

Through the course of their own actions, the protagonists inadvertently capture the attention of the predator. Often this creature is dark, stealthy, male, and in possession of immense power. Although the protagonist and the predator are adversaries, they are also tied together. It could be argued that the monster is a manifestation of the protagonist's own uninhibited sexuality. German Expressionist directors used Freudian concepts when constructing their killers. All of their protagonists have virtually the same fatal flaw. They are all obsessed with sex. In *Faust*, the protagonist loses his soul when he trades it for youth and physical pleasure. Later on, he falls for a girl named Gretchen. Faust allows the demon Mephisto to trick her by placing a golden trinket inside of her house.<sup>8</sup> In *The Cabinet of Dr.*

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<sup>6</sup> *Faust*, directed by F. W. Murnau, performed by Gösta Ekman, Emil Jannings, and Camilla Horn, UFA, 1926, film.

<sup>7</sup> *From Morn to Midnight*, directed by Karlheinz Martin, performed by Karlheinz Martin, Roma Bahn, and Erna Morena, Ilag-Film, 1920, film.

<sup>8</sup> *From Morn to Midnight*, 1920.

*Caligari*, the somnambulist Cesare is hypnotized by Dr. Caligari, who leads him to kill. Cesare ends up murdering Francis' best friend and love rival, Alan. After which, Cesare climbs into Jane's window. He intends to stab her, but taken by her beauty, he carries her away in the middle of the night. After it is revealed that all of the characters are mentally ill, Cesare, Jane, and Francis are standing in a courtyard. The last scene is Francis standing right in front of Cesare while talking about his desire for Jane. This is symbolic of how Cesare is a manifestation of the uninhibited lusts in Francis' subconscious. According to Jane Walker, "...the film easily lends itself to a Freudian reading wherein the split self of the conscious subject and its unconscious may be seen in the relationship between Caligari and Cesare as well as that between Francis and Caligari/Cesare."<sup>9</sup> Dr. Caligari himself represents the embodiment of Freudian theories taken to extremes, as he becomes obsessed with the subconscious and how to manipulate it.<sup>10</sup>

In *Nosferatu*, Hutter is introduced as a husband deeply in love with Ellen. After Hutter shows a picture of her to Count Orlok, the monster becomes obsessed with Ellen. Hutter goes through with selling him a house, which happens to be right across the street from Hutter's house. Orlok's window actually faces that of Ellen's. In the middle of the night the vampire enters her bedroom multiple times and tries to carry her away.<sup>11</sup> Whenever there are scenes in her room, the Count's house is always looming in the background. This shows that he is always looming in the back of her mind. She is never truly free from his grasp. Count Orlok could be interpreted as Hutter's strong desires for his wife. The movie shows that they stay in separate rooms and their marriage seems to be chaste. The struggle between the protagonist and the predator reflects the growing interest in Freud's theories on sexuality by the general public. According to Jerry Kennard, Freud believed that neurotic anxiety occurs when sexual desires are repressed. These would then be transformed into a symbolic representation that would act as a release.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Julia A. Walker, "In the Grip of Obsession:" Delsarte and the Quest for Self Possession in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*." The Johns Hopkins University Press. *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 58, No. 4, Film and Theatre (2006): 617-631.

<sup>10</sup> *The Cabinet of Caligari*, 1920.

<sup>11</sup> Jerry Kennard, "Freud 101: Psychoanalysis," HealthCentral.com, accessed July 5, 2017, <https://www.healthcentral.com/article/freud-101-psychoanalysis>.

<sup>12</sup> Kennard, "Freud 101."

## An Analysis of the Love Interest

The fight between the sexualized villain and the virtuous prey is symbolic of the growing concern many had when the Roaring 20s began to spread throughout Europe. Now that the men were home from war, many wanted to have a good time. This worried the older generation, as they saw the youth abandon traditional German views on chastity. This fear was reflected in the role of the prey. In German Expressionism, the prey was often female and innocent. The prey becomes the source of desire that propels the protagonist to act. She was often the unsuspecting pawn and the bait of the predator. Even if she were married to the protagonist, as in *Nosferatu*, she still acted virginal and sweet.<sup>13</sup> When she did not retain her virginal status, however, she was punished severely, as seen in *Faust*. After Faust had his fill of the lusts of the flesh, he falls in love with a young maiden Gretchen. She resists him at first, but eventually gives in and sleeps with him. After this, Faust leaves her and Mephisto destroys her life. He sets it up so that her whole family dies, she is run out of the village, and gives birth to a child out of wedlock. She then becomes homeless and ends up being burned at the stake.<sup>14</sup>

The prey is often reminiscent of the title character in the German folktale *Little Red Cap* by the Grimm brothers. In this folk tale, the innocent main heroine is tempted into trusting a monster who tries to devour her and is then saved at the last minute. This story used as a cautionary tale for young girls to avoid lecherous men.<sup>15</sup> A scene in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* specifically plays on this theme. Jane is worried about her father who has gone to look for Cesare. She arrives at Dr. Caligari's tent, and much like *Little Red Cap* at grandmother's cottage, walks in to face her monster. While in the tent, she locks eyes with Cesare, who later becomes her captor.<sup>16</sup> By playing up the role of the victim caught in an evil man's trap, the directors were trying to caution young girls in the same way *Little Red Cap* did.<sup>17</sup> The emphasis on

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<sup>13</sup> *Nosferatu*, 1922.

<sup>14</sup> *Faust*, 1926.

<sup>15</sup> Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, "Little Red Cap," in *Arguing About Literature: A Guide and Reader*, ed. John Schilb and John Clifford (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's. 2014): 620-623.

<sup>16</sup> *The Cabinet of Caligari*, 1920.

<sup>17</sup> *The Cabinet of Caligari*, 1920.

chastity by the directors within the German Expressionist movement would carry on well after the end of movement. The push for purity later became the marker of proper womanhood within the Nazi party.

## The Blurring of Lines

As Germany entered the 1930s, the lines between the character roles began to blend together. *M* by Fritz Lang follows the search and capture of Hans Bercket, who lures away little girls to their death.<sup>18</sup> The hunt is conducted by both the police and the criminal underworld. They are headed by Inspector Karl Lohmann and the notorious Der Schränker. It is unclear who the protagonist really is in *M*. It could be argued that Hans is the protagonist, since the audience follows him more than any other character. It could be Inspector Karl, but he is not the one who figures out who the child killer is and he does not capture the criminal. Perhaps it is Der Schränker, who unleashes his followers to turn over the streets of Berlin. It is he and his criminal gang that captures Hans, an action normally reserved for the hero of the story. But Der Schränker himself is a known thief, killer, on the run from the law, and only appears in a handful of scenes.

Along the same lines, it is hard to pin down who is the predator and who is the prey. Obviously, the little girls that Hans captures are the true victims. However, through the course of the story the killer also shifts from being the predator to the prey. As the criminal world descends on him, they corner Hans in a factory where he locks himself in the attic. He is a figurative rat in a cage. When Der Schränker describes Hans, he displays his cold ruthlessness in pursuit of the killer. He states emphatically, "This beast has no right to exist; it must be exterminated, mercilessly, without any compassion." They literally tear apart the building trying to find the murderer. The director shows many shots of the aftermath that highlights the level of destruction they used to capture him. Once the criminals seize Hans, they give him a trial with a jury made up of those from the underground. During his testimony, Hans confesses to his crimes, but explains that it is beyond his control to stop. He falls to his knees and screams, "How can any of you know what goes on inside me? How

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<sup>18</sup> *M*, directed by Fritz Lang, performed by Peter Lorre, Otto Wernicke, and Gustaf Gründgens, Nero-Film A.G, 1931, film.

my innermost is shouting and screaming to me forcing me to do it against my will. I must do it. I don't want to. I must do it, and then a voice is screaming. I can't stand it anymore! Help!" Der Schränker acts as the prosecutor and judge. He shows no mercy and in a very cold manner argues for the death of Hans. The jury is stirred into an angry mob that demands the execution of the murderer. This is the moment when the police break in and take Hans away.<sup>19</sup> This scene correlates with the German people because the general public began to see their authority figures as incompetent and weak. They began to look towards different political systems such as communism and socialism as an answer to their problems. They also desired a stronger hand to lead them, such as Der Schränker, who used morally ambiguous methods. Regardless of his ethics, he could produce results when the police could not. He and the criminals became the protectors of the city.

During the tumultuous decades between the world wars, Germans experienced growth and uncertainty. Germany had to face the shame

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of losing World War I. As a result, ordinary people turned to a film movement that offered them a way to reflect on their inner turmoil. German Expressionism gave the German public an outlet by showing main characters who were unstable, flawed,

and yearning to be more than they were. Many of the tales wove German heritage into their narratives. By calling on folktales, German psychology, and traditional virtues, these films reminded the people of what it meant to be a proud German citizen. This nationalistic pride played a crucial role in the years ahead when the dark figures on screen began to manifest in real life. ■

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<sup>19</sup> M, 1931.



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## *Student Biography*

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Alyssa Phillips is a senior majoring in history at Sam Houston State University. Alyssa will graduate with a BA in fall 2017, and is a member of Phi Alpha Theta (National History Honor Society). Alyssa's research has focused on the cultural importance of media in relation to historical events. Alyssa's projects have ranged from the different European film movements of the twentieth century to the portrayal of Jacqueline Kennedy in film. This interest stems from her time as a mass communications major when she took several classes on the history of film and media. "The Cultural Significance Found in German Expressionism" is one of a series of papers covering the European film movements that arose during the time between the two World Wars. After graduation, she plans to pursue a teaching career at the middle or high school level. Later in life, she plans to pursue a master's degree in archives and preservation. While teaching, Alyssa will continue researching her own projects. Alyssa's future topics deal with the film and television movements that gained popularity throughout twentieth-century America.