Preeti Oza, “Aesthetics of Horror in Cinema”

In this paper PO considers *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari,* interpreting it as a horror film that follows Noel Carroll’s account of what makes Art-Horror pleasurable: a contrast between Utopia and Dystopia, or in PO’s version, Heart and Hopes (which makes no sense, but whatever).

PO is applying Carroll’s theory accounting for the pleasure in Art-Horror to Robert Wiene’s *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligary*.

**Introduction**

PO begins by introducing her most-direct interest: the role of German Expressionism in the development of the ‘Horror’ film genre, with *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligary* as the first of this kind. [pg.2t]

PO thinks that what makes this originating Art-Horror Film work is not to do with the plot, but rather, with the *visuals*. What PO finds distinctive is that Wiene’s film “creates a subjective mental landscape, a psychological fiction that is based on the audience’s perception” and that perception is brought to ponder something unrecognizable: a situation where unspeakable tragedy suddenly is possible.

**Influence of German Expressionism in the Film**

JP: Note that German Expressionism was an art movement in the early 20th C that replaced representations of reality with representation/evocation of the artist’s inner feelings or ideas. What inspired expressionist artists was something *within themselves* (in the form of emotions or ideas, or both) rather than *what was before them in the world whether manmade or part of Nature*.

PO alludes to ongoing uncertainty about the origins of the framing story of *Caligary*, something that she couples with the mode of presentation in the film itself: “skewed angles and unsteady images”. [pg3t/m]

**The Modern Social Order**

Here PO does something new in our exploration of film theory: she offers a socio-historical account of how/why the genre of Film-Horror came into existence. The art movement of out of which *Caligari* emerges was part of “a fierce ideological battle” responding to “the post-World War I period of civil and governmental upheaval” in Weimar Germany. Its target was “mainstream art creation” that was promoting “conservative-to-reactionary” popular opinion. Leftist/Marxists hoping to produce a ‘counter-current’ to these trends in popular opinion by combining the new artform, **film** (then regarded as “a gutter art form aimed at the unwashed masses, who preferred direct prosaic realism”), with the already-familiar (in Germany and Europe more broadly) expressionist approach to art-making.

**Some Un-Answered Questions in *Caligari*:**

Po thinks that *Caligari* is “an anti-authoritarian call to rebellion, an object lesson in conformity, or a metaphor about how we’re all simply pawns in a culture gone insane.” [p4t]

Interesting sidelight: the film’s distinctive visual style was partly a consequence of the need to keep it low-budget given the relatively weak post-war economy in Weimar Germany. This made expensive production techniques inaccessible, so the producers decided to have “the actors … perform in front of painted backdrops” (painted backdrops that followed the expressionist style, but in a **horror mood**).

PO wonders how the storyline came into existence, and doesn’t seem to have a clear answer. The scripts co-author claimed that “the idea of a mad dictator and a hypnotized subject who follows out his homicidal commands subconsciously came from Mayer’s military experiences in World War II (JP Note: Carl Mayer was the co-author of the *script*, there was no *novel*).

**Themes and Treatment of Major Themes**

For PO’s money, *Caligari* is a meditation on “the nature of authority as a violent and domineering force” (especially interesting given its proximity to the advent of Nazism in post-Weimar Germany).

The twist at the end of the film (the whole story is being told by a patient in a mental institution) adds another layer to the film. It could be taken as an investigation into “the distinction between insanity and [sanity].” [pg4m]

JP: while PO makes it hard to understand her point, it is the ‘bizarre and deformed’ character of the fixed backdrops to the film’s scenes that most clearly evokes German Expressionism and promotes the feeling of “a drunken nightmare”.[pg4m/b]

JP: that all the images and events are colored by the fact that they are being evoked by a storyline coming from a mental patient fits neatly into Carroll’s account of Art-Horror: a story with a Beast (Dr. Caligari himself) whose nature violates cultural and conceptual norms, creating the revulsion/attraction of the *impossible* that is the essence of Art-Horror for NC.

And note: by revealing that all that we have seen in the story was evoked by a madman storyteller satisfies our hope that our curiosity about the Beast will lead to a disclosure of its nature that will restore order to what had become a disordered picture of reality throughout most of the story.

**Mis-en-scène**

*Caligari’s* mis-en-scène involved two-dimensional sets, both for budgetary reasons and because they fit ‘the film’s point of view and presentation.’ For PO, “[t]he environment of the framing narrative, with its jagged trees and the peculiar dreadful asylum architecture that shares its identeity with the narrator’s images, alludes to aspects of the main story’s strange reality, as do the characters in the framing story.”[pg5m]

JP: Brockmann in his book “A Critical History of German Film” describes *Caligari* as a story “…about an entire universe that is undoubtedly out of balance.” Thus, this offers an example of Art-Film-Horror in which *disorder* seems to play an equally important role as *impurity* in the generation of revulsion/attraction that Carroll plausibly identifies as the source of our pleasure in Art-Horror.

**Conclusion**

Among later films influenced by *Caligari* are: F. W. Murnau’s *Nosferatu* (1922) (which influenced Werner Herzog’s *Nosferatu the Vampyre* [1979] [particularly in Klaus Kinski’s makeup, long fingernails, etc.]) and Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1923).

JP: This article, while filled with mistakes in spelling, punctuation, grammar, and guilty of failing to consider its possible audience (sins of a novice in the essay-writing game), is a good example of what one can do in using the ideas we have been exploring in this course to reflect on and interpret a film.