The Cabinet of Dr. Kracauer

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Though it would be foolhardy to attempt to trace the development of the early avant-garde the way one sketches the rise of the silent narrative tradition, I think it is at least plausible to assess the importance of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* for the avant-garde, as comparable to the importance of *The Birth of a Nation* for the popular film. That is, *Caligari* is the best remembered early venture in avant-garde film experimentation just as *The Birth of a Nation* is the most memorable forebear of the commercial narrative. Of course, *Caligari* was both narrative and commercial, and its influence has never totally disappeared in the popular tradition. Yet it also has special significance for the avant-garde in that it is the most distinguished early attempt to articulate the concerns of a contemporary art movement, Expressionism, in film.

The place of *Caligari* in film history is secure. It appears wherever the classics are convoked. But its reputation is another matter. Though much seen, it is also much maligned. Two kinds of charges plague it. The first relies on one or another myth of the cinematic. Either *Caligari* is too theatrical or it violates film's supposed commitment to realism.[1]

The other charge is partly political, but it is also aesthetic since it amounts to the claim that the film is castrated. This argument, enshrined by Siegfried Kracauer,[2] holds that *Caligari*, though initially a radical denunciation of authoritarianism, was reduced to hollow conformism by the addition of the psychiatric framing story. The problem here is not only that the film is right-wing (and, for Kracauer, proto-Nazi), but also that it is an imperfect masterpiece whose authentic message has been garbled.

Of these two kinds of arguments, the first sort seem the least serious because they lean so heavily on discredited theories of film. Also, the theatricality of *Caligari* can be justified internally in the film as a quotation of theatrical staginess that emphatically fosters the sense of society as both artificial and externally directed, two major assertions of the film.

The Kracauer position, however, seems to require a more detailed response. His approach does not presuppose a dated film theory. Consequently, it can be embraced by critics of almost every aesthetic allegiance. Indeed, some commentators on Weimar film merely repeat the Kracauer story whole.[3] Kracauer's explanation has spread like a pernicious rumor, making the forerunner of the avant-garde film seem like a botched job.

What did Kracauer say? Basing his speculations on a manuscript about the origin of *Caligari*, by one of the film's co-authors (Hans Janowitz), Kracauer explains that originally the story had a specific pacifist intention. Carl Mayer and Janowitz meant their tale as an allegory, "animated by hatred of an authority which had sent millions of men to death."

Cesare stands for the common man, virtually hypnotized by the malevolent Caligari who manipulates the somnabulist like a puppet to do his murderous bidding. Absolute authority, Caligari, is characterized as an impostor and as insane. The central metaphor of the original script is that unchecked authority is mad; the implication warns that authority leads to homicidal mania, the poets' analogue for war. Power inevitably spirals into frenzy and bloodbath.

But the original script was not filmed as Mayer and Janowitz planned. A framing story, purportedly suggested by Fritz Lang, was added which established the saga of the mad psychiatrist and his factotum as the fantasy of the protagonist, Francis. This deviation, directed by Robert Wiene, reportedly infuriated Mayer and Janowitz. In Kracauer's words

> . . . it perverted, if not reversed their intrinsic intentions. While the original exposed the madness inherent in authority, Wiene's *Caligari* glorified authority and convicted its antagonist of madness. A revolutionary film was thus turned into a conformist one—following the much used pattern of declaring some normal but troublesome individual insane and sending him to a lunatic asylum.[4]

For Kracauer, the framing story vitiates the project. The denunciation of authority metamorphoses into the hostility of a patient for his doctor. The madman reverses the order of things, relocating his own insanity in his psychiatrist and projecting his own aggression into other characters and the threatening environment. Perhaps, following Kracauer, we could go so far as to interpret Alan's murder as a displacement of Francis' morbid wish to do away with his one rival for the affections of Jane. Cesare's abduction of Jane might be a manifestation of Francis' unacknowledged desire to rape her. Francis, Caligari and Cesare could be read respectively as the super-ego, ego and id of the paranoid fabulator, the ever-present triangles of the set an emblem of this psychic hierarchy.

Kracauer is undoubtedly correct in holding that the framing story makes a difference. But is it the difference Kracauer asserts? Kracauer has the film changing from day to night, from revolutionary to conformist, in one easy step. Could a work that is intrinsically radical be subverted so effortlessly? In Kracauer's account, the original story seems to function like a shot in montage—by juxtaposing it to the framing story, its significance shifts completely.

There is something disconcertingly facile in this analysis. It virtually denies that the core of the film has any internal integrity. It is one-sided, giving the framing story too determinant a position in terms of establishing the meaning of the film.

Against Kracauer, I would urge a more dialectical reading, one that would consider how the original, radical conception of the film makes the framing

story work in its favor. Far from a cripple, *Caligari* is stylistically and thematically an organic whole. Kracauer's approach is too mechanical, insensitive to the interplay of the various elements of the film. He supposes that a complex aesthetic system has no powers of recuperation; for him, it can be disabled as simply as putting sand in the gasoline tank of a car.

My strategy for defending the unity of *Caligari* is simple. The framing story does transform Holstenwall from a allegory to a fantasy. The violence is relocated in Francis. But this does not make the film conformist because, dialectically, it raises a new question, viz., what is the source of Francis' madness? The film assures us that Francis can be cured; but why was he afflicted? I think that *Caligari* has an answer to this question, one that resides in the core of the film, the part Kracauer thought had been defanged. In terms of the whole film, the framing story doesn't subvert social criticism so much as resituate it in a psychoanalytic context where the core of the film, the fantasy, dialectically supplies enough evidence for us to charge that Francis has been maddened by his environment.

In order to say how the film supplies this evidence, I must put my psychoanalytic cards on the table. Throughout this article, I will hold that the symptoms of the psychotic often contain a symbolic account of the source of his madness. Consequently, I intend to examine Francis' tale and its imagery from two perspectives: both as indications of his madness and as a symbolic expression of the factors that maddened him. I am very sympathetic to Morton Schatzman's recent rereading of Daniel Paul Schreber's paranoid fantasies as a symbolic transformation of the unbearable regimes that his father subjected him to in the name of hygiene. That is, Schreber's "feelings of persecution can be adequately explained as transformations of his real persecution."[5] Similarly, I will argue that Francis' fantasies are not only symptoms, as Kracauer holds, but also, dialectically, indices of the source of that madness. From this perspective, I interpret what is given as Francis' representation of Holstenwall as an accusation to the effect that the inhumanity and hostility of the environment are the causes of his madness.

Unlike Kracauer, I don't regard the framing story as a debilitating appendage, an excresence, but rather as a healthy organ neatly segued with the central story. The difference its addition makes vis-à-vis the Mayer/Janowitz version is to unequivocably ground their visionary symbolism in the language of the unconscious. Some may bridle, charging that this effect is quite philistine, insofar as it involves naturalizing or psychologizing poetry. Yet, within the framework of Expressionist literature, the complaint is hardly compelling because the Expressionists often seem to explicitly mime the language of madness. For example, their experiments in telegraphicwriting sometimes recall the structure of psychotic word salads. In this context, the psychologism of *Caligari* merely makes the already apparent source of the imagery more apparent.

Madness, of course, was a favorite Expressionist theme. Expressionism might even be called the art of the traumatized. Though often couching their diatribes in the rhetoric of cosmic estrangement, the Expressionists were responding to concrete social conditions. The personal anxiety, the alienation and the sense of crisis of artists, first in reaction to the rapid industrialization of Germany after

1870 and then against the world war, led them to madness as a likely subject. Madness could embody the experience of shock, derangement standing for the feeling of acute disorientation that accompanies convulsive social change.

The Expressionists were rebellious rather than revolutionary. Apart from vague utopian promises, they rarely espoused political programs. Instead, one might argue that the political function of their art was to serve as an index of anguish, despair, uncertainty and hysteria. In the face of social upheaval and dislocation, they were lightning rods galvanizing the prevailing sense of *angst* into powerful currents of expression. Intense psychological states and characters literally driven mad were natural analogues for their own subjective experience of social chaos and collapse.

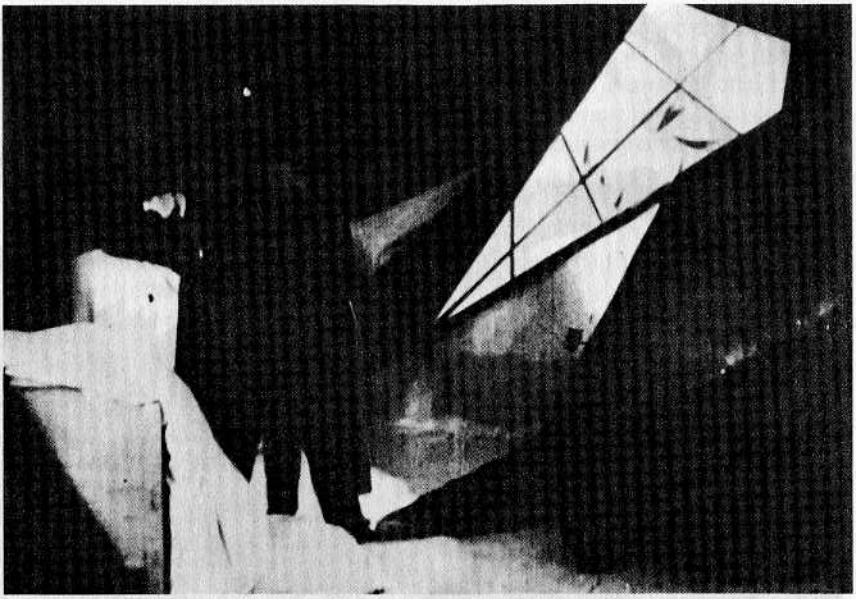
Madness supplied Expressionism not only with content, but also with technique. The language of madness, based on the structures of the primary process, could be intuitively mobilized by artists in their quest to project a symbol system that would appropriately and expressively communicate their extreme sense of crisis. Discussing *Job*, Walter Sokel remarks, "Intimately related to the dream and the workings of the human subconscious, as expounded by Freud in his *Interpretation of Dreams* and *Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious*, *Kokoschka's* method constitutes the dramatic parallel to Kafka's art of projecting the repressed content of the mind into mysterious events."[6]

The use of the structures of the primary process as a means of communication is apparent as the very basis of Mayer's and Janowitz's original idea for *Caligari*. Their central theme, that authority is mad, is articulated metaphorically by identifying the authority figure as a madman. This form of symbolism is one that is quite common in dreams. Freud called it condensation. It operates by uniting two disparate elements, in this case authority and madness, for the sake of identifying them.

Condensation is an apt symbolic device for dreams because dreams are primarily visual, not linguistic. The yoking together of disparate elements supplies a means for overcoming the lack of the term "is" in the vocabulary of the dreamwork. Silent film is also primarily visual. Thus, it is not surprising to find the makers of *Caligari* resorting to condensation as a means of articulating their themes, especially since the basic story is founded on a condensation.

The search for further condensations in the plastic elements of *Caligari* is rewarding. In many of the sets, the shape of a knife seems incongruously joined with—indeed, superimposed over—other disparate entities. When Jane and Francis discuss Alan's murder, there are painted, knifelike shadows on the garden wall behind them. One of them is especially pronounced in the shooting—it seems to be a black version of Cesare's white, steel dagger.

Pointed angular shapes echo throughout the film. The two bannisters at the entrance to the fairground seem modeled on cutlery. The window at the discovery of the first mysterious murder looks like a stiletto ominously pointed at the bed. Indeed, windows throughout are often triangular, not only suggesting authority, but pretending to the shape of a knife. Extremely narrow buildings jut out against the horizon, their sharp tips and edges hyperbolized. Sometimes these distorted buildings are described as shards. This is close, but I think not quite right. The architecture and the attendant network of shadows are rather based on a knife as their basic form, condensing its shape with the



Caligari: *"the window looks like a stiletto"*

man-made environment. This condensation is not only based on pointed figures, but on a persistent theme of long edges throughout the film.

The natural world continues this condensatory motif. Note the fields Caligari races across as he returns to the asylum after Cesare's death. Here we find what are quite literally *blades* of grass; the knolls are depicted as a series of teeth of some fantastic chain saw. This grass also recalls the earlier backdrop of the hillside town of Holstenwall. Both the natural and architectural environment seem hostile because they are weapon-like. Leafless trees, such as those underneath the bridge Cesare crosses, are shaped and sharpened like spears. The physical environment, in short, is an oneiric arsenal, surrounding and enclosing the drama like veritable knives pointed at the frail human characters. The set designers, Hermann Warm, Walter Reiman and Walter Rohrig, have created a milieu that is nothing less than a colossal Iron Maiden.

The distortion of the sets should not simply be explained as having a single message—"this is the vision of a distorted mind." The sets are more specific in their significations. One part of the meaning of this distortion is the condensation which identifies the environment as a forest of sabers and lances. But even where the environment is not overtly hostile, it is inhospitable. Rooms are not designed for human habitation. Their raked floors would be troublesome to navigate, while their slanted ceilings make much of the space useless for a person of average height. Likewise, the public streets that adjoin the square are precipitous, as well as so narrow that they crowd with the mildest traffic. Human life must be profoundly uncomfortable in the homes and on the boulevards of Holstenwall. And consider the thinness of many of the buildings—they signal symbolically an implosive sense of the environment closing in, contracting like a vise.

Caligari: *"The knolls are depicted as a series of teeth of some fantastic chain-saw."*

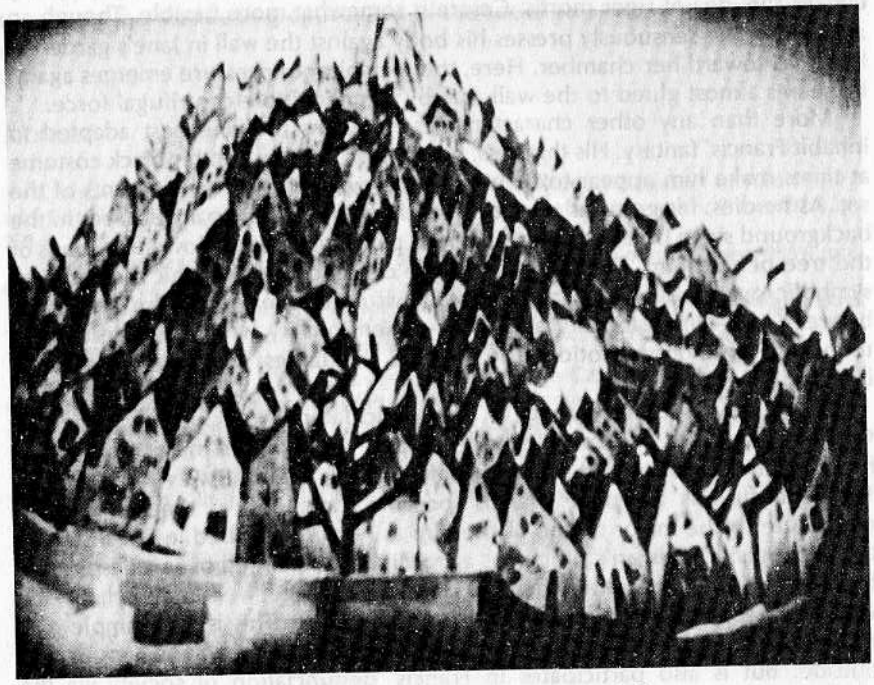
So far, it may appear that I haven't said anything that Kracauer couldn't absorb. He might account for the hostile portrayal of the environment as a projection of the paranoid Francis. The inhospitable nature of Holstenwall similarly is a reification of the phenomenology of psychosis, the implosive character of the physical world a correlate to the madman's experience of overwhelming pressure.

But I want to stress that these remarks are not where an analysis of *Caligari* should end, but where it should begin. Within the context of Expressionism, the distortion of the physical environment stands for the disruption and degradation of the social world. In the poetry of Trakl, the air is befouled with loathesome odors. Blood runs from slaughter houses into fetid canals, the landscape swarming with rats, worms, ravens and flies. Here, the emphasis on physical decay articulates the experience of social and cultural decay, just as Gottfried Benn's early collection of verse, *The Morgue*, presents a microcosm of society in terms of an inventory of corpses whose rotting flesh compose the body politic. In "Weltende" by Jakob van Hoddis (the pseudonym of Hans Davidsohn), the premonition of the tumultuous decline and fall of bourgeois society is charted in images of roofs breaking apart and cascading, trains tumbling off bridges, an outbreak of influenza and floods breaking through embankments. Sickness, breakdown and deluge, attributes of the physical environment, represent the condition of society. Similarly, Francis' imagination plastically reconstructs society in the image of a physical world that is not only inhospitable but hostile, not only inhuman but closing in.

Another key symbolic process in *Caligari* is what Freud called dramatization. This is rather like a game of charades that the dream plays with the dreamer. Images literalize words, ideas and metaphors. A simple example is the famous chair scene in *Caligari*. When Caligari comes for a permit for his sideshow, he must importune the lofty town clerk perched appropriately on a seat that stands higher than Caligari's stooped shoulders. This is a picture of hierarchy. The linguistic expression that the official is "above" Caligari in the chain of civic authority is literalized, the metaphor made concrete in the imagery. This technique is also repeated in the police station where the constabulary, atop their swivel chairs, tower over the townspeople.

Much of the distortion in *Caligari* is of this sort. I have already mentioned the idea that the environment is implosive. There is also a suggestion in many of the rooms that the environment is in a state of imminent collapse. The slanted ceilings lower awesomely, as in Francis' private quarters. The bending buildings, crooked street lamps and cracked walls recall the buckling cityscapes of Ludwig Meidner (e.g. *Burning City*). Though the sets are sometimes compared to Feininger's paintings, the analogy seems wrong to me because the locked architectonic of Feininger's Cubist designs promotes a feeling of solidity. Holstenwall is unsteady. Throughout, top-heavy facades heave forward, literalizing the idea that society is on the brink of toppling.

This is a visual theme Wiene exploits even further in a subsequent film, *Raskolnikov*, where the motifs of broken windows and bannisters, sagging buildings, rooms that look like exploded mine shafts and apartments supported



Caligari: *"Holstenwall is unsteady"*

by jerry-built beams are pervasive. In *Raskolnikov*, the physical environment is literally coming apart; windows, for instance, are too big for their frames. The milieu is one that has cracked under its own weight, been patched up carelessly and is about to fall apart again. This sense of imminent collapse, though perhaps not as strident in *Caligari*, undeniably shapes Holstenwall. It constitutes the elements of Francis' fantasy, but also causes it. As such, it is an indictment as well as a symptom.

Francis' imbalance literally structures the ever-sloping sets. The night before Caligari is unmasked, there are interesting shots of him asleep where it is hard to tell whether the oblique image is a result of camera angulation or the sets. This ambiguity nicely encapsulates the question of whether the distortion is in the telling or in the world described.

Dramatization not only determines set design, but also acting. That the moral values Caligari represents are warped and diseased is inscribed in his gait. His corruption is virtually painted onto his decrepit complexion with splotchy greasepaint. The tendency of the authoritarian mentality to juxtapose obsequiousness with megalomania is represented, on the one hand, by his body bent into a hunched over bow and, on the other, with moments when he draws himself erect, shaking with exclamation. That Caligari is morally twisted is literalized in his movements—watch his hand as he is first tempted to become Caligari. In short, an entire vocabulary of scorn shapes his gestures.

Though it would be possible to casually compare Cesare with the vampire in *Nosferatu*, to me his movement seems different. The idea in *Nosferatu* is that the vampire is death. Stiffness is emphasized; Dracula, though moving, palpably evokes the idea of rigor mortis. Cesare is somewhat more flexible. Though an automaton, he sensuously presses his body against the wall in Jane's garden as he slinks toward her chamber. Here, the metaphor of pressure emerges again; he seems almost glued to the wall as if by some invisible centrifugal force.

More than any other character, Cesare seems the one best adapted to inhabit Francis' fantasy. His thinness, his angular posture and his black costume at times make him appear to blend into the two-dimensional elements of the set. As he dies, his gestures tend to refer the viewer to the painted trees in the background since his arms are an inverted pantomime of the lower branches of the tree behind him. The fact that Cesare can become a graphic element has symbolic overtones. It is part of a major visual theme in the film, a tension between two-dimensionality and three-dimensionality which may be read in terms of a sense of psychotic claustrophobia, the flatness suggesting life caught in an ontological crunch.

Of course, I don't pretend to have elucidated every kind of image in *Caligari*. There are also complexly developed visual motifs that involve confounding the organic with the inorganic and the internal with the external. These confusions articulate Francis' oceanic state. But, at times, they also contribute to the major theme of the film as I have described it. For instance, the wall outside Caligari's office has a crawling vine painted over it despite the fact that we presuppose the chamber is inside the large, well-kept asylum. The vine seems on the verge of taking over the hallway. This is an example of a recurrent vegetative motif which confounds the distinction between inside and outside. But is also participates in Francis' denunciation of society via the

physical environment because it pejoratively suggests ruins; that stage in a civilization's life when it is overrun by nature since culture is long dead.

Caligari presents its core story as an hallucination, as a dream. The idea that it is a sort of rebus is evident, not only in terms of the psychiatric framework, but also in the way it uses outright symbols—letters and numbers—as design elements in the sets. The scene where the psychiatrist proclaims he must become Caligari puts the written word on a par with the physical environment. This should beckon us to attempt to read the iconography.

My major problem with Kracauer is that, in an important way, he did not try to decipher the imagery of the film. For the most part, he surmised that the distortion had one dominant message—Francis is mad. Given this monolithic reading, he postulated that the film subverted its animating conception and became reactionary. But a closer look at the imagery reveals that the original critical impulse is still intact.

It is true that I have not shown that the revised *Caligari* is the pacifist work Janowitz intended it to be. On the one hand, I wonder if without the framing story the film could be read so precisely. But even if a pacifist theme were lost that would not make the film reactionary, which is Kracauer's central claim. Francis is mad, but that madness is attributed to a hostile physical environment which, in the context of Expressionism, represents an attitude toward society that condemns the accelerated transformation of Germany into a capitalist state, the disruption and sense of rootlessness of rapid industrialization and the crisis of the war as anti-human. *Caligari* may be likened to a cry of pain. But it is also a consistent and coherent utterance which uses the language of the unconscious to express the maddening oppression of the social environment on the individual.

Notes:

1. e.g., Erwin Panofsky, "Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures," in *Film Theory and Criticism*, ed. G. Mast and M. Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 169.
2. Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler* (New York: Noonday Press, 1959), pp. 61–76.
3. e.g., David Robinson, *The History of World Cinema* (New York: Stein and Day, 1974), p. 91.
4. Kracauer, 66–67.
5. Morton Schatzman, "Paranoia or Persecution: The Case of Schreber," *History of Childhood Quarterly: The Journal of Psychohistory*, Summer '73, vol. 1, no. 1, p. 81. For a more detailed account also see Schatzman's *Soul Murder: Persecution in the Family* (New York: Signet, 1973).
6. Walter Sokel, *An Anthology of German Expressionist Drama* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1963), p. xvii.