

Modern Identities in Early German Film: *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*

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Photography is truth.
And cinema is truth twenty-four times a second.

Jean-Luc Godard

Only twenty-four years after the emergence of “film” as a new medium with the world’s first public showing of a “moving picture” at the Berlin Wintergarten on 1 November 1895,¹ *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*) was shot in the Decla-Bioscop company’s Lixie-studio at Berlin Weissensee from December 1919 to January 1920.² This silent film, directed by Robert Wiene and produced by Erich Pommer, is often and rightly referred to as a “landmark in film history”³ signifying for German cinema the beginning of an era of new aesthetic aspirations.

Despite its relatively novel character, film had already become a valuable and attractive commodity by the time *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* went into production. In the early 1920s, there were more than three thousand cinemas in Germany alone, and after the war the public’s escapist desire seemed greater than ever before—a million people a day visited the movie theaters in Germany.⁴ Throughout World War I, film had been used for entertainment as well as propaganda. Almost untouched by the political crisis that followed the war, in which technologies of destruction had advanced the comprehension of the “modern” human being, production companies brought forth crime movies, comedies, melodramas, even films on sex education. During the decade preceding the Great War the early cinema of sensation had matured into a cinema of narration. The resulting narratives were hardly ever confined to their respective topics: even extremely popular detective series were less about the crimes to be solved than about adventure, luxury, speed, and technical possibilities, as well as modern, urban lifestyles. The first German feature-length film of forty-five minutes had its premiere in April 1909: Adolf Gärtner’s *Das gefährliche Alter* (*The Dangerous Age*), a melodrama in which a countess’s daughter has to surrender her fi-

ancé to her mother’s desires but nevertheless finds happiness in the end. Love, preferably tragic, proved to be the most popular topic of early German film, especially melodramas such as Joe May’s *In der Tiefe des Schachtes* (*In the Depth of the Mine*, 1912) or Ernst Lubitsch’s *Carmen* (1918). Only one year later, Lubitsch’s costume drama *Madame Dubarry*, starring Pola Negri and Emil Jannings, became the first internationally successful German film following World War I. But even films on sex education (such as Richard Oswald’s *Es werde Licht! / There Shall Be Light!*) became popular commodities from 1917 onward, satisfying the audience’s voyeuristic desire while providing information in regard to sexually transmitted diseases.

By 1919 approximately five hundred films were produced annually by more than two hundred film companies in Weimar Germany.⁵ By then, the cinema for the masses was taken seriously even by its most outspoken critics. Well-trained and gifted directors and stage actresses and actors no longer considered film a vulgar, crude form of entertainment. It was the employment of such outstanding directors as Fritz Lang,⁶ Ernst Lubitsch, Paul Wegener, Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, Georg Wilhelm Pabst, or Robert Wiene and actors like Pola Negri, Emil Jannings, Lil Dagover, Werner Krauss, and Conrad Veidt that ensured the creation of a “quality product.” It was not until *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, the most notable of expressionist films, however, that film aspired to be an art form, in which revolutionary aesthetic means already established in other visual arts and in literature entered the new medium of film.⁷ The film’s international success was due to “the mixture of commercial thrift, artistic daring, simple décor, and clever advertising strategy,”⁸ as Hans-Michael Bock points out, but it was the “artistic daring” of producer Erich Pommer and director Robert Wiene that turned *Caligari* into a “film legend.” Or as Lenny Rubinstein puts it, “Robert Wiene’s *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* not only heralded the emergence of German film as an important new art form, but was also the harbinger of a theme and a number of cinematic devices that have left their marks on literally hundreds of films that came after it.”⁹

In this chapter, I shall explore the representation of identity and modern space in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, for space and identity here are linked on both representative and narrative levels. Often claimed to be a translation of an expressionist aesthetic into the still emerging language of film, this motion picture provides us with dramatic reflections on the transformations that affected modern urban space and its inhabitants. More than an aestheticized form of visual representation, the film attempts to materialize—and hence to overcome—the “unreadability” of space and the fragility of identity and meaning often associated with modernity. The experience of the changing fabric of everyday modern life is critically juxtaposed with elements of chance, desire, and myth that serve to undermine an emerging monolithic hegemony of “the modern” during the period in question. A discussion of the distinctive representation of identity in juxtaposition with the experience of modern space in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* allows us to gain an understanding of the question of identity in modern time and space. Moreover, by placing it in the context of expressionist aesthetics, we may grasp what the avant-garde perceived to be the essence of modernity.

THE STORY

The silent film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* begins with words rather than images, thus offering a summary of the diegesis: "A tale of the modern re-appearance of an 11th Century Myth involving the strange and mysterious influence of a mountebank monk over a somnambulist."¹⁰ In the opening scene, framing the main narrative to follow, two men sit on a bench in a garden or park: a young man who turns out to be the main character and narrator, Francis (played by Friedrich Feher), and an older gentleman with bulging eyes and a rather crazed appearance who states that "Spirits surround us on every side—they have driven me from hearth and home, from wife and child." He falls silent at the sight of a woman in white who walks by without taking notice of the two men on the left. They, however (possibly just like the audience), follow her with a desiring gaze. Francis immediately manifests his ownership: "My betrothed" reads the title plate. Their story, the story of Francis and Jane (played by Lil Dagover), is about to be told: "In Holstenwall, where I was born."

The place of the main narrative is introduced by the obviously painted scenery designed by Hermann Warm, Walter Reimann, and Walter Röhrig,¹¹ which appears to be a curious mixture of a medieval town and an urban Moloch—a mountain of houses, stacked on each other, hardly leaving room to breathe. The strange angles and thick black outlines add to a sense of oppression. The style of the design is typically expressionist and dominates the aesthetic appearance of the entire set. Here, in Holstenwall, Francis's birthplace, the mysterious tale of Caligari begins to unfold with the arrival of a traveling fair. When murders begin to occur, fear spreads and modern society reveals its fragility. Mikhail Bakhtin pointed out that carnivals "marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions,"¹² which is also true for most aspects of a fair, but with an important difference. While the carnival is completed within and its profound ambivalence¹³ is intrinsic to society, the fair comes into existence when others arrive. In the film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* the "otherness" of the fair folk is unmistakably stated. Their mobility—and therefore their potential for chaos—is juxtaposed with the bourgeoisie's belief in the stability and quiescence of Holstenwall. When the fair arrives, entertainment and pleasure are readily available, but the laughter of the audience is ambivalent—for the threat of a mysterious and anarchic atmosphere is ever present and always already implied. The events of the fair might not be what they seem. This is emphasized by the title plate shown immediately before Caligari appears on screen for the first time: for with the traveling fair "came a mountebank." By identifying Dr. Caligari (played by Werner Krauss) as an impostor, Robert Wiene emphasizes both the potential threat bourgeois society associates with a traveling fair and the instability of Caligari's identity.

Caligari operates a concession at the fair, but his identity is to be understood as ambivalent and doubled. The audience, however, is throughout most of the film kept in the dark in regard to Caligari's other life as the head of a mental hospital. We are to mistrust this character despite his academic title, and his appearance with dark-rimmed spectacles, a top hat, and a wide, dark coat underlines his mystery. Shortly after his arrival, the first murder takes place. The victim is the town clerk whom Caligari

had humbly asked for a permit to operate his concession, only to be treated with arrogance and condescension, emphasized by the extraordinarily high stool on which the clerk was positioned.

Once the stalls and tents are open to the public, the avaricious fair uses advertisements to reach out to torpid Holstenwall—placed distanced and unwilling in the background. A leaflet lures Alan (played by Hans Heinz von Twardowski) and Francis to see for themselves the "Wonders! Miracles! Marvels!" of the Holstenwall fair. They make their way through the crowds to Caligari's show of the somnambulist Cesare. First, a picture of Cesare is shown painted in a style reminiscent of Edward Munch. Spectators pour into the cabinet of Dr. Caligari, among them Alan and Francis. On an otherwise empty stage the spectators are shown a large box like an upright coffin. In it we see Cesare, who has allegedly slept for twenty-five years. Thin, with lengthy, dark shadows around his eyes, blackened eyebrows and lips in an otherwise white face, Cesare (played by Conrad Veidt) remains silent and motionless until awakened by Caligari. Like an automaton without a trace of identity, Cesare only reacts to the commands of his master. To heighten the attractiveness of the commodity somnambulist, Caligari assures the audience that Cesare knows all secrets and can predict the future. When invited to predict Alan's destiny, Cesare tells the young man that he will die at dawn. Anxious and bewildered, the two friends return to Holstenwall, where they meet up with Jane (played by Lil Dagover), whom they both love.

That night, Alan is murdered. We see the murder taking place, but the murderer remains a shadow on the bedroom wall. Just like the threatening shadow of the vampire in F. W. Murnau's 1921 film *Nosferatu* and of the serial child killer in *M*, Fritz Lang's first sound film (1930), the shadow of Alan's murderer rather than his identifiable and therefore classifiable (i.e., confinable) appearance to this day remains an effective tool to increase suspense and create a sense of unease. We believe the shadow is Cesare's but cannot be entirely sure. The shadow also indicates the instability of Cesare's identity itself. Never a mirror image and yet unique and reminiscent of its owner, the shadow is a doubling that is always already unreliable. Despite its representational effectiveness, the identity of the shadow's owner is never unambiguously contained in the dark silhouette dancing on the wall. Cesare's shadow reminds us of the shadow of his identity and reflects the objectification of Cesare the somnambulist and automaton. His objectification is emphasized by Francis. When called by Alan's landlady after her grim discovery, he runs to the police implicating the somnambulist: "There is something frightful in our midst." Not man, not human being, but something (*etwas*). Objectified, the murderer even more effectively corrupts Holstenwall's peace and order. And, of course, he (it?) is not sought among one's own, but suspected among the fair folk. Had Cesare stayed in the space temporarily allocated for "others" by society, the threat posed to Holstenwall would have remained an abstract, almost imperceptible one; typically, it is the transgression of ordered spaces, the intrusion into the heart of society (here symbolized by a bourgeois bedchamber), that transforms a potential problem into a real threat.¹⁴ In the film, it is made worryingly clear that the somnambulist has no place within society—should he have left the spatially distanced fair and trespassed into Holstenwall, the threat would be as real as it would be instantaneous.

Should the audience have any doubt about Francis's fears, Jane's father, Dr. Olfen (played by Rudolph Lettinger), a medical officer and a respected member of bourgeois society, supports Francis's interpretation of the frightful events, as the title plate states: "Your suspicion of the somnambulist seems justified. I shall ask the police for permission to examine him." But the belief in the ability of science to shed light on truth is not only led *ad absurdum* by the doubling of Cesare (i.e., his replacement with a puppet shortly after the examination), but the examination also leads to further instability and chaos. Dr. Olfen's scopophilia is ambivalent, as his desire to satisfy his curiosity in regard to the stranger, his desire to look, is mixed with fear. That night, after Dr. Olfen had taken a "closer look" at the somnambulist (figure 10.1) and therefore posed a threat to Caligari, Cesare is awakened by his master and sent to kill Jane. To cover his tracks, the somnambulist—from the beginning more of an automaton than a human being—is replaced in his coffin by an identical but now completely lifeless puppet, which Francis sees while spying into Caligari's trailer. Meanwhile, Cesare makes his way toward Dr. Olfen's house, uncomfortably creeping along the walls of the city, almost becoming one with the decor (figure 10.2). When Jane awakes and begins to struggle with her assailant before fainting, the somnambulist carries her off. With her rescuers on his heels, Cesare flees over the rooftops in a fantastic expressionist *mise-en-scène* (figure 10.3). Sharply angled rooftops with black chimneys reaching into the sky for help provide the uncanny and uninhabitable scenery through which Cesare drags Jane. With her father, Francis, and seemingly the entire household staff nearly catching up, Cesare has to leave his victim behind. Jane identifies her assailant at once upon reviving, but again his identity is obscured, for Francis had seen him in his box moments earlier. The impossibility of the doubled Cesare is rectified when the puppet is discovered. Cesare's master flees, but Francis follows him and finds himself in the courtyard of an insane asylum. When asking whether there is a patient named Caligari, Francis is told by one of the doctors present that "only the head of our Institute can divulge the identity of our patients." Again we are reminded that identity in modern society is not independent and individual but constructed and transferred. Therefore one can never achieve unambiguousness or harmony unless the human being bows to society and eliminates all idiosyncrasies that do not fit the role prescribed. In this, the film closely resembles the treatment of identity in avant-garde plays at the time, which was often portrayed as being identical with profession or societal role (the cashier, the mother, the son, etc.),¹⁵ thereby indicating the modern being's loss of *being* and his or her inability to fully develop a personality. Expressionist writers such as Georg Kaiser, Ernst Toller, and Walter Hasenclever often depicted human beings as being reduced to the fulfillment of certain actions required by society.

The painted set indicates the mental states of the characters "with . . . disturbing force."¹⁶ The head of the insane asylum, an important institution in any repressive society, rules over the identities of his patients. Mental hospitals created spaces in which individuals could be excluded and distanced from bourgeois society if they did not conform, or even talked out of existence in bourgeois culture, as Michel Foucault has so convincingly argued in his entire oeuvre. The head of the mental hospital occupies a position of omnipotence. In *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, however, the head's

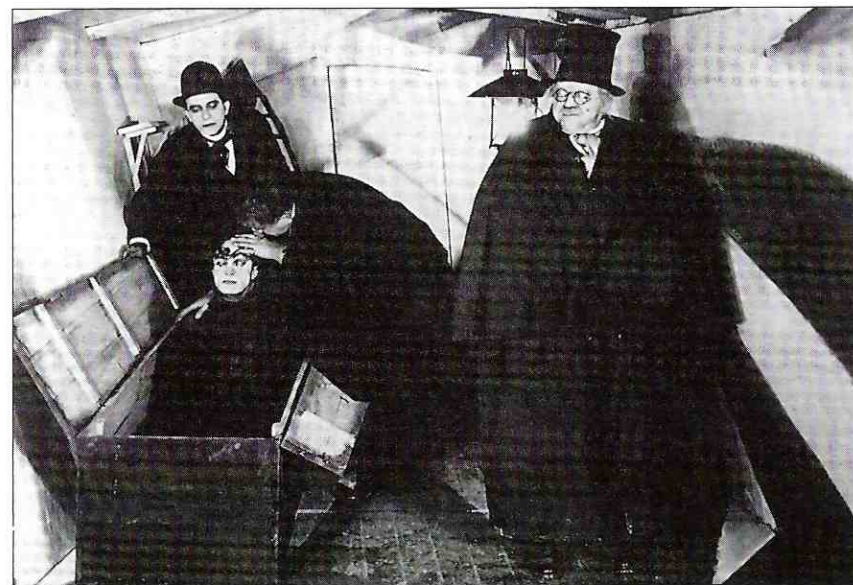


Figure 10.1 Dr. Olfen looks at the somnambulist (from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*) (© Transit Film GmbH, Munich).



Figure 10.2 Cesare creeps along the city wall (from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*) (© Transit Film GmbH, Munich).

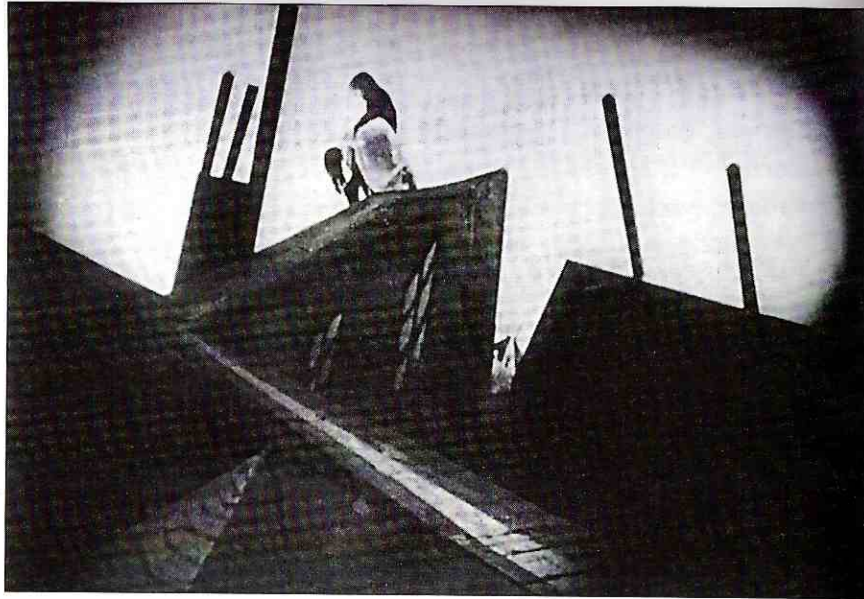


Figure 10.3 The expressionist city in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (© Transit Film GmbH, Munich)

power is given an additional twist. When Francis enters the office to clarify and manifest Caligari's identity, the director of the asylum slowly lifts his head and, of course, is Caligari himself. Francis runs off, breaks down, and finally confides in the staff. While Caligari sleeps, they enter his office and uncover the mystery. Caligari's ambition had been to test an eleventh-century monk's theory, which stated that a somnambulist could be made to commit murder. The prospect of exercising complete control over someone else's mind had been too tempting to resist.¹⁷ Caligari is led away in a straitjacket and put in a cell. With this revelation Francis's story ends.

As the film comes to a close, we reenter the framing narrative: In the courtyard of the asylum, Francis looks crazy and Jane appears apathetic. When Caligari enters in the white coat of the head of the institution, Francis experiences a mental breakdown. Bound in the same straitjacket, he is put in the cell previously occupied by Caligari. Now a benevolent doctor, Caligari examines Francis and announces to his staff that he knows how to cure this patient. With this somewhat unsettling statement, the audience is released.

THE FRAME

The framing scenes indicating that the main narrative is a madman's fairy tale disguised as a flashback were added by Robert Wiene to the original script and obviously obscure the main narrative categorically. The scriptwriters, Hans Janowitz and

Carl Mayer, protested vehemently against "this crime,"¹⁸ which "perverted, if not reversed their intrinsic intentions."¹⁹ Siegfried Krakauer wrote, "The original story was an account of real horrors; Wiene's version transforms that account into a chimera concocted and narrated by the mentally deranged Francis. . . . While the original story exposed the madness inherent in authority, Wiene's *Caligari* glorified authority and convicted its antagonist of madness."²⁰ Janowitz and Mayer, as well as Krakauer, had a point, but the inversion of representational stabilities, in my view, remains an illusion.²¹ When the main narrative is placed in the realm of an insane asylum, our perception of the characters changes, but trust in the revised representation or in the stability of the identities portrayed is not reestablished. The interpretation of the framing device as "undercutting to some extent the original attack on murderous authorities hidden within a rigidly hierarchical society"²² is no doubt a valid one, especially in light of the script writers' mistrust of the government and its officials resulting from their war experiences. But this interpretation relies on an understanding of the film as one-dimensional and ignores all other layers of meaning. A "mode of ambiguity,"²³ as Richard J. Murphy puts it, characterizes the entire film—a doubling of meaning that manifests itself both in the characters portrayed and in the narrative structures.

Irrespective of whether he is the benevolent doctor or the uncanny master of a somnambulist, Caligari's double-dealing creates an eerie impression. This developing sense of representational instability is augmented by the doubling of Cesare as sleeper and murderer, as man and machine, as victim and assailant, which finally makes any identity doubtful—if not outright nonexistent, given its tripling in the appearance of the dummy or puppet used to replace Cesare in the coffin. Francis's identity and narrative are altered when his appearance as the trustworthy and sane narrator is corrupted. But when he is classified as a madman, his identity becomes by no means stable, and the doubling of his identity only intensifies the atmosphere of ambiguity. The doubling of events at the end of the narrative, which binds Francis in the same straitjacket Caligari wore moments earlier, destabilizes representation as such and leaves the spectator without direction. We are to doubt the stability of representation and identity, which relates the diegesis and discourse to the expressionist style of the decor. The style of the stage set, vacillating between permanence and instability, order and chaos, further underlines the film's ambiguous tone.

EXPRESSIONISM

There is, in my view, an obvious connection between the instability of the modern identities portrayed and the film's expressionist style. David Robinson, however, prompts the question whether "Caligari is a truly and essentially Expressionist manifestation or represents only a modish pastiche applied to a conventional story"²⁴ and concludes "that the Expressionist style was indeed 'only a garment in which to dress the drama,'"²⁵ a statement he repeats in his BFI Classics book on *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, adding that the drama "might equally well have been presented in realist

style.”²⁶ His view is shared by a few contemporary critics such as Ernst Angel in his review of the film in *Die neue Schaubühne* on 4 April 1920,²⁷ but most reviewers clearly identified the film as expressionist.²⁸ Expressionism is still the label most commonly associated with *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, even in the most recent publications.²⁹ Moreover, Marc Silberman identifies *Caligari* as the only expressionist film that presents the most distinctive traits in expressionist cinema—“such elements as decor, set, lighting and acting techniques”—as a “unified set of effects.”³⁰

Originally employed to define the art of Henri Matisse, Paul Cézanne, and Vincent van Gogh, the term “expressionism” was used to describe the literature and visual art of young women and men that appeared mainly in Berlin and Munich but also in Vienna and Prague between 1907 and 1925. During that time, however, the term was used to describe so many different cultural manifestations that a precise and brief definition of the term “expressionism” is almost impossible to formulate.³¹ In open conflict with the bourgeoisie and the hierarchical society of the Wilhelmine era, German expressionists set out to break aesthetic and social norms by challenging traditional forms of representation and by moving marginalized figures—such as beggars, sex workers, psychopaths, and criminals—into the center of their stage or canvas. Expressionists called out for a transformation of the “old” traditional, narrow-minded individual into the “new man” or “new woman,” who would realize himself or herself unconstrained by the conservative demands of bourgeois space. Their aesthetics seek abstraction of form and color, sharp contrasts, speed, and noise in an effort to uncover an essence of being, to represent aspects of what modern space and its inhabitants are *essentially* about. For many expressionists, representation is based on inner necessity, and an essentially and always already ambivalent expression of nature as it exists and as it is experienced within the mind. Here, the influence of psychoanalysis is obvious and is emphasized by the frequent use of psychologically challenged characters in expressionist literature and visual arts. By aiming to represent the truth within, expressionists cried out what they experienced as the modern human being’s fears, hopes, and aspirations. The formulation of art as passive mimesis was crushed and ultimately replaced with demands for the creation of a “new reality”—a reality that entailed the ambivalent essence of the experience of modern “being”—of order and chaos, sanity and insanity, authority and anarchy. Expressionism’s vision and “mission” was the creation of an individual—independent in every sense—who would be able to transform society.³² When the expressionist writer and theoretician Kasimir Edschmid wrote in 1918 that “the expressionist poet does not observe, he envisions. He does not portray, he experiences,”³³ the bourgeois *Weltgedanke*, as Edschmid calls it (i.e., the thoughts or ideas that suggest understanding of the world via its structuring), came to an end. This implied both the demise of positivistic knowledge and a deconstruction of the marginality-centrality paradigm. All that was left was the possibility of a vision. Needless to say, the efforts of expressionism to find an adequate representation of modern times via new aesthetic means remained just as contradictory as the times themselves. But the visual dimension of cinema offered to expressionists “a particularly fruitful means for subverting bourgeois codes of representation.” Marc Silberman continues, “The notion of objectivity and laws of reality

as defined by bourgeois standards could only limit the imagination. Thus, the stylised architecture of the *Caligari* sets . . . manifest a refusal to acknowledge the hegemony of ‘normal’ perspective.”³⁴

The film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* can be considered a representation of what the expressionist Ernst Stadler called the chaos of their epoch, the disintegration of tradition, and the anarchy of values.³⁵ It features many elements essential to expressionist works of visual art, music, and literature, such as acute contrasts and abrupt movements, sharp angles, sudden outbreaks, and fragmentations. Bourgeois space became expressionism’s synonym for limited, closed space, without room for movement or thought, let alone creativity. The town clerk on his high stool exemplifies this reduction of the human being to an occupation. At the same time, however, due to the fact that society is entirely hierarchical, the structure suggests power to the individual as long as there is still at least one person lower in the hierarchical system. As long as this illusion of personal importance can be upheld, order is attained and individual creativity, potentially threatening, is avoided. This chimera of significance is illustrated in the film by the absurd height of the clerk’s stool and is destroyed by Cesare/Caligari when the clerk is annihilated. Expressionists longed for an *Aufbruch*, a new beginning. In the film, the new beginning is marked by the first murder: the clerk, symbol of arrogance and authority, is killed.

THE CITY

But the construction of identity must be viewed in relation to the environment, and urban landscapes are a part of every discussion of expressionism.³⁶ Holstenwall, the name of the town depicted in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, was chosen by scriptwriter Hans Janowitz after an incident that he witnessed in Hamburg in 1913: “At an amusement park on the Reeperbahn, beside the Holstenwall, he had noticed a young girl, ‘drunken with the happiness of life.’ Fascinated, he followed her, but she disappeared into some bushes, from which emerged, moments later, an unremarkable bourgeois man. Next day he learned that the girl had been murdered. The incident left an indelible impression.”³⁷

Although Holstenwall seems almost charming in comparison to Fritz Lang’s depiction of an urban Moloch in his film *Metropolis*, the narrative of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* clearly incites a sense of danger that Janowitz associated with the city. Moreover, the setting and design of the film are decidedly urban. Most images are dominated by architectural elements, preferably limiting walls. These elements and painted backdrops allow no illusion in regard to the “reality” of the “film” medium but continuously remind us of their function. Nancy Ketchiff writes, “The set is a self-conscious cipher—a symbol for the ‘place’ of the action but one whose self-consciousness never lets us forget that it is a function of the art-form itself.”³⁸ The expressionist design of the stage set with its “elongated streets radiating out in all directions, the trapezoidal houses with matching doorways and window frames,”³⁹ captures the city’s disposition, its mood, to which the avant-garde’s response was

decidedly ambiguous. When Kasimir Edschmid demanded a true, fearless gaze on the modern metropolis and proclaimed the artist as sole legislator and creator of a new reality, he was aware that the expressionist reality was largely determined by massive shifts of population from rural to urban landscapes. In 1871 the German empire contained eight large industrial cities, but by 1910 there were forty-four such "massive centers of urban population and industrial power."⁴⁰ Between 1910 and 1930, Berlin (where *Caligari* was produced) was certainly the most imposing of these centers within the German empire, having doubled its number of inhabitants from 2 million in 1910 to 4 million in 1920. But even within a European context, Berlin was rightly considered one of the most outstanding centers of the European avant-garde, a global city, and an experimental cultural playground of the machine age. Determined by speed, rhythm, dynamics, hustle, and bustle, Berlin filled expressionists with both fear and fascination. This voracious giant seemed irresistible to most expressionists—many of whom had moved from Leipzig, Dresden, or Jena to take part in Berlin's metropolitan life.

The relationship between expressionist writers and urban space has often been described as rather negative or, at best, ambivalent. Berlin, the Moloch and demon, was perceived by many as "one of the most horrific, cannibalistic manifestations of modernity,"⁴¹ as Jost Hermand put it. Early expressionist lyric poetry in particular offers many examples of a threatening, dark, and sinister image of Berlin. Think of Georg Heym's famous poem "Der Gott der Stadt" (*God of the City*, 1912), depicting a furious, power-hungry demon squatting on urban rooftops eagerly awaiting destruction and despair. In a first collection of expressionist poetry entitled *Menschheitsdämmerung* (*Dawn of the Human Race*), edited by Kurt Pinthus in 1920, the poems devoted to Berlin—such as Johannes R. Becher's long "Berlin" poem or Paul Zech's "Fabrikstraße Tags" (Factory Street by Day)⁴²—all signify the city as a place of disintegration and vary only in the degree of their sense of threat. But the city was much more than just a destructive demon of the machine age. The possibilities offered by urban space were also experienced as liberating and intoxicating, and many expressionists (e.g., Alfred Lichtenstein, Ernst Blass, Georg Kaiser, and Alfred Döblin) convey a sense of pride and a distinct enthusiasm in their literary texts regarding their status as cosmopolitan outsiders—bohemian, avant-garde artists and writers.

In early German film, the city almost always reflects this attitude. German silent "street" films, such as G. W. Pabst's *Freudlose Gasse* (*Joyless Street*, 1924), Bruno Rahn's *Dirnentragödie* (*A Prostitute's Tragedy*, 1927) or Pabst's *Tagebuch einer Verlorenen* (*Diary of a Lost Girl*, 1929), often focus on urban tragedy. These films clearly illustrate how in the modern industrial city the stability and safety in a woman's or girl's life can easily fall to pieces and leave her at the mercy (or rather at the commercial interest) of the street. But it is unlikely that the portrayal of women's suffering made films like these box office hits. They captured the imagination of their viewers because they "catered to the audience's interest in, and obsession with, the worst aspects of urban life: crime, drug usage and sexual license."⁴³ Time and again, the fear of the city's abyss is at the same time a distinct fascination with its possibilities, be they negative or positive. The audience's conflicting attitude toward the city

combined with the realities of any urban experience made (and still makes) the city the ideal symbol of conflict. Like Holstenwall in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, the city is often depicted as a dangerous terrain ruled by imposters, crooks, and corrupt geniuses—as, for example, in Fritz Lang's films *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler* (*Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler*, 1922) or *Metropolis* (1925–1926). Especially in Lang's films do we at almost every moment sense the seductiveness and charisma of the urban Moloch.

IDENTITY

And yet *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*—like most expressionist representations of the metropolis—accentuates the experience of a threatened individuality and the impossibility of an eventual Hegelian harmony within the human being as such, as well as between the individual and his/her environment within an urban landscape. Yet it is in the "doubling" of the "modern" experience through the juxtaposition of urban landscapes and unfixed identities that expressionism finally achieves a truly un-Hegelian but entirely Benjaminian "dialectical image." If isolated from each other, both apocalyptic urban landscapes and representations of unfixed identities still embody an almost utopian longing for a reconciling context. Their unresolved contrast in one image, however, denies this possibility of resolution. Instead, they mirror each other in all of their fracturedness, thus leaving the spectator with no plausible escape route from the internally necessary chaos portrayed. Here vanishing point and perspective literally become each other, become, in fact, a soiled kind of Möbius strip. In expressionism, the experience of this endlessly broken mirror is still the experience of an individual facing the shock of being swallowed by the city and its masses. An expressionist representation of this "folded dialectical image" thus incarnates one last cry for the human condition.

Caligari's somnambulist is the modern "human" automaton, a machine reminiscent of Maria's robot in Fritz Lang's famous film *Metropolis* (1925–1926). The town clerk has an occupation rather than an identity, and his depiction criticizes bourgeois society, which values dutifully performed tasks more than individuality and creativity. Discussed within the context of expressionism, it is rather fitting that *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* should stage its final scenes in a mental hospital. As I already mentioned, mentally unstable characters were popular protagonists in expressionist literature: *Der Irre* (*The Madman*, 1913) by Georg Heym is one of the most striking examples of a depiction of mental illness. Insane asylums often appear as metaphors for bourgeois space, which was experienced by expressionists as closed, incarcerating, and powerful. The figures of authority are represented by guards and medical personnel, and the patient symbolizes the suppressed individual who is being forced by society to suppress his or her instincts and desires. Remaining tuned in to his or her instincts (nature) while experiencing the crushing force of bourgeois conservatism, which marginalizes the ill-behaved and drives them into madness, the psychopath becomes a fitting and entirely ambivalent representative for an expressionist criticism of bourgeois society. Both aggressive and fatalistic, this criticism is mirrored in

the film as Wolf von Eckardt and Sander L. Gilman point out: "*Caligari* showed the extent to which the German soul seemed beset with fatalism, which was transformed into violent art—at times, an art of hallucination rather than mere fantasy."⁴⁴

The framing narrative of the film on one level abridges the criticism of authority by shedding doubt on the narrator's mental stability; but at the same time, it is exactly the frame that leaves the viewer in limbo. Cesare is both a human being and a machine, doubled yet again by the "spiritual automaton"⁴⁵ cinema, as Gilles Deleuze phrases it. We are to doubt the meaning of the narrative, but consequently we mistrust the frame itself and question its ability to give absolute meaning to the story just told. Meaning remains ambivalent and Francis's identity remains unfixed. The stabilization of Caligari's identity toward the end of the narrative fails mainly due to his unchanged outward appearance. Caligari's dark overcoat of myth, chance, and desire is replaced with a doctor's white coat of stability, knowledge, and authority. In addition to this simple substitution of coat color from dark and uncanny to white and enlightened, the director could have changed Caligari's makeup and costume much more drastically to turn the madman into the sound bourgeois and competent psychoanalyst, but Robert Wiene chooses not to do so. Why? Could the provision of certainty by the frame be meant as an illusion, as yet another doubling of meaning and narration? Do not ambivalence and uncertainty still rule?

The representation of unfixed identities as witnessed in the characters of Francis, Caligari, and Cesare successfully deconstructs the "possibility of difference," as Derrida famously invoked this pillar of instrumentalized rationality.⁴⁶ Therefore, the film—with and without the framing narrative—questions the comfortable world of bourgeois antagonisms. The "essence" of an unfixed identity lies beyond the unambiguity of *traditional bourgeois* spaces. It is precisely along these lines that the expressionists' representation of unfixed identities denies the bourgeois *Weltbild* and its cosy set of oppositions, which make the world "readable." It indulges in doubt and confusion, for this, according to the expressionists, is the essence of modern urban spaces and their inhabitants. Unfixed identities represent illegibility itself and threaten the mere possibility of difference and sociation. Caligari could be the benevolent doctor or the menacing madman, Francis might be sane or insane or both. They are undecidable, to borrow Derrida's term, like the Greek word *pharmakon*, which can mean remedy as well as poison, or as Derrida puts it, "neither remedy nor poison, neither good nor evil, . . . neither speech nor writing."⁴⁷ Thus undecidables cannot be included in a philosophical world of binary antagonisms, which is precisely the source of their power. Or as Zygmunt Bauman phrases it, "Their underdetermination is their potency: because they are nothing, they may be all. . . . They bring the outside into the inside, and poison the comfort of order with the suspicion of chaos."⁴⁸

The story's design and the framing narrative merge to produce an ambivalent representation of the individual's experience of modern space. Fixed identities like the clerk's are recognized as empty illusions and discarded. Western philosophy traditionally understood Being in terms of *presence*, and it is often pointed out that only postmodern thought—particularly the work of Jacques Derrida—turned our atten-

tion to *absence*. In films such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, like many examples of expressionist literature, however, we already encounter characters that confess to their own fragmented nature. We are confronted with doubled or even tripled identities that are never fixed but become inconstant, fluid conceptions of identity instead. If we read the film as an expressionist manifestation, has it succeeded in representing the essence of modern man and his experience of modern time and space? Perhaps the authenticity we are seeking lies precisely in the ambiguity and multiformity, the doubling and contradictions we encounter. After all, identity develops out of the historical process—a process that constantly and necessarily implies ambivalence—while members of the audience decode the film in accordance with their own history. Transcending boundaries is the order of the day. As early as 1919, unfixed, multilayered identities were presented in film to illustrate what the experience of modernity was all about. Still today, it is not one single identification but rather a multiplicity of different, indeed contradictory, identifications that produce a subject that is continually exposed to fresh processes of change, opposition, and interpretation. *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* illustrates this destabilization of the identity of modern man while the reflection of the story in the eyes of the alleged psychopath destabilizes narration itself. What is the story? Who is mad here? Is photography really truth and cinema truth twenty-four times a second, as Jean-Luc Godard tells us? The understanding of film as the ideal representative of truth is questioned already in Robert Wiene's *Caligari*. Both the film's mimetic desire and the audience's belief in the medium's mimetic capacity are mocked. The irony is powerful and surprising at the same time. For the first time in the history of film, the experience of a severe destabilization of one's identity within modern society is combined with a deconstruction of the visual real. The fashionable aestheticization of the film, its sharp angles and exaggerated gestures, seem to divert our attention from witnessing a representation of truth to observing a work of expressionist art as spectacle. But does not truth appear in the folds of the artificial, strange, and essentially expressionist film after all? The essence of modern identity remains unfixed and unstable, sometimes even uncanny.

NOTES

1. Max Skladanowsky presented "Living Photographs" using his Bioscop projector.
2. See David Robinson, *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (London: BFI, 1997), 22, 78; and Siegbert S. Praver, Uli Jung, and Walter Schatzberg, *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari: Drehbuch von Carl Mayer und Hans Janowitz zu Robert Wiene's Film von 1919/20* (Munich: edition text + kritik, 1995), 156. The orthography of some of the names (Caligari/Calligari, Francis/Franzis, Alan/Allan) and the title of the film differ in the script, the advertisements, and the film itself. One of the scriptwriters, Hans Janowitz, commented: "Whether 'Caligari' were to be spelled with one or two 'l's' called for an extended debate, over which we fell asleep." Quoted in Robinson, *Caligari*, 78. I shall leave it at that and employ the most commonly used spellings.
3. Robinson, *Caligari*, 7.

4. Cf. Anton Kaes, "Film in der Weimarer Republik," in *Geschichte des deutschen Films*, ed. Wolfgang Jacobsen (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1993), 39.

5. Wolfgang Jacobsen, ed., *Geschichte des deutschen Films* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1993), 13–100; Thomas Elsaesser, "Germany: The Weimar Years," in *The Oxford History of World Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 136–51; Jack Ellis, *A History of Film* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1979), 95–112. See also the two standard English-language commentaries on German film of the 1920s: Lotte Eisner, *The Haunted Screen* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969); and Siegfried Krakauer, *From Caligari to Hitler* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974).

6. Fritz Lang was originally assigned to direct *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* but was too busy with the sequel to his successful *Die Spinnen* (*The Spiders*) to take on the job. Cf. Krakauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, 65.

7. For an introduction to *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, see especially Mike Budd, "The Moments of Caligari," in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari: Texts, Contexts, Histories*, ed. Mike Budd (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 7–120; and Robinson, *Caligari*.

8. Hans-Michael Bock, "Erich Pommer," in *The Oxford History of World Cinema*, 145.

9. Lenny Rubinstein, "Caligari and the Rise of Expressionist Film," in *Passion and Rebellion*, ed. Stephen Bronner and Douglas Kellner (London: Croon Helm, 1983), 363.

10. In the version of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* distributed by Redemption Film, Ltd. (RETN 013), all title plates are translated into English. All quotes in this essay refer to the Redemption Film release.

11. Cf. Siegfried S. Prawer, "Vom Filmroman zum Kinofilm," in *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, 12–13. According to Werner Krauss's autobiography, Walter Reimann was chiefly responsible for the design (quoted in Prawer, 11–12). David Robinson, however, identifies Hermann Warm as chief designer, who "consulted with Reimann and [Walter] Röhrig, painters who had recently been working with him, also in the Lixie-Atelier, on Otto Rippert's *Pest in Florenz*, written by Fritz Lang" (Robinson, *Caligari*, 22).

12. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 10.

13. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986), 8.

14. For a multifaceted analysis of transgression, see Tim Cresswell, *In Place, Out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

15. See, for example, the English translation of plays by Georg Kaiser, Walter Hasenclever, and Ernst Toller in *German Expressionist Plays*, ed. Ernst Schürer (New York: Continuum, 1997); and Ernst Schürer's introduction to this collection of plays, pp. vii–xxi.

16. David Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 16.

17. The idea of unfixed identity as power was picked up by Fritz Lang in his 1922 *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler*. Mabuse is an extremely talented criminal, a master of deception and transformation, who controls an entire metropolis. Cf. Kaes, "Weimarer Republik," 62.

18. Janowitz quoted in Robinson, *Caligari*, 13.

19. Krakauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, 66.

20. Krakauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, 66–67.

21. I am in agreement here with Richard J. Murphy, who argues in his excellent essay "Carnival Desire and the Sideshow of Fantasy: Dream, Duplicity, and Representational Instability in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*," *Germanic Review* 66, no. 1 (1991): 48–55, that "the psychological and representational structure in *Caligari* is characterized by a mode of ambiguity"

(p. 48). Murphy's argument is based on Samuel Weber's interpretive framework in his analysis of E. T. A. Hoffmann's "Der Sandmann," in which the "uncanny" as an experiential structure is explored.

22. Rubinstein, "Caligari," 364. Regarding the framing device, see also Neil Donahue, "Unjustly Framed: Politics and Art in *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*," *German Politics and Society*, Summer 1994, 76–88, in which the author argues that the artificial ending signals "the conscious construction of a political dilemma" (p. 76). He examines the film in the context of a real-life example of the expressionist "father-son" conflict by focusing on the psychoanalyst Otto Gross.

23. Murphy, "Carnival Desire," 48.

24. Robinson, *Caligari*, 38.

25. Robinson, *Caligari*, 39.

26. Robinson, *Caligari*, 59.

27. Ernst Angel, "Ein 'Expressionistischer' Film," *Die neue Schaubühne*, April 1920, 103–5. Reprinted in Schatzburg, *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari: Drehbuch von Carl Mayer und Hans Janowitz zu Robert Wienes Film von 1919/20*, 139–40.

28. See, for example, the 1920 reviews of the film by Podehl, Martin Proskauer, and Herbert Ihring reprinted in Schatzburg, *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari: Drehbuch von Carl Mayer und Hans Janowitz zu Robert Wienes Film von 1919/20*, 140–47.

29. See, for example, Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style*, 15–16.

30. Marc Silberman, "Industry, Text, and Ideology in Expressionist Film," in *Passion and Rebellion*, ed. Stephen Bronner and Douglas Kellner (London: Croon Helm, 1983), 377.

31. Much has been written about German expressionism; among the most useful publications are Walter Sokel, *The Writer in Extremis: Expressionism in Twentieth-Century German Literature* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1959); R. S. Furness, *Expressionism* (London: Methuen, 1973); Richard Hamann and Jost Hermand, *Expressionismus* (Berlin: Akademie, 1975); Otto Best, ed., *Theorie des Expressionismus* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1982); Stephen Bronner and Douglas Kellner, eds., *Passion and Rebellion: Expressionist Heritage* (London: Croon Helm, 1983); Francis Courtade, *Cinéma Expressioniste* (Paris: Veyrier, 1984).

32. See Ernst Schürer's introduction in *German Expressionist Plays*, ix, in which he quotes Georg Kaiser: "What is the vision? There is only one, that of the regeneration of the human individual."

33. Kasimir Edschmid, "Expressionismus in der Dichtung," *Die neue Rundschau* 1 (1918): 364.

34. Silberman, "Industry, Text, and Ideology," 379.

35. Ernst Stadler (1914) in Wolfgang Wendler, *Carl Sternheim: Materialienbuch* (Darmstadt, Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1980), 17.

36. In regard to expressionism and the city, see among others the essays by Raymond Williams and Edward Timms in *Unreal Cities: Urban Experience in Modern European Literature and Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 12–24, 111–27.

37. Robinson, *Caligari*, 10.

38. Nancy Ketchiff, "Dr. Caligari's Cabinet: A Cubist Perspective," *Comparatist* 8 (1984): 12.

39. Rubinstein, "Caligari," 363.

40. Reinhold Heller, "'The City Is Dark': Conceptions of Urban Landscape and Life in Expressionist Painting and Architecture," in *Expressionism Reconsidered*, ed. Gertrud Bauer Pickard and Karl Eugene Webb (Munich: Fink, 1979), 42.

41. Jost Hermand, "Das Bild der 'Großen Stadt' im Expressionismus," in *Die Unwirklichkeit der Städte. Großstadtdarstellungen zwischen Moderne und Postmoderne*, ed. Klaus Scherpe (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1988), 61.

42. Kurt Pinthus, ed., *Menschheitsdämmerung* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1982), for Becher's poem see pages 43–45, Zech's poem is on page 55.
43. Rubinstein, "Caligari," 371.
44. Wolf von Eckardt and Sander L. Gilman, *Bertolt Brecht's Berlin* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 95.
45. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (London: Athlone, 1989), 262.
46. Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).
47. Jacques Derrida, *Positions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 43.
48. Bauman, "Modernity and Ambivalence," 146.