

# CINEFANTASTIQUE

## SCREENING THE IMAGINATION

### Week 1: *A Trip to the Moon* (1902) and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920)

#### George Melies

- Stage magician and owner manager of The Theatre Robert Houdin in Paris
- Sought to use the new cinematic technology as an extension of his stage magic – wanted to make ‘optical illusions’ rather than ‘films’
- He bought a camera and filmed everything he came across – began to experiment
- While filming a street scene his camera jammed – this caused a jump in time on film.
- Cars/people disappeared – the special effect was born.
- The first person to make a film with a story (Cinderella) – a beginning, a middle and an end
- He built the world’s first custom made movie studio
- He gave up magic and went completely into the movie business
- Melies would present audiences with an onscreen version of real-life serial killer *Bluebeard* (1901).
- In this formative 10 minute short, the nasty protagonist is seen hanging his female victims from meat hooks prefiguring the brutal goings-on in Tobe Hooper’s *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) by a good 70 years.

#### *A Trip to the Moon* (1902)

- A huge success internationally
- He was made famous in the US
- Producers such as Thomas Edison made illegal copies of the film, profiting from them
- Melies decided to open Star Films in New York – placing his brother Gaston (a failed shoe salesman in charge), it was hoped this would protect his interests

#### Edison’s Monopoly

- In 1908 Thomas Edison created the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC) – it included Biograph, Vitagraph, Essanay, Selig, Lubin, Kalem, American Pathe and Méliès’ Star Films Company
- It was effectively an Edison led monopoly
- Star Films was committed to make 1000 feet of film per week
- He made 58 films in the first year as part of the obligation
- Melies tried to form a protest against the monopoly – he stopped making films for a year
- In 1910, he made a deal with Pathe – he took money in advance with a commitment to make specific content
- His films started to lose popularity
- Pathe hired Ferdinand Zecca to trim the films – they remained unprofitable
- Melies broke his contract with Pathe – which meant he incurred debts he was not able to pay
- His brother was unable to meet Edison’s demands and had to sell off the American branch of the company

#### The End of an Era

- His career as filmmaker was over by 1914
- He lost his theatre
- In 1917, his studio was turned into a hospital for the war wounded
- Ironically, many of his original films were melted down and used to make soles for soldiers’ boots

“...discovered the means of placing poetry within the reach of the man in the street.”

**Walt Disney**

“The first great film magician...”

**Terry Gilliam**

## Early German Expressionism and its Influence

- And while it's perhaps inevitable when considering the on-screen 'crazy' that our imaginations tend to lean heavily on American versions of this particular cinematic trope, with Images of supernatural fiends like Jason, Michael Myers or Freddy Kruger dominating popular culture, had not European filmmakers first established many of these formative concepts then it's doubtful that the Hollywood horror would look quite the way it does now.
- These nightmarish and surreal adventures from the likes of Murnau and Wiene would not only heavily influence later European works but also provide the basis, at least visually, for a host of new American horrors like *Dracula* (1931), *Frankenstein* (1931) and *The Black Cat* (1934) and numerous gritty Film Noir thrillers.
- But while the horrors of Hollywood's golden age and beyond would essentially exploit our conscious or unconscious fears of death by wrapping them in the guise of fictional creatures like the mummy or the werewolf, in Germany, 'M' offered us a much worse nightmare, that of the anonymous child killer, chillingly portrayed by Peter Lorre who is skilfully adept at being both frightening and frightened in the same moment.
- Given that the use of the word psychopath originated in Germany, it's perhaps unsurprising that that country should be one of the first to fully explore the nature of death and horror in such a vividly effective manner.
- Capitalising not only on story and characterisation but on technical advances, stagecraft and the artistic movements of the day; while incorporating Freudian ideas about disjointed viewpoints, Robert Wiene and later F.W. Murnau were able to wrap their thinly veiled polemics, within an expressionist aesthetic offering *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* (1920) and *Nosferatu* (1922) respectively. Whereas the former utilised unnatural lighting, painted backdrops and off-kilter set design, and the latter used on-location shooting and bizarre camera angles, both would reflect the upside-down nature of a world gone mad, cowering in the shadow of the Great War and its devastating consequences.

## Early Cinema and German Expressionism

- Unlike impressionists who tried to imitate nature, expressionists used distorted colour, scale and space to present a 'subjective' view of what they saw.
- Remained an aesthetic movement until...
- 1915 onwards – it became a bitter protest movement
- A recognizable style of modern art
- By 1920 though, expressionism as a wider art form was all but dead
- But *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) showed that the art form could be utilized in the relatively 'new' medium of cinema
- While there had been some nods to expressionism in earlier films like *The Student of Prague* (1913), *Caligari* cemented the idea of it being a cinematic movement

## Early German Cinema and Attitudes

- Low art form – throwaway not respected by the intelligentsia

## Autorenfilm

'...a concept aimed squarely at breaking down the resistance of the bourgeoisie. To this end, properties, or better still, famous literary personalities of the day were pressed into service in order to raise the tone of a medium considered irredeemable by the intelligentsia.'

**Jonathan Rigby**

- On the one hand, there was a leaning towards creating an artistic cinematic movement to appeal to the bourgeoisie (high-brow)
- On the other, they used more crass methods to promote this – celebrity endorsements etc. (low-brow)
- German cinema had an identity crisis

### Early Themes/Subjects in German Cinema

- Death
- Despots
- Doppelgangers/Doubles
- Macabre
- Mysticism
- Myth
- Science

### Expressionism as a Cinematic Form

- Expressionist painting was notable for its use of vibrant colour and ambitious palates
- However, early expressionist filmmakers faced the obvious limitation – of black and white photography
- While, with *Caligari*, some prints of the film had used colour tints – the ‘expressionism’ was exhibited via other methods

*“...the mise-en-scene of expressionist films sought to add colour through the broader imagery portrayed on screen.”*

**Ian Roberts**

*German Expressionist Cinema*

### The Look of *Caligari*

- Twisted, deliberately distorted perspectives
- Narrow slanting streets, which cut across each other
- Unexpected angles
- Inclined cubes/dilapidated houses
- As though the whole thing might collapse
- Exaggerated silhouettes and shadows
- Not a hint of nature is allowed in to distract from the spectral set design

*“Curves and slanting lines have a meaning which is decidedly metaphysical. For the psychic reaction caused in the spectator by oblique lines is entirely different from that caused in him by straight lines. Similarly, unexpected curves and sudden ups and downs provoke emotions quite different from those induced by harmonious and gentle gradients.”*

**Rudolf Kurtz**

### A Parable?

- The original story could be considered a political parable
- *Caligari* – representing an unchecked authoritarian state
- Cesare – representing the sleep walking masses – sent to kill and be killed
- However, an epilogue and prologue were added to (perhaps) soften its political edge
- Screenwriters Hans Janowitz and Carl Mayer had been angered by the ‘framing’ story which Weine had added
- They claimed that this change turned their ‘revolutionary’ story into a conformist one.

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*“It is surely not at all unreasonable for Wiene to have paid close attention to the wishes of the audience, since these, after all, were the constraints imposed upon a commercial venture such as a film, not least in the economic climate prevailing in the early years of Weimar’s fledgling democracy. Furthermore, the film’s box office would seem to vindicate this decision.”*

**Ian Roberts**  
*German Expressionist Cinema*

### **Other Influential Elements**

- A small community beleaguered by an unknown evil
- The ‘mad scientist’ and his ‘murderous creation’
- The shambling creature risen from a death like existence
- Jekyll and Hyde like duality
- A tale told from the point of view of a ‘lunatic’
- A carnival setting

### **Next Week.**

*Haxan* (1922)

*Nosferatu* (1922)

*Metropolis* (1927)