**German Expressionist Films**

German expressionist films were prevalent in the 1920s. Amongst the most well remembered are films such as The Cabinet of Dr Caligari (Robert Weiner, 1920), Nosferatu (F.W. Murnau, 1922), Metropolis (Fritz Lang, 1927) and Sunrise (F.W. Murnau, 1927). These films were united by highly stylized visuals, strange asymmetrical camera angles, atmospheric lighting and harsh contrasts between dark and light. Shadows and silhouettes were an important feature of expressionism, to the extent that they were actually painted on to the sets in The Cabinet of Dr Caligari.

The story lines of German expressionist films matched the visuals in terms of darkness and disillusionment. Often sombre in mood and featuring characters from a corrupt underworld of crime, the films’ dramatic effects produced motifs of claustrophobia and paranoia. The same words could be used to describe 1940s Hollywood film noir, a genre hugely influenced by German expressionism. Film noir is typified by Bogart and Bacall in films such as The Big Sleep. Fritz Lang himself also went on to make notable film noirs such as Fury and You Only Live Once. (http://michelle-strozykowski.suite101.com)

**Background**

More than any other national movement in the history of film, German Expressionism was an answer to the grim reality of daily life. But it was not so much a direct relay of life to art. Rather, it was more of a filter; a way of assembling the clutter of post-war Germany to coherence on the screen. It was a way to represent and bring across the reality few could imagine. Sex murders, depression, veterans ghoulishly mangled in the war, the loss of innocence and complete rejection of the past were the things the German people dealt with during the post-war years of 1919 – 1929 (commonly called the Weimar Period in film history). The films produced in Germany during those years captured the cry of a broken nation and a people horrified by the every-day.

Before the Great War, German film was not nearly as technologically or thematically sophisticated as other European film. Until 1910, most German films consisted of short, pornographic snippets and crude day-in-the-life anecdotes. Only the works of Oskar Messter showed even the most minute level of innovation. He implemented the close-up, artificial lighting and even some experimentation with sound. But not until right before the start of the war did Germany begin to produce truly innovative work. Der Student von Prag (The Student of Prague) (1913, dir. Guido Seeber) – commonly considered early Expressionism – explored the theme of the “deep and fearful concern with the foundations of self”1. With Student, the foundation for German Expressionism in film was laid.

  
Der Student von Prag (The Student of Prague) (1913)

In 1914, the Great War began in Europe, cutting Germany off from its usual supply of international cinema. German filmmakers were therefore unaware of the innovation of technique D.W. Griffith had achieved in Birth of a Nation (1915). The only films imported into Germany during the war years were from Denmark and Sweden. However, Sweden and Denmark simply didn’t produce enough films and so, in 1917, the German film studio Universum Film-Aktiengesellschaft (UFA) was founded. UFA remained the largest European film production studio until World War II. After the German defeat in 1918, UFA went on to become a sizable competitor with Hollywood. Expressionism, with the help of nation-wide abolition of censorship in 1919 and the intellectuals’ adoption of cinema, was hailed as a new way of expressing a new world. “Germany’s young artists were ready to accept it as a new means of communicating with the masses. The new freedom of expression manifested itself most immediately in a series of well-mounted, independently produced pornographic films.”2 This “Aufklärungsfilme” (films of elucidation) phase did not last long, however, and in 1920 Das Kabinett Des Dr. Caligari, (The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari) (dir. Robert Wiene) one of the most important and influential Expressionist films, was released.

  
Genuine (1920)

With the outbreak of sex murders – violent sexual crimes in which a victim was not raped but savagely violated in a sexual manner as a means of murder – the German people had yet another horrific product of war to fear. Dr. Caligari plays off of those fears by telling the story of a traveling magician with a hypnotized servant who does his master’s murderous bidding under the cover of night. In addition to being thematically appropriate for the time, Dr. Caligari also contains some of the most identifiably Expressionist examples of mise en scene. Due to budget constrains, the set could not be lit enough to produce the kind of dramatic lighting that Expressionism required. Instead, lighting effects were painted directly on the scenery and sets, creating an even more Expressionist vision. The hard contrast of white and black rays on the walls gives the sense that the action is taking place in the confines of a woodcut, a popular medium for Expressionist art at the time. The sets are also elaborately ridiculous in terms of architectural impossibility. Houses and walls sit atop each other and curve down onto the streets, entombing them in shadows. Every set is populated by numerous paper cut-outs, whether they are trees, houses or chimneys on a rooftop. Nothing seems real but together, the pieces of the world of Caligari create their own reality.

  
Von morgens bis Mitternacht (From Morning to Midnight) (1920)

In some ways, Expressionism was an inevitable movement in Germany. Its seeds were planted before World War I and probably would’ve grown even if the war did not give the German people a thirst for such dark artistic expression. But only with the help of the war could Expressionism become as mainstream as it did. It might’ve continued to surface as a modern art movement but would have doubtfully flourished past that. With a bombardment of disturbing post-war imagery in every-day life, the German people needed a way for art to categorize and assemble these images into coherent forms of expression. Two-Dimensional mediums such as woodcuts and graphic novels of those woodcuts along with film after film relaying the darkness viewers had come to see as commonplace accomplished just that. The silence of the cinema provided an extra degree of depth to Expressionism as well, allowing the viewer to be fully immersed in the caustic imagery he or she was fed. Not until the late thirties and early forties did America begin to experiment with styles similar to Expressionism. The Noir of the forties can be seen as a successor to Expressionism. With its sharp shadows and dark streets, Noir provided the American movie-goer with the style of Expressionism without the depressing social background. Many German directors, in fleeing the Nazis, came to America and directed some of these films. The deficit of talent crippled the German film industry, as did World War II. It would not recover until decades later. But the Expressionist movement marks one of the most important times in the evolution of film. (German Expressionism by Paul Karpenko)

**Expressionist Films**

The early 20th century artistic movement known as German Expressionism, which influenced music, theater, painting, sculpture and architecture, was perhaps most successfully realized in the medium of film. Since the movement sought to reflect emotion over realism, many Expressionist movies had horror themes whose fantastic storylines invoked strong emotional responses and granted wide artistic freedom. Also feeding into the horror elements was a dark introspection brought about by Germany’s involvement in World War I.

The first Expressionist film might be 1913’s The Student of Prague, a Faustian tale in which a poor student takes money from a devilish sorcerer in exchange for his reflection. Although the movie overall lacks some of the extravagance and surrealism of later German horror films, its plot provided for the sort of visual effects and experimentation that characterized Expressionism, as star Paul Wegener played both the titular student and his reflection, which takes on a murderous life of its own. Wegener would stick with the horror genre for his now-lost 1915 film The Golem, based on the Jewish legend of a clay monster brought to life as a servant that veers out of control. Also during this time were groundbreaking films like 1916’s Nachte des Grauens (Night of Horror), the first German vampire movie, and a six-part serial entitled Homunculus (1916) featuring the Frankenstein-like plot of a man manufactured in a lab who turns violent when he recognizes his inability to love.

  
Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari (The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari) (1920)

It wasn’t until the 1920s, though, that German horror — and German Expressionism — hit its creative stride. Robert Wiene’s The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920) was a landmark film that has become the epitome of the Expressionist movement, with its dreamlike sequences and distorted set design with painted buildings and landscapes (including painted-on light and shadow) that resemble abstract art. Wiene’s lesser-known Genuine (1920) had sets designed by Expressionist painter César Klein, using the same artistic methods as Caligari, while Wiene’s The Hands of Orlac (1924) used highly stylized direction and dreamy sequences to tell the story of a pianist who’s driven insane when he receives hand transplants from an executed murderer.

The same year as The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, Paul Wegener returned to the Golem character with the prequel The Golem: or How He Came into the World , which delves into the origin of the monster as a protector of persecuted Jews. The portrayal of the German Jews as oppressed outsiders eerily foretold the Holocaust to come, although the depiction of a rabbi’s mystical “black magic” could be seen as actually contributing to their status as outsiders.

During the ‘20s, a stable of German actors, writers and directors pushed Expressionism to international acclaim. Fritz Lang was the most famous, and although his works weren’t as readily identifiable as horror as other films of the era, his use of supernatural elements, dark storylines and artistic sets generated the same sort of emotional response. Destiny (1921), for instance, revolves around the character of Death, while Dr. Mabuse the Gambler (1922) features a murderer haunted by ghosts, and Metropolis (1927) continued the “manufactured man” theme of Homunculus and The Golem with the story of a robot built in a futuristic society.

Also highly acclaimed was director F.W. Murnau, whose Nosferatu (1922) used a myriad of effects — sped-up film, negatives, shadows, transparencies, montages — to tell an unauthorized version of Dracula. Murnau was no stranger to horror and suspense, having helmed a 1920 adaptation of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, entitled The Head of Janus, and the gothic thriller The Haunted Castle (1921) — the former containing what some believe to be the first instance of a moving camera in cinematic history, an illustration of his inventive filmmaking style. Murnau would later deliver a tour-de-force of special effects in his rendition of the classic tale Faust (1926), an epic full of extravagant set pieces with hundreds of actors and miniatures in the larger-than-life portrayal of God versus Satan.

  
Der Golem, wie er in die Welt kam (The Golem: How He Came into the World) (1920)  
  
Directors like Paul Leni, Henrik Galeen and Georg Wilhelm Pabst also made their mark. Leni’s Waxworks (1924) featured exaggerated sets and colored filters in a “startling” collection of stories. After emigrating to the United States, he continued to startle with the stylish murder mystery The Cat and the Canary (1927) — flush with layered imagery, transparencies, funhouse mirrors and even animated title cards — and The Man Who Laughs (1928), a historical drama whose title character’s shocking visage inspired the design of the Batman villain The Joker. (Its star, Conrad Veidt, was perhaps the most iconic actor of the era, having also starred in The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, The Hands of Orlac, Waxworks, The Student of Prague.)  
  
Galeen, meanwhile, not only wrote Golem, Nosferatu and Waxworks, but he also directed a remake of The Student of Prague in 1926 and another “manufactured man” film, Alraune (in which a woman is created by a scientist who inseminated a prostitute with the semen of a hanged criminal), in 1928. Pabst was not known for his genre efforts, but he did contribute the fantastic Secrets of a Soul (1925), an ambitious attempt to visualize the psychoanalytical landscape laid by Sigmund Freud, creating nightmarish imagery that supposedly reflected unconscious thoughts.  
  
  
**Influence and legacy**

The stunning artistry of German Expressionist cinema didn’t escape the eyes of Hollywood studios. Universal in particular borrowed from the dark style for its gothic monster movies of the 1930s, led by Dracula (1931), Frankenstein (1931) and The Mummy (1932). Aiding in the studio’s efforts was the emigration of German film luminaries like Murnau, Lang, Leni, Veidt and Karl Freund during the political upheaval that brought the Nazi party to power. Freund was the cinematographer on The Golem: or How He Came into the World , The Head of Janus and Metropolis, and he went on to serve in the same role in Dracula before taking the director’s chair on The Mummy and Mad Love, a 1935 American remake of The Hands of Orlac starring fellow émigré Peter Lorre.

  
Die Bergkatze (The Wild Cat) (1921)

In Germany, although the 1930s witnessed some dark, experimental, Expressionist-inclined fare like Fritz Lang’s The Testament of Dr. Mabuse (1933) and Vampyr (1932), a German/French production by Danish director Carl Theodor Dreyer, Lang’s fact-based thriller M (1931) in many ways signaled an end to Expressionism. The renewed realism of noir-ish crime stories like M would dominate the next round of German thrillers. During the ’40s, though, the outbreak of World War II, the emigration of filmmaking talent and government control over the German film industry curtailed any cinematic efforts outside of Nazi propaganda. (German Horror Movies, By Mark H. Harris, About.com Guide)

German silent cinema was arguably far ahead of cinema in Hollywood.As well as the direct influence of film makers who moved from Germany to Hollywood developments in style and technique which were developed through Expressionism in Germany impressed contemporary film makers from elsewhere and were incorporated into their work and so into the body of international cinema from the 1930s onward.

A good example of this process can be found in the career of Alfred Hitchcock. In 1924, Hitchcock was sent by his film company to work as an assistant director and art director at the UFA Babelsberg Studios in Berlin on the film The Blackguard.An immediate effect of the working environment there can be seen in his expressionistic set designs for The Blackguard.

The influence can also be seen throughout the rest of Hitchcock’s career. In his third film, The Lodger, Expressionism’s influence extends to set designs, lighting techniques, and trick camera work to the British public against the wishes of his studio. In his later films, this influence continued through his visual experimentation. For example, in the shower scene from Psycho, Norman Bates’ blurred image seen through a shower curtain is reminiscent of Nosferatu shown through his shadow. The development of these themes and techniques are not coincidental. Hitchcock said, “I have acquired a strong German influence by working at the UFA studios Berlin”. Hitchcock’s film making has in its turn influenced many other film makers and so has been one of the vehicles which have propelled German Expressionist techniques into the present day.

  
Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens (1922)

Expressionism has also had an influence on contemporary films. For example Dark City is influenced by German Expressionism’s stark contrast, rigid movements, and fantastic elements.

Werner Herzog’s 1979 film Nosferatu: Phantom der Nacht was a tribute to F.W. Murnau’s 1922 film. The film uses Expressionist techniques of highly symbolic acting and symbolic events to tell its story.Notably it links the vampire myth with the black death through the use of black rats. One may even notice the link between the evil character of the vampire portrayed by Klaus Kinski, and Nosferatu’s star, Max Schreck.

Stylistic elements taken from German Expressionism are common today in films that do not need reference to real places such as science fiction films (especially Ridley Scott’s 1982 film Blade Runner and the many films influenced by it).

Ambitious adaptations of the style are depicted throughout the contemporary filmography of director Tim Burton. His 1992 film Batman Returns is often cited as a modern attempt to capture the essence of German Expressionism. The angular building designs and severe-looking city squares of Gotham City evoke the loom and menace present in Lang’s Metropolis.

  
Orlacs Hände (The Hands of Orlac) (1924)

Burton’s influences are most apparent in the fairy tale suburban landscape of Edward Scissorhands. The appearance of the titular Edward Scissorhands (not accidentally) reflects Caligari’s somnambulist servant. Burton casts unease in his candy-colored suburb, and the tension is visually unmasked through Edward and his Gothic castle. Burton subverts the Caligari nightmare with an inspired narrative branding, casting the garish somnambulist as the hero and the villagers as the villains.

The familiar look of Caligari’s main character can also be seen in the movie The Crow. With the tight, black outfit, white makeup, and darkened eyes, Brandon Lee’s character is obviously a close relative to Burton’s film Edward Scissorhands.

Burton was also reportedly influenced by silent films and German Expressionism for his film adaptation of the musical Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street, describing the musical as a "silent film with music. (Wikipedia)

**Style**

The “German style.” Emphasis on design or mise-en-scène, uncanny atmosphere, and composition (less on story and editing, unlike  
Hollywood). “The film image must become graphic art” (Hermann Warm).

Expressionism = Stylization that abstracts and transforms reality as we know it (from the conventions of realistic art) through

- photography (unexpected camera angles, little camera movement)  
- lighting (stark contrasts of light and shadow for various effects)  
- totally artificial, stylized sets (“paintings come to life”), stripped of all realistic details and psychology—sets that become   
symbolic diagrams of emotional states  
- overtly theatrical (anti-naturalist) acting style (actors move in jerky, slow, sinuous patterns) and heavy make-up  
- integration of all elements of mise-en-scène to create an overall composition

Such Expressionist techniques aim to

- abstract from realistic details and contingencies  
- bring out the “essence” of an object, situation, or state of being   
- express a subjective viewpoint   
- evoke mystery, alienation, disharmony, hallucination, dreams, extreme emotional states, destabilization

Expressionist film in the 1920s is based on the premise that film becomes art only to the extent that the film image differs from  
empirical reality: “The world is there: Why repeat it?” The “formative” power of film was seen in its ability to

- resignify and rework reality (not merely record it)  
- construct a self-contained aesthetic and symbolic world of the imagination radically detached from the everyday

  
Metropolis (1927)

**Legacy**

After the end of inflation in 1924, Weimar reality stabilized and films sought to be realistic, objective, documentary (in accordance with the cool, sober “New Objectivity” in painting, photography, and literature). Introduction of sound after 1928 forced films to become more “realistic.” Notable exceptions: Murnau’s Faust and Fritz Lang’s Metropolis (both 1926) were the last major Expressionist films, both excessive in their production values. Hollywood became interested in the German style. Filmmakers (Lubitsch, Murnau), actors (Jannings, Veidt, Dietrich), cameramen (Karl Freund), were lured to Hollywood.

Expressionism has been interpreted as

- a challenge to our habitual perception of reality (liberating in the sense that we see the world not as given or fixed but as  
constantly changing)  
- a protest against the “duplication” of empirical reality (liberation at least in the aesthetic realm)  
- an exploration of film’s materiality, i.e. its difference as a medium (experiments with expressive lighting effects, subjective   
camera, design that externalizes the character’s inner thoughts)  
- a foregrounding of the signifier (showing film to be a constructed object designed to make things, sets, and actors   
signify/express something)  
- a way to imbue inanimate objects and sets with “life” (colored by the subjective vision of characters in distress or gripped   
by insanity, paranoia, insecurity, disorientation), to let objects “speak”

Expressionist techniques—unrealistic sets, theatrical composition, lighting, self-conscious or obtrusive camera—live on in Surrealist film, avant-garde cinema, horror films, and in American film noir of the 1940 and 1950s.