

Title of the Module:

German Expressionism

The term Expressionism is used to refer to a modernist movement in art which was notably manifested in poetry and painting in Germany in the first decade of the 20th century, though the echoes of it were felt as early as the last decade of the 19th century in Norway. In 1910s and '20s, expressionist echoes were felt in theatre, music, sculpture, cinema and other forms of work of art. Expressionism declined in Germany by the end of the third decade of 20th century.

Learning Objectives of this module are:

To enable the learner to:

- a) understand the aesthetic movement Expressionism
- b) familiarize themselves with German Expressionism in the context of cinema
- c) identify major German Expressionist films and filmmakers
- d) comprehend and locate major features of expressionist films
- e) critically analyse major German expressionist films

Expressionism as a philosophy of art gave thrust to subjectivity in creative enterprises, where unique creations of art displayed a very individuated style to communicate a very personal or subjective emotion or meaning experienced by the artist. Such experience, emotion or meaning offered no possibility of objective verification or rational explication. Expressionism is the subjective realism or individuated perspective of the artist. Expressionism cannot be analysed with the objective realism of the material world. In a way, one can say that, expressionist art is anti-realistic, as it does not try to draw a parallel symbolic or semantic line with the world of realism. Expressionist works of art often celebrate distortion, rearrangement, anguish, incompleteness, illogicality, and indefiniteness. One of the earliest expressionist paintings is Edvard Munch's 1893 oil painting, which was later called "The Scream". The original Norwegian title of this painting was "Shrik", meaning "shriek". This iconic painting encapsulates the angst of nature as expressed through desexualised and depersonalised living entity, that remotely resembles a human being. Here, the artist's subjective feeling of the presence of a terrified nature is expressed through the mind and body of the artist, thereby uniting himself with nature. However, as the painting reveals, the other human beings in the canvas do not experience such a terrified nature. Elger Dietmar notes that it was the Berlin art dealer Paul Cassirer who used the word 'expressionist' for the first time to refer to the painting style of Edvard Munch for the sake of differentiating his style from the impressionist art (7). Wassily Kandinsky, Auguste Macke, Paul Klee and Erich Heckel were some of the major figures in German Expressionist painting. Dietmar further notes that, "The foundation of the artists' group Die Brücke (The Bridge) in Dresden in 1905 is generally regarded as the first cornerstone of Expressionism, and the revolutionary post-war unrest of the 1920 is seen as the end of movement in Germany, thus forming the second cornerstone" (8). What are the key representative premises of expressionism in art? Though Expressionism resisted a uniform style and a finite definition, rejection of naturalistic and realistic ambience, employment of conflicting and destabilizing colour codes, highlighting of tilted and distorted background, subjective selection and positioning of disconnected objects, expression of intense emotionality

in unrealistic form, omission of historical reference points etc. could be considered as the essential hallmarks of expressionist art.

In German cinema, the expressionist tendencies were vividly visible throughout the 1920s. Frequent political unrest, unstable economic health of the Weimar Republic, international isolation of the Germany in the post-WWI context etc. are the various sociohistorical contexts in which the beginning of German Expressionist cinema can be placed. Robert Wiene, Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, Fritz Lang, Karlheinz Martin, Arthur Robison were some of the notable German filmmakers of the 1920 who experimented with and extended visual and narrative stylistics of the expressionist cinema movement. In her book *The Haunted Screen*, Lotte H. Eisner says that, “The mysterious chiaroscuro, the dim sfumato, the opalescent reflections from mirrors and walls of glass, all these are common characteristics of all the classic German films of the time” (81). With the expansion of the Nazi ideology in Germany in the early thirties, the German expressionist cinema also started to weaken.

The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920), directed by Robert Wiene is generally considered to be the first model German Expressionist movie. With *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, the Expressionist artistic philosophy is wedded with the newest form of art of the time, cinema. This film, about lunatic authorities, upsets the audience’s general conceptions of space, time, human locomotion and narrative structure. *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* is a sort of cinematic hypnotism in which the audience are taken for a psychological ride into the labyrinths of complex human psyche that acts like the somnambulist in the movie. The psychological journey, mostly nocturnal, is executed primarily through four characters: Dr. Caligari, a hypnotist with mental retardation; Cesare, the somnambulist and the hypnotized instrument of death; Jane, the girl who was abducted by the somnambulist, Francis, the student and beloved of Jane; and Alan, Francis’ friend. The film is conceived as a modern-day reinterpretation of an “11th century myth involving the strange and mysterious influence of a mountebank monk over a somnambulist.” *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* is a political parable, depicted in a flashback and with a twisted end, on the complete surrender and participation of haunted people to annihilate their own brethren under authoritarian establishment. The general mood generated by the film is that of sense of loss, claustrophobia, distrust, insecurity and perpetual hauntedness. The distorted sets, tilted camera vision, narrow spaces, mysterious dealings, exaggerated unrealistic acting style, and shadow-filled ghostly night sequences in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* convey the expressionistic psychological disillusionment, trauma, and angst. The whole world here is turned to a mental asylum, where it is difficult to segregate the patient and the curer. Anton Kaes says that, “Caligari’s historical unconscious—what it does not speak aloud—is the memory of a traumatic experience. ...The film’s disregard for temporal linearity and illusionism further unsettles the viewer, affording no clear delineation between past and present, fantasy and real occurrence, dream and delusion” (54). Robert Wiene was a prolific German filmmaker who directed about 40 films during 1910s to 30s. In 1933, he went into exile from Germany due to the growing clout of Nazi ideology in Germany.

Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau is another great German filmmaker who contributed much to the expansion of the idea of expressionism in cinema. Murnau’s *Nosferatu* (Vampire), released in 1922, is another monumental cinematic creation included within the expressionist tradition. This film is an unauthenticated free adaptation of Bram Stoker’s Gothic horror fiction written in 1897. This film is also about the main theme of hauntedness. The blood sucking count Orlock, the rats invading the city, the moments of hypnotic subjugation, the lurking danger etc.

add to the eerie ambiance of the film. The film combines together psychology and superstition, contamination and purification, nightmares and dreams, devilishness and humanity and innocence and villainy. Murnau's film *Nosferatu* was able to create an ever-lingering iconic visual image of the imaginary vampire in popular culture. Cristina Massaccesi says that, "... *Nosferatu*, along with many other films produced during the Weimar Republic and despite its apparent detachment from the current events, can be doubtlessly interpreted as a vehicle to express the inner anxiety and unrest that were at work in Germany during the dramatic and unruly years that followed the end of the First World War" (13). Wide angle shots of remote locations with small human figures moving along implying their extreme vulnerability to impending danger, awe-inspiring dimly lit interiors of large mansions, tight shots of book pages with horror-creating contents, frequent intertitles that predict impending doom, dark and cloudy evening skylines juxtaposed with closeup shots of frightened men, foreboding and ominous background music, moth eating plants, coffin-carrying *Dracula* and closeup shots of human necks with puncture marks add to the visual metaphors of horror and death.

The 1921 film, *Destiny*, directed by Fritz Lang, significantly adds to the canon of German Expressionist cinema. The narrative structure of this film is episodic spanning over different geographical locations and temporal zones. *Destiny* presents four love-triangles, the last three put within the first triangle. The first story of love and death takes place in an unidentified place, where Death is bargaining with a young woman whose husband had just died. Death offers to return her lover, if she could save at least one of those three flickering candles, which represent the impending death of three men at different parts of the world. The first flickering candle represents the love story of Zobeide and Frank which is set in in the Middle East city of the Faithful. The second candle contains the love story between Monna Fiametta and her lover Gianfrancesco and this episode is set in Venice. The story that represents the third candle is set in an ancient Chinese empire where Tiao Tsien is trying to save the life of her lover Liang. In all these three sub-narratives, the respective couple dies finally. And, the young woman in the first love triangle is united with her lover in death by Death. This film is about human being's simultaneous attraction and repulsion towards death. *Metropolis* was another film by Fritz Lang where he re-employs the metaphor of death in the contexts of a highly automated modernist urban space. *Metropolis* is about the collapse of a modern industrial civilization where human beings are rendered into machine like objects destined to do tiresome and boring jobs under a very sucking capitalist industrial complex.

Arthur Robison was another prolific film director from the German Expressionist film school. His film *Schatten* (*Shadows*, 1923) begins in a stage performance mode of shadow-puppeteering. The huge dark shadows that dominate the screen in the beginning, along with the puppet like movements of the characters produce an air of horror, distrust, and lurking danger. In this silent film, which has no intertitles and background music, more than the actors and bodies and their movements; the positioning, size, angles, and the movements of their shadows contribute much to the drama. Actually, shadows are the real characters in Robison's *Schatten*. Almost every frame or sequence of this film has a significant presence of shadows of different kinds. These shadows imply the inner psyche of the characters. The complex intermingling of actors' bodies, often with popped up eyes, and shadows suggest the simultaneous expression of their bodily exterior behaviour and mental interior behaviour. A heightened sense of distrust among the host and his guests, extreme anxiety, engulfing erotic postures and gazes, seductive female sexuality, feminine narcissism, male gaze on female

body, spousal suspicion etc. are all effectively communicated by intermixing shadows and corporeal bodies.

Another important representative film from the German expressionist school of the silent era was Karlheinz Martin's film *Von Morgen bis Mitternachts* (From Morn to Midnight, 1920). It was a cinematic adaptation of the German Expressionist drama of the same title, written by Georg Kaiser in 1912. Greed for money, looting, pursuit of expensive sexual, religious practices are the major issues in the film. Robert Neppach's flawlessly executed sets of extreme distortion turned this film into an iconic status among all the German Expressionist film, primarily because of its stylized setting with a permanent black backdrop. Death and richness often make their frequent appearances in this film amidst the interplay of extreme blackness and extreme whiteness. The bank cashier's bid to make a big life with stolen money comes to an end with his suicide. Notably, the absence of grey shades in the film is suggestive of the impossibility of a middle path for greed for money, lust for sex and quest for spiritual salvation, as there is no middle-path between life and death; its either life or death.

The tilted camera angles and distorted sets in expressionist films actually give external concrete materiality to the disillusioned mental state of the characters. So, the visible material exteriority is the cinematic representation of the invisible human mental interiority. According to Figge Richard, "Film historians often speak of the "entfesselte Kamera, the chained camera," as being characteristic of the German films of the twenties. In fact, it was not used extensively until 1924. The completely mobile camera, along with its possibilities in montage sequences, was developed by Karl Freund for Murnau's film", *The Last Laugh* (313). About the waning away of expressionist cinema, Bert Cardullo makes the following comment, "Tellingly, the expressionist experiment in film largely ceased with the advent of sound: things were too much like the theater again, where the word was primary. The word ultimately destroyed dramatic expressionism because within the form it tended to lack variety, subtlety, and ambiguity: richness. It destroyed cinematic expressionism because, speaking, its characters, before their painted sets and artful lighting, were somehow less real, even ridiculous" (34). During the silent era of cinema, the expressionist films offered the possibilities of exploring the human psyche by attempting to externalise at least a semblance of it. Human psychological interiority, which is largely universal and not confined to a language, was the primary narrative content in German Expressionist films of the 1920s.

Let's wind up this discussion about German Expressionist cinema of the 1920s by pin-pointing some of its common identifiable formal, thematic and aesthetic features. Rejection of a realistic mise-en-scene is the fundamental hallmark of expressionist films. This is achieved by creating settings with disharmonious and distorted elements, wide usage of low-key lighting that creates visible shadows of people and other objects, presenting characters in phantom-like costumes and very visible facial makeup, crating claustrophobic and terror-generating fantastic locations, and adopting exaggerated and highly dramatic acting style. Visual exploration of human psyche is another characteristic of expressionist films. Such externalizations of the abstract interior psychological feelings are achieved inventing material objective correlatives like unstable and fragmented physical space of action filled with shadows of different size and shape. Expressionist films generally follow a cinematographic idiom of titled and disturbing visuals. Trauma, paranoia, schizophrenia, suspicion, jealousy, homicide etc. are some of the oft-repeated thematic elements in German expressionist films. An aesthetics of permanent

unsettlement and all-pervading terror can be located in German Expressionist films of the 1920s.

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Web Links:

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<https://news.artnet.com/market/art-house-an-introduction-to-german-expressionist-films-32845>

<https://lib.guides.umd.edu/c.php?g=326833&p=2194181>

<http://www.openculture.com/2017/06/what-is-german-expressionism.html>