

BACK TO CALIGARI

THE other day I realised a long-cherished ambition. I saw a screening of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, a 16 mm. print of which has been secured by the Wellington Film Institute. Like *Battleship Potemkin*, this is one of those pictures which everybody who is seriously interested in the cinema keeps on hearing about but very few in this country have ever actually seen.

Dr. Caligari, which was directed by Robert Weine in Germany in 1919, is important, historically, because it represented almost the first occasion on which lighting was used imaginatively in the cinema; because, in the work of Conrad Veidt and Werner Krauss, the leading players, it hinted at the development of a truly cinematic technique of acting; and because it founded a whole school of sombrely expressionistic and heavily subjective screen drama, especially in Germany. The film, in fact, relies much more on lighting than on editing for its atmosphere; there is none of the fast and varied cutting to produce an

emotional impact which one finds, for instance, in *Potemkin*. The action is very leisurely, especially by modern standards; but the film has emotional power, nevertheless. Technically, *Dr. Caligari* is important not only for its lighting but also for its highly ingenious and artistic backgrounds, constructed out of the meagre resources available in the German studios of those days. Students of the theatre as much as of the cinema are still excited by the effects which Weine and his fellow-craftsmen produced with a little lath and canvas and a few pots of paint.

AND socially, *Dr. Caligari* is important because, for those with eyes to see, it reflects clearly the depressed conditions and fatalistic state of mind of defeated Germany in the years immediately following the First Great War. There are, in fact, two writers on the film, E. W. and M. M. Robson, who practically blame *Dr. Caligari* for causing Hitler and the Nazis. In their book *The Film Answers Back*, they use this German production as the basis of a far-fetched apology for the American

cinema, seeking to prove that Hollywood produces films full of sweetness, light, objective realism, and social consciousness, by contrast with the morbid, subjective, introspective, and decadent productions from the Continent and from Britain. This thesis is false, in my opinion, anyway, but it does contain at least a half-truth. There is no doubt that *Dr. Caligari* is the direct outcome of a world that had slipped its moorings and lost its bearings; it was born in the midst of chaos, disillusionment, and gloom; and it illustrates the tendency, which such conditions create, of "flight from a world become too horrible to contemplate; flight to an escape world of introversion, of speculation, amid the apparently inscrutable workings of the human mind; flight to the prostrate worship of the ego, to subjectivism," to sadism, and unhealthy individualism.

Not only is *Dr. Caligari* one of the distinct milestones in film technique, say the authors of the book I have mentioned, but "it will also remain as one of the most revealing documents by which future generations will judge the Europe of 1919-20. . . . In a film like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* you will see not only the extraordinarily fantastic backgrounds just as the designers painted them, not only the lighting . . . but the very tragedy of a continent fixed upon a roll of celluloid and yet visible in motion for future generations to ponder over."

WELL, you may have guessed what I am leading up to; why I have been discussing this antique German film and quoting those comments upon it. As I have said, they are far-fetched, but they do contain a grain of truth. If films like *Dr. Caligari* were a sign of their times, if they were part of the aftermath of war, is this the explanation for the new deluge of films about insanity, schizophrenia, and other refinements of mental disorder which is currently deluging the cinema? In brief, is screen history repeating itself? Is post-war disillusionment and escapism colouring the films of to-day almost as much as it coloured those of the 1919-20 era? The Robsons, from whose book I have quoted, might not like the suggestion, and might find it hard this time to answer back on behalf of the American film, since most of these new productions on the lunatic fringe are originating in Hollywood. But the fact is that *Dr. Caligari* has innumerable modern counterparts; he and the weird somnambulist who terrorise a German town are blood-relations to any number of currently-popular screen characters. I am only surprised that apparently no present-day producer has yet had the bright idea of refilming the story of *Dr. Caligari* and his cabinet. As a "psychological thriller" it would be very much in the fashion, and would almost certainly prove a draw at the box-office, with its setting in a

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