

German Expressionism in Film

German Expressionism in Film – Study Notes

1. Overview

Aspect	Key Points
Time period	Roughly 1910–1933 (peak 1919–1925)
Geographic centre	Berlin and other German studios (e.g., UFA)
Cultural context	Post-World War I trauma, political instability (Weimar Republic), economic crisis, and a reaction against naturalistic realism.
Artistic goal	Convey inner emotions, psychological states, and societal anxieties through distorted visual style rather than literal representation.

2. Defining Characteristics

Visual / Formal Element	Description	Typical Techniques
Distorted sets	Jagged, angular architecture; exaggerated perspective.	Painted backdrops, forced perspective constructions, steep staircases, twisted trees.
High-contrast lighting (chiaroscuro)	Sharp light/dark divisions create dramatic shadows.	Spotlights, low key lighting, use of silhouettes.
Oblique camera angles	Tilted or canted frames (“Dutch angles”) to disorient the viewer.	Cranes, tilted tripod heads, unusual framing.
Expressionist makeup & costuming	Pale faces, stark makeup, elongated features.	Heavy contouring, stylized costumes (e.g., cloaks, capes).
Symbolic use of color (later)	Limited palette to heighten mood (e.g., reds for danger).	Early two-tone processes, tinted film stock.
Narrative focus on the psyche	Stories explore madness, guilt, alienation, fate.	Adaptations of gothic literature, original psychological dramas.

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3. Historical Development

Phase	Years	Notable Films	Key Developments
Proto-Expressionism	1910? 1918	<i>The Student of Prague</i> (1913)	Early experiments with shadow and interiority; influence of German Romantic theatre.
Classic Expressionism	1919? 1925	<i>The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari</i> (1920), <i>Nosferatu</i> (1922), <i>Metropolis</i> (1927) (borderline)	Full articulation of visual style; collaboration between directors, set designers, and cinematographers.
Late/Transition	1926? 1933	<i>M</i> (1931), <i>The Blue Angel</i> (1930)	Incorporation of realism and sound; some directors (e.g., Fritz Lang) move toward "Neue Sachlichkeit" (New Objectivity).
Post-Expressionist legacy	1930s? present	Film noir, horror, sci-fi, neo-expressionist works (e.g., <i>Blade Runner</i> , <i>The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari</i> remakes)	Visual language adopted worldwide; influence on Hollywood, anime, and contemporary art-house cinema.

4. Major Filmmakers & Artists

Name	Role	Signature Works	Contribution
Robert Wiene	Director	<i>The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari</i> (1920)	Established the "twisted-set" aesthetic; narrative framing device (story-within-a-story).
Fritz Lang	Director	<i>Metropolis</i> (1927), <i>M</i> (1931)	Combined expressionist visuals with epic scale; later moved toward realism.
F.W. Murnau	Director	<i>Nosferatu</i> (1922)	