

Notes for Caligari Expressionist Speaker Series, Wednesday Oct 19, 2016, Gerald Saul and Chrystene Ells. Work in progress.

As artists, musicians, actors, filmmakers: we all have influences. However, all too often we cannot work in the genre or style of our idols. Filmmakers Stanley Kubrick and George Lucas admired collage filmmaker Arthur Lipsett, Trey Parker and Matt Stone of South Park fame were students of legendary avant garde master Stan Brakhage. Lists go on and on. For many, German Expressionism, films such as Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, Hands of Orlac, Nosferatu, or Dr. Mabuse were immediately and irreversible central influences. I would certainly name both Guy Maddin and Tim Burton as such filmmakers. For others, while an influence is consciously present, the work created often is not clearly related. Regardless, ideas rattle around and hints and references pop up, waiting for an opportunity that would allow them to explode forth. This is what we created for ourselves with The Caligari Project.

It seems important to discuss why the influence of German Expressionism on us was so profound. Chrystene and I both discovered this material in the 1980s when film restoration was in its

infancy. The versions we watched were scratched and contrasty. The 16mm prints were poor but the vhs tapes were worse. Somehow we could see something daring and challenging yet understandable beneath it all. The low budget nature of these films is comforting and welcoming. The vampiric images beacon us from the screen; their uncanny half alive shadows flicker and call out to us saying "you belong with us". As years went on, this tug of influence was often derailed by the perceived necessity to be contemporary, to be new and unique. We often denied the urge but could not altogether avoid the signs of these influences as they popped up in front of us *in our own work*.

Suddenly, in just the past few years, new releases of restored German Expressionist films have brought renewed international recognition and respect to this period and has resulted in bringing more and more works into the light, allowing us to watch again with a more developed eye, to understand and analyze. The German Expressionist traditions no longer seem so ... disreputable. We look at Caligari, Mabuse, or Orloc with reverence rather than as acts of rebellion.

It is with this access to the past and the opportunity for analyses and understanding that

gives contemporary filmmakers the ability to explore the root of film like never before. Youtube also gives viewers a way of understanding obscure cultural references, to give context to things like Rob Zombie's "Caligari" homage and so on. This analysis grants us the ability to truly work on a mode, to consider the story being told and make new ones that build upon them and not just allude, parody, or mimic. Repeated viewings and access to a greater number of the films, not just the select few canon, has exploded our ability to work in an obscure field and still expect viewers to understand our work. We can finally study these works closely enough to begin to figure out why we liked them so much and how they have managed to have such an impact on us.

To illustrate the difference between filmmakers and audience who are able to achieve this deep reading of cinema history, I look back at the 1970s and Mel Brooks' parody "Young Frankenstein" which uses iconic images or lines of dialog to set up silly jokes. Brooks' audience, being familiar with the source material, or at least key scenes in one or two highly distributed films, namely Frankenstein and Bride of Frankenstein, can laugh when they recognize the iconic sources referenced. This film was highly

successful with the public who had, at that time when old movies were only shown on the late late show, limited memory of cinema history.

On the other hand, Woody Allan's underappreciated "Shadows and Fog" from 1991 about a man confused, lost, and victimized in the dark streets of a 1920s German city is a clever homage to German Expressionism. It makes use of almost every trope of German Expressionism and compounds these allusions with a layer of satire, turning the German post war anxiety into a tale about anti-semitism and Allen's ongoing struggle for identity. Due to the audience lack of familiarity with German Expressionist cinema, the film was a flop. Had Allen sent his character into a gloomy castle or windmill to encounter a mad scientist yelling "It's Alive", he'd have been applauded for his clever postmodern references. Instead, the film was ignored and is mostly forgotten. Were we to have shown it in the context of one of this festival's screenings, it would have been completely understood and appreciated.

What it comes down to is that we like what we know. We know Hollywood. Back in 1920, as a grand gesture, German filmmakers decided to not copy Hollywood. This was in part due to the mood of the day, the despair over the war, and

the active Avant Garde movements in Europe. It is suggested that the German Expressionist cinema activities are not just a cultural reaction, but are a commercial venture to compete with Hollywood by creating a unique alternative approach. As such, this would make *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* the first politically “anti-Hollywood” film.

In the 1920s, silent film allowed all cinema to be international. After sound films began, National cinemas took shape. Protecting and building indigenous cultures on film and tv went hand in hand with language. But here we are, living in the shadow of the giant USA and Hollywood. We try but are inevitably doomed to fail if and when we compete with them. We are but pale wisps of media beside the inferno of Hollywood. But what if we choose to not compete with them but rather seek a way of standing apart from them, like a hibachi cooking an unusual gourmet delicacy far from the giant beach bon fire, catering to a select few but garnering more attention and making more profound impact? It was this sort of niche market that the Germans in the 20s were chasing. It is this sort of audience that is essential for Canadians today.

So now that we accept that seeking alternative aesthetic approaches is essential for an English

language, non-American national cinema, we must consider how we go about developing or adopting a new cinematic language. German Expressionism offers us a model, both politically and aesthetically. When we were young filmmakers, or at least I can say this about myself, we started off with mimicry, horror lighting, big crazy shadows and obtuse angles. Such experiments rarely saw the light of the screen. If such impulsive uses of Expressionist elements are not conceptually rooted in the overall project, these sequences will feel misplaced and disruptive to the unity of the overall film. To solve this, we each need to find our own answer. We must immerse ourselves through watching and reading and ... walking a mile in these filmmakers' shoes. Mimicry was no longer a shortcut but, for better or worse, a way for many of us to respect our roots. By roots, I do not suggest it in a nationalistic or ethnic way, nor do I suggest that we have experienced the same things (war, etc) but I mean we have a creative root, a common attraction to the distinctive expressionist experience through which we had a shared awakening.

Ultimately, if this impulse to work is some way akin to these 1920s filmmakers is going to be of any real value, we knew we would need to

produce more than just the window dressings of German Expressionism, we would have to figure out what they were originally doing that we connected with. Simply put, what were they doing? These filmmakers worked in tandem to put design, story, performance, makeup, costume, music, light, and every other aspect of art on the table to be treated equally. They were a community of creators, building projects where we could see the hand of the artists, not just one, but every one.

The question is then, how do we use such a strategy to express this common or shared interest in the German Expressionist's look and ideas, and combine it with our personal angst and make in congeal into our own personal unholy cinematic union? To begin with, we must question how close we want to emulate the original? Let me consider three loose categories relating to authenticity that I think anyone seeking to work in a milieu distant from their own, such as the case of German Expressionism, would naturally consider. Authenticity can take the form of:

- Look (content)
- Process (form)
- Spirit (philosophy)

That brings us to Chrystene and me. We began working on the Caligari Project a couple of years ago, drawn to it for our interest in German Expressionism and our desire to explore these approaches further. Now that we have come this far, it is quite apparent that we are not the same person. As such, we have taken on the mantle of being "German Expressionists" in very different ways. We both have a love of authenticity, but perhaps not by the same definitions.

To me, the look of expressionism is so magnetic that it seems a crime to embrace this form without using this aesthetic. I think we agree on this. However, I believe in following the spirit of the expressionists by creating the work using with most affordable tools at hand. Ken Wilson spoke last week of Otto Dix painting on paper or any surface while in the hospital. Similarly, I feel that the use of digital technologies, used in any way I desire, are admissible if it is in the service of accomplishing my art in an affordable manner. It is not about what tools are used, but how they are used.

CE

So I first fell in love with German Expressionism before I even knew what it was. I was a punk rock mime artist living in the back of a theatre in

Calgary in 1983. Anyone who is old enough will remember those days when cinephiles were at the mercy of whatever was playing in the local rep cinema, or chanced to be on one of 2 television stations. There was no instant download, no streaming, no DVDs, and even no VHS. I had come across images of films that looked amazing, to an 18-year old punk rock mime artist: the image of Cesare the Somnambulist groping his way along a wall, **(INSERT STILL OF CESARE)**

the pianist Orlac glaring in terror, his veins bulging on his temples, at his transplanted hands, supposedly taken from the body of an executed murderer.

(INSERT STILL OF ORLAC)

I decided to create a film festival in my theatre space. A little research pointed me to film distribution centres in Winnipeg, Toronto, and Vancouver, and weekly I brought a selection of the weirdest looking films to Calgary during the coldest winter anyone could remember. The audiences were tiny, but I was able to order 16mm prints of these films, which I watched, enraptured, with three or four other underground film buffs. The first time I saw *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* I was sitting on a gym mat in a black box theatre, listening to the sound of

the projector, watching the dancing of the millions of scratches and leaps in action from previous breakages, and waiting through three film repairs mid-screening. I was hooked. I lost a lot of money but this festival, named Eugene's Favourite Flix after my dog at the time, was the genesis of my life-long obsession with German Expressionism – a film genre for which I did not even have a name. Remember, this was pre-internet.

Later when I moved to San Francisco, I worked for Last Gasp Comix, a publishing and distribution house that specialized in pornographic comic books. But they had a small distribution wing of random titles. Gathering dust over many years in the back of the warehouse was a stack of 4 copies of a book called Great Film Stills From The German Silent Era. I claimed one of these books and have carried it with me for decades, hoping to one day step into the world of the German Expressionists and make my own film in their company. Meanwhile, all of my film and theatre projects, especially some of my puppet projects, have drawn heavily on German Expressionism in both style and theme.

INSERT STILL OF PUPPET SHOW

Gerald has already outlined the background of the Caligari Project and our collaboration on the dreaming up of this festival, so I'll just jump ahead to the making of my most recent film, *Der Glöckner, The Bell Ringer*, in collaboration with Berny Hi, which will screen tomorrow at the Filmpool's screening of contemporary German Expressionist-inspired films, *The Cinema of Dr. Caligari*, at the MacKenzie Art Gallery.

(STILL OF DER GLOCKNER TITLE CARD)

Originally I had been inspired to make this film by the considerable theatrical acting talent and mad genius of my friend, and the friend of many of us, of the late Paul Crepeau.

(STILL OF PAUL CREPEAU)

When Paul sadly and suddenly passed away in January of 2015 I scratched the idea of making the film, but with the Filmpool's call for films, my amazing creative partner, filmmaker and amazing artist Berny Hi inspired me to collaborate with him on taking the idea forward. And I realized that the moment had come to put all of my years of devouring German Expressionist cinema, poring over stills from long lost films, and reading about the Expressionists and their milieu into a grand project. Berny and I

decided to make the most authentic German Expressionist film we could in 2016.

Berny is a gifted cinematographer with a deep respect and understanding of celluloid and an amazing eye for lighting and shots. He also shares my passion for coming as close to perfection in artmaking as humanly possible. We're both a little flawed that way. I knew if I was ever going to have my chance, this would be it.

How authentic was our process? Well, first of all, we were completely broke. We were looking at a \$150,000 project that we had to find ways to make for \$10,000 – the film, processing, and digitization alone was over \$6000.00 -- with grants from the Arts Board and the Filmpool. And Creative Saskatchewan gifted us the sound stage for a song, which was the clincher that made it possible. Thank you to those worthy orgs! But the German Expressionist filmmakers didn't have money either. We followed in their footsteps, portraying the inner world of our protagonist as he wandered through flat scenery, hand painted to represent the two dimensional quality of his experience as a bell ringer who rarely leaves his belltower, watching life from

afar as he rings the bell for funerals, weddings, and calls to arms. We used heavy symbolism and metaphor, and introduced an otherworldly element: a spirit, the spirit of the bell, portrayed as a young girl.

We used a selection of non-actors, fans of the genre, and cast my steady friend, the excellent and versatile theatre actor Don Wood.

(INSERT HEADSHOT OF DON)

who incidentally is one of the biggest cinephiles I know, as the lead. Don has been the lead in my four largest film projects, starting with Goodbye Guy Guy in 1997 – as someone recently said he is the Johnny Depp to my Tim Burton. His co-star, the young woman playing the spirit of the bell, is Sable, a 17-year old Deaf woman who Berny and I met during our artists' residency with Deaf high school students last year.

(INSERT STILL OF SABLE HEADSHOT)

Sable is not an actor, and yet her mysterious presence on screen is nothing short of riveting to me. So we had a nice German Expressionist stable of performers, a mix of a ringer, a seasoned actor, and a bunch of non-actors. And then we collected a bunch of willing people, really good people, the kind you find in Regina, to create the props, sets, and costumes. It

became a village. I imagine the Germans worked similarly.

Like the Expressionists, who often shot entirely in the studio, even for outdoor scenes, we created an entire Bavarian-style village, circa 1914, in the sound stage. In 1920, the celluloid was not as light-sensitive as it is today, and often the sun was not bright enough for good image, so the studio shoot provided the opportunity for banks of giant lights, which were in fact not bulbs, but huge electrical arcs pounding light at the actors and sets. We settled for the brightest light we could get from the Film pool, an Arri HMI for the geeks in the crowd, and we enlisted the help of one of the few people in town who understand lighting for celluloid, the mindblowing lighting designer Geoff Yates. We had theatre artists helping to build the sets, (INSERT STILL OF SET PAINTING) which would have been the talent pool for the sets of the Expressionist filmmakers, and like any indie film, Expressionist or contemporary, Berny and I were painting and building alongside the crew into the wee hours, and our bank accounts were emptied well above and beyond the funding and support we received. I can tell you, the process of creating this grand film on a

shoestring filled us both with plenty of Expressionist angst.

GS: We should also talk about filmmakers who have been very successful with German Expressionism. Two top names would be Tim Burton and Guy Maddin. Both has used many very authentic approaches using film, practical effects, and carefully controlled studio light and sets. However, the results are extremely different.

GS: Regardless of the look of the film, regardless of the process, we felt that we could only truly celebrate German Expressionism through a more comprehensive look at all of the underlying ideas that these filmmakers struggled and played with. Let's run through a few of these tropes. Andrew Burke talked extensively this week about melodramatic excess. Even though the two films I worked on were only 7 minutes each, they both had overly complex stories with every character facing at least one, usually two, dilemmas. In "Testament of Frankenstitch", the monster discovers that Edison is intending to

CE: **Melodrama in Der Glockner.....**

GS: The performance style of GE was notoriously mannered. This often looked like bad acting, but was actually a very controlled style in which actors were like every other piece of the design of the film and were similarly expected to perform with their emotions expressed visually with their movement and posture.

In "Eyes of Sorrow Moon" I literally had William's face painted top of his face to ensure that his performance could not possibly be naturalistic.

..... more

CE: In terms of acting, Don, a theatre actor with a remarkable physical ability and facial control, was just the icing on the cake. He studied the films we sent him to watch: From Morning til Midnight, Caligari of course, and Warning Shadows. When he stepped on set, he was truly channeling an Expressionist actor from the 1920's. I want to emphasize that he was not merely overacting. He was ACTING the way a theatre actor, new to film, with a background in melodrama and perhaps Grande Guignol, would have approached the job of acting onscreen. He worked with speed, with weight, with directness or lack thereof. He used his body, he used his hands, he used his face, and he developed small gestures for his character to depict his physical reaction to distress.

(INSERT STILL OF DON WITH FINGERS TO HEAD)

Although it may to the untrained eye appear to be overacting, this is a trained, methodical approach to acting expression that comes from long tradition in the theatre. While I have always worked in a very physical way both as an actor and when giving direction to actors (remember, I am a punk rock mime from way back), Don gave me a new appreciation for the talent, training, and attention to detail of the best Expressionist actors.

GS: Stories nested inside other stories to immerse us deeply into the complex inner workings of the characters' minds. In "Eyes of Sorrow Moon", the flashbacks told by the mother, on one level, just establishes the desperation of the family and introduces the three animal servants for the protagonist. The subtext behind the faceless mother is to reinforce how alone the protagonist is, completely lacking human contact, and the words and tone of the voice create an antagonistic mother role who is heartless and controlling. Life without joy.

CE: As part of the preproduction for Glockner, Berny and I went to meet Wayne Tunnison, master Bellringer at Knox Met,
(INSERT PICTURE OF BELL RINGER FROM KNOX MET)
who was only too happy to show us the belltower, visit the bellroom, talk about the bell ringer legacy, and have us ring the bells... very badly. Bell ringers, as it turns out, have many of the characteristics we were looking for in our story: they are isolated, often single men, who traditionally lived in the belltower and acted as both lookouts and a way of communicating news

both good and bad to the community through the ringing of the bells. This couldn't have been a better setup for our Glockner, a man shut off from society, looking down on the comings and goings, and ringing his bell for the town, while cultivating an unnatural relationship with the spirit of his bell, as played by Sable. The isolated man, a lone cog in the vast human machine, is a constant trope of German Expressionist cinema.

GS: Fear of the outsiders: In "Eyes of Sorrow Moon" begins with strangers arriving and how the fear of those strangers, stated without rationale, ultimately brings around more evil and the downfall of the entire community. The three animal servants are sinister. They emerge from a fairy tale and are inhuman servants of a stranger. They are all nocturnal. more

GS: Delusion, insanity, madness, dreams, fantasy, and nightmares:. Discuss the monster's journey in "Testament of Frankenstitch", moving between scenes without rational transitions, sampling pieces of dialogue while pretending that it all makes sense. In the end, the dream world is fragile and easily destroyed but only

transforms into a new dream world. The rational world is always just out of reach.

CE: Glockner lives in his 2 dimensional world, shot in flat space with flat backdrops, but he dreams in deep space, where he sees the spirit of his bell dancing in the fog.

(INSERT STILL OF BELLE DANCING IN THE FOG)

Our only departure from true German Expressionist cinema, which draws on more recent cinematic themes such as transcendence, and perhaps a little Jungian theory, is in our final shot, when Der Glockner turns from the two dimensional world of mechanation and war, and steps into a wide, three dimensional, real, rational, outdoor world. The ending does however embrace the Expressionist themes of transformation, and of reconnecting with and re-entering nature as an antidote to an angst-ridden existence in industrial urban society.

GS: German Expressionism wouldn't be complete without lies and deceit. This important trope takes many forms, anywhere from hypocritical characters to deception and even to twins or doppelgangers. In "Testament of

Frankenstitch" I play with these ideas through the extensive use of mirrors. ... mirrors used to propagate the lies through the creation of two dimensional copies of those looking in the mirrors while simultaneously reminding the characters, through the reflections of notable scientists and writers, that the world will not be forever tricked.