

Connecting Various Depictions of Monsters in German Expressionist Film to Explore the  
Significance of Monsters within Germany's Interwar Period

Dylan Janson

**Abstract**

While the German Expressionist film movement and their prevalent monster characters have been significantly analyzed and researched by film scholars over the 100 years since their creation, there has yet to be any substantial, dedicated discussion on the connections between monsters from different German Expressionist films. Many seminal works on German Expressionist cinema analyze the films and monsters individually as a means for understanding the historical significance of the movement occurring at the same time as the rise of Nazism in Germany, but these works do not specifically focus on the significance of monsters dominating German Expressionist films. With this research proposal, I intend to explore the connections between various portrayals of monsters throughout German Expressionist cinema and what these connections reveal about the significance of monsters within the historical context of interwar Germany. I expect to write a research paper exploring the significance behind connecting these German Expressionist monsters, which I hope will in turn extend the discussion on the significance of monsters in cinema and the horrific truths that they reveal about our societies.

## **Introduction**

The German Expressionist film movement that took place from the 1910s to the 1930s is responsible for the creation of one of the most popular and solidified genres in all of cinema: the horror genre (Ebert). Horrifying monsters take center stage in many of the movement's films: blood-sucking vampires, giant clay golems, hypnotized murderers, and many more. This same time period in Germany, the interwar period between World War I and World War II, is also responsible for the creation and rise of the Nazi Party, and according to many film scholars, horrifying elements such as the monsters within many German Expressionist films capture shared public attitudes similar to the ones that allowed the Nazi Party to rise in Germany and take control of it (Kracauer 11).

Many film scholars over the years have dissected individual German Expressionist films to discover what each film's portrayal of monsters says about German society at the time, but there are almost no discussions dedicated to the connections between monsters from different German Expressionist films. Since monsters are so prevalent in German Expressionist cinema, I want to explore the connections between various portrayals of monsters as a means for determining the greater significance of these monsters within the context of interwar Germany. In other words, the question that I want to explore is: What do the connections between various prominent portrayals of monsters throughout German Expressionist cinema reveal about the significance of these monsters within the historical context of interwar Germany?

## **Background/Related Work and Motivation**

According to film scholar Mia Spiro, "The dilemmas, fears and sense of distress that plagued the [post-World War I] population in Germany... often took shape on the

expressionist... screen in haunted landscapes or fantastic forms” (18). These “fantastic forms” that expressed common sentiments of alarm within the German public took on the shape of horrifying monsters in German Expressionist films. As stated in the introduction, many film scholars have analyzed different German Expressionist films for their individual significance to the film movement and to the greater time period, yet this means that they have only analyzed individual monsters in the context of pre-Nazi Germany and have not pursued a dedicated comparative analysis of multiple German Expressionist monsters within the time period.

Two seminal works on the German Expressionist film movement, Siegfried Kracauer’s *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* and Lotte Eisner’s *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt*, extensively explore the broader history and significance of German Expressionist film, but neither specifically focuses on the connections between the monsters in these films. Other scholars like Roger Ebert and Mia Spiro explore German Expressionist films on a more individual basis, and thus only focus on how the monsters are portrayed within their selected, individual films. Based on my research thus far, there are no current academic sources dedicated specifically to the connections between monsters in various German Expressionist films. This is why I want to generate a research paper on the connections between different portrayals of monsters in German Expressionist film, to see if these connections add to both the filmic and historical significance that other scholars have already discovered for their individually analyzed monsters. The question thus remains: What do the connections between various prominent portrayals of monsters throughout German Expressionist cinema reveal about the significance of these monsters within the historical context of interwar Germany?

## Methods

To explore potential connections between various portrayals of monsters throughout German Expressionist cinema and what these connections reveal about the significance of these monsters within the historical context of interwar Germany, I plan to analyze four prominent films from the German Expressionist film movement where monster characters are put in the spotlight: *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), *The Golem: How He Came into the World* (1921), *Nosferatu* (1922), and *Metropolis* (1927). Each film contains its own unique depiction of a monster: *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* portrays a hypnotized murderer, *The Golem: How He Came into the World* portrays an animated clay being created for protection, *Nosferatu* portrays a blood-sucking vampire, and *Metropolis* portrays sentient and deadly machines.

In examining these portrayals of monsters, I will be analyzing common threads of monstrosity among these monster characters and how the films generate these common threads. To carry out this analysis, I will watch each film multiple times and take notes throughout every viewing on how the monsters are depicted both visually and in relation to other elements within the film. Themes, symbols, and plot elements associated with the monsters will take the main focus of this study. Additionally, since many of the films take place within or around Germany, how these monsters interact within their film's respective societies will be another point of analysis, as the reactions to these monsters by other characters will expose "the dilemmas, fears and sense of distress" that are embodied in these monsters (Spiro 18). While my analysis of these monsters will largely be comparative in nature, the analysis will also inherently involve individual analyses of these four monsters to serve as the basis for the comparative analysis.

I plan to use scholarly sources, such as the two seminal works on German Expressionism from Kracauer and Eisner, to further develop and examine my analysis of each individual

monster and to also analyze different scholarly interpretations for what each monster represents about interwar German society. Additionally, I will consult historical sources on attitudes present during inter-war Germany to determine attitudes that the monsters in the four chosen films express and potentially share. I also plan to use the interpretations generated within and from these sources to see if I can apply some of the ideas surrounding one monster to the other monsters selected for this analysis. For example, if one academic scholar were to say that one monstrous trait unique to *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari's* Cesare the somnambulist reveals a certain truth about interwar German society, I would attempt to analyze the other monsters in the context of that particular trait to see if it also applies to them and thus also reveals a similar truth. Connecting these monster characters based on the traits that they each exhibit could prove fruitful in determining what their most common traits say about the significance of these monsters within the context of interwar Germany. That is why I also plan on incorporating references dedicated to examining characteristics of monsters, such as a chapter on "The Artificial Birth" that monsters experience during their creation in a book titled *Anatomy of a Robot* by Despina Kakoudaki. Examining the four selected monsters through traits common to many monstrous characters could further point to their significance within the German Expressionist film movement. All of these sources will be used in tandem with my analysis to determine the significance of these German Expressionist monsters within the greater German interwar period.

### **Expected Results**

In conducting this research, I expect to generate a research paper specifically focused on the connections between the monsters in the four selected German Expressionist films and what

these connections reveal about the significance of these monsters within the historical context of interwar Germany. As far as what connections will be drawn in the paper, I currently see some connections between the relationships these characters share with those around them. The Golem, the android in *Metropolis*, and Cesare are all manipulated by other characters throughout their respective films. Nosferatu, on the other hand, is a monster who does the manipulating to others, although there is still this shared element of manipulation. What this manipulation says about German society has yet to be revealed, but this is only one point of research with a potentially new revelation about attitudes in interwar-German society.

In producing this paper, I intend to generate further discussions on cinematic monstrosity beyond just the monsters present in the four selected German Expressionist films and to other applicable monster films in German Expressionist cinema. This approach to research could potentially also apply to other sets of monster films, such as the later kaiju films from Japan. Overall, I hope to extend the discussion on the significance of monsters in cinema and the horrific truths that they can reveal about our societies.

## **Conclusion**

The German Expressionist film movement has a rich body of monster films to analyze in relation to the interwar period in which they were made. With this research paper, I intend to explore the connections between various portrayals of monsters throughout German Expressionist cinema and what these connections reveal about the significance of these monsters within the historical context of interwar Germany. While there has yet to be an academic work that specifically focuses on synthesizing the portrayals of various monsters in German Expressionist films, this research proposal could lead to new perspectives on the monsters that

command the screen in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, *The Golem: How He Came into the World*, *Nosferatu*, and *Metropolis*.

## References / Works Cited

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- Nosferatu*. Directed by F.W. Murnau. Prana Film, 1922.
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- The Golem: How He Came into the World*. Directed by Paul Wegener, Carl Boese. PAGU, 1921.

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Columbia University Press, 2009. *ProQuest Ebook Central*,  
<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/lmu/detail.action?docID=909254>.

## Budget

### Materials:

Since the four selected films are all older films and more difficult to own digitally, I plan on purchasing physical, restored copies of each film to ensure availability for repeated viewings. Each film is restored by Kino Classics and sold through Amazon. I already have a Blu-Ray player that can run these films.

- Blu-Ray – *Metropolis* – \$23.94
- Blu-Ray – *Nosferatu* – \$20.77
- Blu-Ray – *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* – \$19.99
- Blu-Ray – *The Golem How He Came Into the World* – \$14.44

### Hourly Pay Rate:

I plan on spending 25 hours per week for 6 weeks analyzing and researching for this research project, and the LMU pay rate for undergraduate research students is \$15.00 an hour. See Timeline below for allocation of hours per week.

### Overall Cost:

<b><u>Budget</u></b>	<b><u>Cost</u></b>	<b><u>Amount</u></b>	<b><u>Sub-Total</u></b>	<b><u>Total</u></b>
Materials	\$79.17	(see above)	\$79.17	\$79.17
Hourly Rate	\$15.00/hr	25 hours / 6 weeks	\$2,250	\$2,250
			<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$2,329.14</b>

## **Timeline**

### Week 1:

- Watch each selected film one time through
- Begin drawing connections between the monsters in every film and noting them down
- Begin research on characteristics of monsters that may be found among selected monsters

### Week 2:

- Watch the selected films again, looking for deeper connections
- Begin research on seminal works and other sources: what significance they have found for the monsters in their individual films and what minor connections they may have

### Week 3:

- Watch selected films for a third time, deepening initial connections between them while also noting significant points made by consulted sources
- Begin compiling findings into a research paper

### Week 4:

- Continue on research paper, diving into films when necessary to dissect specific elements

### Week 5:

- Rewatch films in full for a fourth and final time, paying attention to already selected points of analysis/research
- Continue consulting research sources and incorporate them into the research paper

### Week 6:

- Finalize research paper