Inside Caligari And The Last Laugh Essay, Research Paper

Inside Caligari and The Last Laugh

The films, The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari and The Last Laugh were very important films. They opened new doors to cinema. They showed the world that films don?t have to leave you feeling really good about life and the world we live in. By this I mean that the two films listed above tell the viewers about the power people posses and the misuse of that power. There are different ways to misuse power; the rich take power for granted, and in Caligari?s case, well, he madly misuses his status as the head doctor of the asylum. My basic idea for this essay is to show that power is derived from different sources; money, status, attitude, and appearance, however, that power isn?t always used for the best purposes. The films use expressionistic devices to support my thesis in ways that compare to and appose one another.

In Caligari there were several instances where expressionism was used. The set of Caligari was the first obvious expressionistic device used. The shadows on the set were perfect for the somnambulist Cesare to stalk his unsuspecting victims. He gained control of all of his prey by using the set to blend and then emerge with element of surprise. He had a dark, unrealistic look that fit in with the dark shadows that were sometimes painted onto the set. Cesare?s victims had nowhere to hide, however, he had everywhere to hide. Basically the set portrayed the atmosphere of the movie; black, warped, and fairly unrealistic. The slanted

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buildings and the painted backdrops and walkways gave the viewer the initial sense of something wrong in their midst.

The Last Laugh didn?t try to make the viewer feel awkward, but it did use it?s set to give the viewer a strong shift in emotion. At the beginning the doorman was on top of the world in his position, but after he was unable to peform his duties, he was demoted to the bathroom attendant. Here the set takes on the unrealistic form. The bathroom is sunk down into the basement almost like hell, which is what it was like for the former doorman. The doorways opened to go down the stairs to the bathroom, the stairs are in shadows, stairs in shadows are of course very odd considering the risk of injury. This also represents his loss of status and the power that goes along with it.

The symbolism in both of the films was the most powerful expressionistic device. In Caligari the symbolism was slightly different than that of The Last Laugh. Caligari used symbolism to represent Cesare. I?m reminded of one scene in which the camera falls upon shadows before Cesare kidnaps Jane. Outside Jane?s door Cesare slowly emerges from the shadows until he is fully exposed to the viewers. The shadows represent the unknown and the dangers of the unknown, which is where Cesare?s power is derived from. The audience knows nothing of the somnambulists plans for Jane and so they are held captive by their fear for the unsuspecting girl. The viewers assume Cesare will kill the girl like he has done to the others, which makes the scene where Cesare looks into Jane?s eyes that much more dramatic.

Cesare himself is symbolic of something, the power of Dr. Caligari. He is completely under the control of Caligari.

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In The Last Laugh there is even more symbolism, but it is in a direct form. At the beginning of the movie, the doorman is symbolized by his doorman?s overcoat and hat, which also symbolize his power and prestige over everyone in his apartment building. He is able to stand tall and hold on to his dignity as long as he has his coat on. However, when his coat is repossessed, all confidence is lost. Not even stealing the coat back can reinstate that. The doorman was seen without his shield on while he was in the bathroom, the shield of his image of power and dignity. In the bathroom he is slumped and beaten without his pride, his position, and his image. All of the years of prestige and power he had attained were lost in one day. That?s a harsh reality for one to endure. After all of this happens to him he puts on his glasses. This represents his recognition of his losses. Glasses have played a symbolic role in more than just this film (Battleship Potemkin). Dr. Caligari is also represented by his glasses, in fact, at the end of the movie, the head of the asylum puts on a pair of glasses that allow him to more closely resemble the mad Dr. Caligari.

Movement plays a role in The Last Laugh as well as a form of an expressionistic device. The proud doorman learns of his demotion and attempts one final act of strength to regain his position. He fails and accepts his fate. Walking toward the closet with the towels he appears slouched to a point beyond what a normal man can endure. The question arises, how low can you go? He sits slumped in his chair, unable to perform even the duties of a bathroom attendant when the rich man comes in to request the former doorman?s services. This is also where the abuse and or the misuse of power emerges. The rich man has no respect for the beaten man and consequently treats him like a dog.

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In both films there are dreams or false realities. In Caligari, Francis?s whole story is a figment of his imagination. Francis has a problem with authority, so he gives the director of the

asylum the characteristics of a madman. He does this to place fault for his problems on someone other than himself. In doing this he is implying that authority can?t be trusted, but who would possibly listen to an insane individual? The ending portrays the exact opposite message of the original writing. However, the message that you cannot trust authority is still in the viewers? minds.

In The Last Laugh the doorman gets drunk and dreams of all of his former strength returning to him, not to mention, a little bit extra. He?s able to lift a trunk over his head with one arm; he then proceeds to throw it up in the air. This trunk, representing the trunk he was unable to lift in the manager?s office.

Both of the stories end in a manner trying to regain the high spirits of the viewers, especially The Last Laugh, in which the poor man is lucky enough to have a rich man die in his presence, who?s will made it so the former doorman would inherit his fortune. These films are masterpieces, however, the need for a happy ending in the film industry caused the addition of the unrealistic ending, which took away from the body of The Last Laugh. Similarly, in Dr. Caligari, the director didn?t want the film as it was, so he made the original story into a figment of a crazy man?s imagination, which took away from the point of the original story, which was to always scrutinize people in power to prevent corruption. However, in both cases I was drawn to the main body of the film and the sense of disgust I had with the people in power; Dr. Caligari, the head of the hotel, and the rich pompous man in the bathroom. The films emphasized power using many devices, solidifying my thesis.