

German Expressionism was an influential film movement of the 1920s. Some of its qualities are present in the film noir movement of the 1940s to early 1950s. A dominant quality of both of these film movements is their illustration of character psychology. In this essay I will compare and contrast the manner in which these two film movements illustrate character subjectivity. There are narrative and stylistic similarities such as point-of-view camera shots, pessimistic endings, mentally unstable male characters, and similar lighting techniques. However there are clear differences including the nature of the setting, the acting style, and the contrasting role of the desirable female object. I will reinforce my argument by examining two German Expressionism films: *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Terror* (1922) and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919), and two film noir films: *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) and *Double Indemnity* (1944).

Character subjectivity can be separated into two areas. The first is perceptual subjectivity and this allows us as viewers to see and hear exactly what the characters can (Bordwell 2008). This includes point-of-view camera shots and diegetic noise. The second area is mental subjectivity where we “see the character’s inner images” or “hear an internal voice reporting the character’s thoughts” (Bordwell 2008). What Bordwell is saying here is that mental subjectivity can be presented in the form of dreams, memories, and narrative techniques such as voiceovers and flashbacks.

In the case of three of the films mentioned earlier, the stories presented have already taken place and are retold in various ways. When writing about *Sunset Boulevard*, Hayward observes that the cause and effect are reversed: “we know the result before we know the cause” (155). The voice-over narrator, Joe Gillis, is actually dead, but explains the events leading up to his death in the form of a flashback. *Double Indemnity* also uses the voiceover and flashback technique with regular cuts back to the present time. *Nosferatu* is a story told from someone’s diary and focuses on the point of view of the male protagonist, Thomas Hutter. *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* is unique in that the result is presented to us in the beginning, but we do not actually realise this until the film’s twist ending. The story being told is the fantasies of Francis, a patient in a mental asylum. What all four of these films have in common is that they are all presented from a male’s subjective point of view. By entering into the minds of these characters it becomes clear that they are all struggling psychologically. However the way their vulnerability is shown is where differences, as well as similarities, can be found.

The type of setting would have to be the most striking difference between both of these film movements. Film noir films are shot in realistic settings. Hayward makes the point that film noir settings are typically dimly lit and involve empty, cold interiors (349). In *Sunset Boulevard* many scenes take place in the large, dark house of Norma Desmond. There are also many night-time scenes, such as the one where Joe and Betty Schaefer share an intimate moment on the street. There are also occasional scenes where it is raining, such as when the roof is leaking in Joe's room across from Norma's main house. This scene is significant because it reinforces Joe's inner feelings of distress, since he is trying to hide from his personal issues.

Dickos argues that night-time rainfall is iconic of film noir (173). In *Double Indemnity* there is one scene where Walter Neff looks out the window of his apartment and it is raining. Shortly after this his voiceover mentions that he felt "all twisted up inside". The rain reflects the inner confusion he is experiencing after meeting with Phyllis Dietrichson and listening to her intentions of killing her husband. Schrader states that film noir portrays, "the world of dark, slick city streets, crime and corruption" (54). This is evident in the very first shots of *Double Indemnity* where, at night-time, a car goes through a traffic stop sign and a truck swerves to avoid the car. This can be considered as a precursor to Joe's confession of the crime he has committed.

The realistic settings used in film noir are in high contrast to the stylistic settings used in German Expressionism. The sets used are studio-based and have been described as bizarre and distorted (Hayward 196). This is certainly the case in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. Throughout the whole film we are presented with unusually angled buildings painted with dark, thick outlines. The purpose of this is to give us a visual understanding of Francis' state of mind. He is deluded and paranoid about uncovering the secrets of the mysterious Dr. Caligari.

The setting used in this film can be related to the acting style of the characters. Thompson and Bordwell observe that actors have a tendency to make exaggerated and sudden movements (93). This is shown at the end of the film where Francis is in the mental asylum which has a radiating floor pattern. He sees the man he thinks is Cesare the somnambulist. He pulls his friend, Alan, towards him as a way of warning him. He also makes excessive movements and must be restrained when he accuses the director of the asylum of being Dr.

Caligari. Turim says that the style of the film, including the visual setting and exaggerated acting, “becomes a metaphor for Francis’ delusion and mad vision” (86). In other words, Francis’ dramatic and quick actions combine with the unique, circular floor pattern to illustrate his madness.

Although *Nosferatu* does not have a stylistic setting the acting style is also exaggerated. Hayward argues that the actor’s body is a producer of meaning (196). A great example of this occurs when Hutter is in Count Orlok’s castle and realises that Orlok is actually the vampire Nosferatu. Hutter watches in horror as Nosferatu opens the door and starts walking towards him. Hutter makes sudden head movements and rapidly covers his head with a blanket. These movements allow us to understand that Hutter is terrified and in fear of his own safety.

The illustration of character subjectivity in both film movements is similar with regards to the frequent use of shadows. Shortly after the scene described in *Nosferatu* above, Hutter is up against a wall and has his eyes closed. Slowly the shadow of Nosferatu, with his arms raised, grows larger and engulfs Hutter’s body and the wall behind him. The effect is similar to that of Hutter’s acting style. It shows us that he is feeling helpless and vulnerable. In film noir light passes through the windows at odd angles, entering onto characters faces and forming shapes on surfaces (Schrader 57). In *Double Indemnity*, while Neff waits in Phyllis’ living room for her to get dressed, light enters through the window to produce horizontal line shadows on the walls. This pattern can be seen as foreshadowing the feeling of imprisonment that Neff is going to be a part of later in the film (Duckworth 2008).

Lighting techniques are also similar between the two film movements. Both make use of low-key lighting which is produced by increasing the intensity of the key light relative to the fill light (Pramaggiore and Wallis 81). This creates high contrasting dark and light images, also known as the chiaroscuro lighting effect. During *The Cabinet or Dr. Caligari*, chiaroscuro lighting produces contrasting surfaces and shadows. This technique is also used to light up the faces of Dr. Caligari and Cesare, such as in one scene at the end when Francis sees a mental patient who he thinks is Cesare. These examples emphasize that Francis is in fear of these characters.

Film noir uses dark lighting produce a somber mood. Schrader points out that a common convention of film noir is having characters sitting in places, such as offices, “at midday with

shades pulled and the lights off" (57). In *Double Indemnity*, Neff and his work colleague, Keyes, are regularly shown having conversations in Keyes' office about the murder. Midday scenes occur in *Sunset Boulevard* when Joe and Norma meet for the first time and discuss the script they are working on. The curtains are pulled with lamps on and candles lit. Film noir also uses hard lighting to draw our attention to certain objects. A memorable scene occurs in *Double Indemnity* when Neff meets Phyllis at her house for the first time. She slowly walks forward to the stair rail where top lighting is used to illuminate her, especially her hair and face. This is effective because it gives us an understanding of what Neff is thinking. He is amazed at this beautiful woman he has just seen.

Character subjectivity is also presented in a similar way between film noir and German Expressionism through the use of point-of-view camera shots. These can function as a window into the mind (Ross, German Weimar Cinema). In *Nosferatu*, there is one shot that gives us the subjective point of view of Hutter as he looks out the window of Count Orlok's castle down a steep cliff to a river. This occurs shortly after he finds out that Orlok is actually the feared vampire, Nosferatu. This shot allows us to realise that Hutter feels trapped and alone, far away from safety.

In *Double Indemnity*, Neff is at the bottom of the stairs in Phyllis' house. A medium, low angle shot is used from his point of view looking up to Phyllis. "She begins to come down the stairs and we see a close up of her legs and her golden anklet" (Johnston 92). This shot shows that Neff is becoming sexually attracted to Phyllis and is beginning to desire her. Low angle shots are commonly used to create a threatening feeling. This is significant because Neff does not yet know about Phyllis' intentions of murdering her husband. The low angle shot therefore foreshadows the power she will later have over Neff. In *Sunset Boulevard*, in the early moments of Joe's stay at Norma's house, we are presented with a point-of-view shot as he scans across the countless photos of Norma. Again, this foreshadows the control the female will have over the male.

This leads on to a major difference between German Expressionism and film noir: the role of the female character. Although both film movements present the female as an object of male desire, the degree to which she is active is the difference. Hayward describes the role of the female in German Expressionism as "a stationary site ... a passive object, to which the male hero travels and upon which he acts" (282). This is certainly the case in *Nosferatu*.

Hutter's wife, Ellen, although she is not shown very often, spends the whole film in their home town of Wisborg, mostly in their home. Hutter travels to Transylvania as requested by his employer and asks his friends to look after her. Once he realises that Count Orlok is actually Nosferatu, and his wife is in danger, he embarks on a journey to save her. This reinforces what Hayward is saying. Hutter is very active in wanting to keep his wife safe.

In *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, Francis convinces himself that the doctor of the mental asylum is Dr. Caligari who uses his somnambulist to murder people. The film begins with Francis and his friend, Alan, in a park with Francis' love, Jane, walking past. In his dream, Francis is in fear of Jane's safety after finding out his friend has been murdered. Jane remains quite inactive. So basically, whether it was in his dream or in reality, Francis desires Jane and is determined to watch out for her. What both these films have in common is that they present the female as vulnerable and unable to defend themselves. This forces the male to worry about her.

This is very different compared to the role of the female in film noir. Each film contains a "femme fatale," which means "deadly woman" in French. Please explain the unique nature of women in film noir:

"the dark lady, the spider woman, the evil seductress who tempts man and brings about his destruction ... It gives us one of the few periods in film where women are active ... are intelligent and powerful, if destructively so, and derive power, not weakness, from their sexuality" (47).

A common convention in film noir is that the male's struggle with personal issues contributes to their seduction by, and sexual attraction to, the femme fatale. In *Sunset Boulevard*, Joe is a struggling screenwriter who, in the beginning, is being chased by men who want to repossess his car. He ends up at Norma's mansion and she later offers him a scriptwriting job. Soon, Joe becomes dependent on her financially. Although Joe is not keen on the idea he decides to permanently live with her after realising how much Norma has given him. This is a great example because even though Joe has been, in a way, trapped into loving Norma, he eventually develops real feelings for her.

Neff in *Double Indemnity* also has personal issues. Near the beginning of the film Keyes asks Neff to be his assistant. But Neff is not keen of the idea and is tired of Keyes' "constant

overbearing ego” (Maxfield 34). According to Maxfield, Keyes has feelings towards Neff like a father to his son (33). Maxfield also argues that Neff purposely got involved in the murder so that Keyes would reject him (34). So part of the reason Neff gets involved in the murder is because he wants to escape his personal issues. Even though he knows murder is wrong and realises that Phyllis is evil, his sexual attraction to her ultimately gets the better of him.

Sunset Boulevard also shows how the femme fatale can be so controlling that it eventually leads to the male committing a crime of some sort. Joe sneaks out of Norma’s house at night to spend time writing a script with Betty Schaefer. This shows that Joe feels psychologically trapped and wants to escape from the power Norma has over him. What both *Sunset Boulevard* and *Double Indemnity* have in common is that the male is continuously questioning his decisions. The narrative progress of the male’s state of mind is exactly the same in both films. At first they are unsure about the female; they then succumb to her attractiveness, feel the need to escape from her, and ultimately meet their demise as a result of their initial temptation. So in summary, the femme fatale plays an important role in our understanding of the psychological and sexual struggle the male is going through.

In conclusion, German Expressionism and film noir are very similar film movements. They both present stories from a male’s point of view and document their psychological struggle. Their mentally unstable nature is expressed through similar lighting and shadow techniques, as well as a desire for the female object. But there are also distinct differences with regards to the acting style, the role the female character plays in determining the decisions of the male character, and the stylistic setting used in German Expressionism versus the realistic settings used in film noir. Although they are both early film movements, their unique qualities make them very interesting to watch and analyse for audiences and film critics in today’s world.

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