

Shell-shock Cinema



Shell Shock Cinema – Anton Kaes (2009)

Anton Kaes argues that masterworks such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, *Nosferatu*, *The Nibelungen*, and *Metropolis*, even though they do not depict battle scenes or soldiers in combat reveal a wounded nation in post-traumatic shock, reeling from a devastating defeat that it never officially acknowledged, let alone accepted.



The term "shell shock" was coined during World War I to describe soldiers suffering from nervous breakdowns.



Today, we would recognise the effects of shell shock as a symptom of post-traumatic stress.

Kaes essentially suggests that the defeat of war caused a national 'psychological wound' that found expression in Weimar cinema.

Directors like Robert Wiene, F. W. Murnau, and Fritz Lang portrayed paranoia, panic, and fear of invasion in films peopled with serial killers, mad scientists, and troubled young men.

These films are loaded with the effects of war trauma, though the war itself is never mentioned – as if in psychological denial



The Cabinet of Dr Caligari



- Insanity and hysteria
- Psychiatrist with an authoritarian agenda
- Claustrophobic atmosphere

- War trauma explored through metaphor

"Ladies and Gentlemen!
Cesare, the Somnambulist, --
will answer all your-
questions."



"How long do I have
to live?"

"Till
dawn,
tomorrow--"





Death stalks the
German nation

Orlok specifically hails from Eastern Europe and critics have suggested he could be seen as an anti-Semitic caricature.

The war years saw mass Jewish migration into Germany, fleeing the Eastern front.



The vampire is associated with rats and plague, reflecting the 1919 flu pandemic



Hutter is sent abroad on an adventure by his insane employer. He leaves full of optimism

He returns traumatised by death and horror, mirroring the experience of the first world war soldier



Ellen waits on the home
front surrounded by
graves





The horrors of war increased fascination with the supernatural and fear of the undead. It was common, for instance, for soldiers to break the legs of dead colleagues in order to prevent them getting up in the night to roam the trenches.

A ghastly image familiar to war veterans



The sexual metaphor of the vampire feeding is obvious even to the makers of *Twilight*, but in this first vampire film, it's never been so complex. Ellen at once betrays her husband, as happened frequently with women whose men were at the front, while saving both him and the wider community. Her sacrifice is at once the act of a victim giving herself to the vampire and predator leading the count to his doom. She is remarkably both 'innocent maiden' and femme fatale at the same time; faithful to her husband while giving herself to another; damsel in distress and saviour.

*"I have to go to him.
He is coming !!!"*

Hutter & Ellen

- Hutter as metaphor for the shell-shocked male
- Ellen – far more complex character:
 - Betrayer/saviour
 - Victim/victor
 - Controller/controlled

Critical approaches

- Anton Kaes – *Shell-Shock Cinema* 2009

Nosferatu links to post-war trauma

- Spiritualism/Supernatural
- Proximity of death
- Metaphorical approach to war trauma – male based

