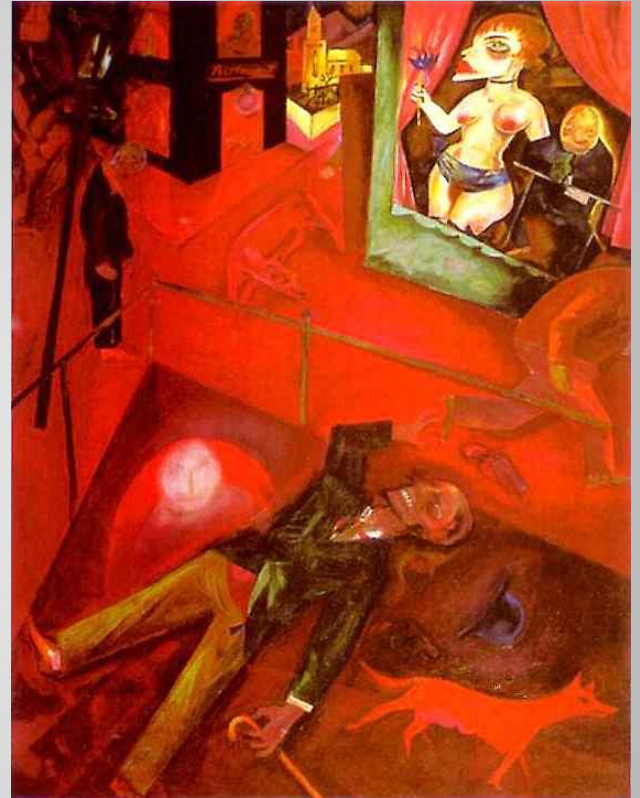Expressionist art often used large shapes of bright, unrealistic colours with dark, cartoon like outlines. Figures might be elongated; faces wore grotesque, anguished expressions. Buildings might sag or lean, with the ground tilted up steeply in defiance of traditional perspective.

Film historians **David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson** describe the essential characteristics of German Expressionism.

- "German Expressionist cinema… is distinctive primarily for its use of **mise-en-scene.** German Expressionist films emphasise the composition of individual shots to an exceptional degree. Expressionist films had many tactics for blending the settings, costumes, figures and lighting. These include the use of stylised surfaces, symmetry, distortion, and exaggeration and the juxtaposition of similar shapes"

"Perhaps the most obvious and pervasive trait of Expressionism is the use of distortion and exaggeration. In Expressionist films, houses are often pointed and twisted, chairs are tall, staircases are crooked and uneven."

"As actors in expressionist films make no attempt at realistic performance, their jerky or dancelike movements, more often than not, come across as extreme versions of silent film acting. Yet this style of acting was very deliberate."

"The heightened and exaggerated acting style was designed to match the other elements of a stylised mise-en-scene. So for example, viewed in long shot, the gestures of the actors appear dancelike as they move in patterns dictated by the sets. It is therefore important that such performances not be judged not by the standards of realism, but by how they fit into the mise-en-scene as a whole."

Bordwell & Thompson state that:

"Expressionist cinematography functions in a similar way to stress the links between the figure and the décor. Most Expressionist films employ a relatively simple lighting scheme, illuminating the scene from the front and sides to create a flat and uneven effect."

The context of the films is important:

- Post war deprivation and depression
- Film as a young art following the trends of the more established arts
- Dented national pride
- The Loss of faith in authority
- Fear of authority as manipulative &/or insane
- Harking back to old Germanic legends
- The growing interest in psychoanalysis
- The wish to create a uniquely German cinema
- Increased industrialisation and its effects on humanity

Most controversially:
- Growing fear of disturbance within the community from outsiders (political/racial aspects)
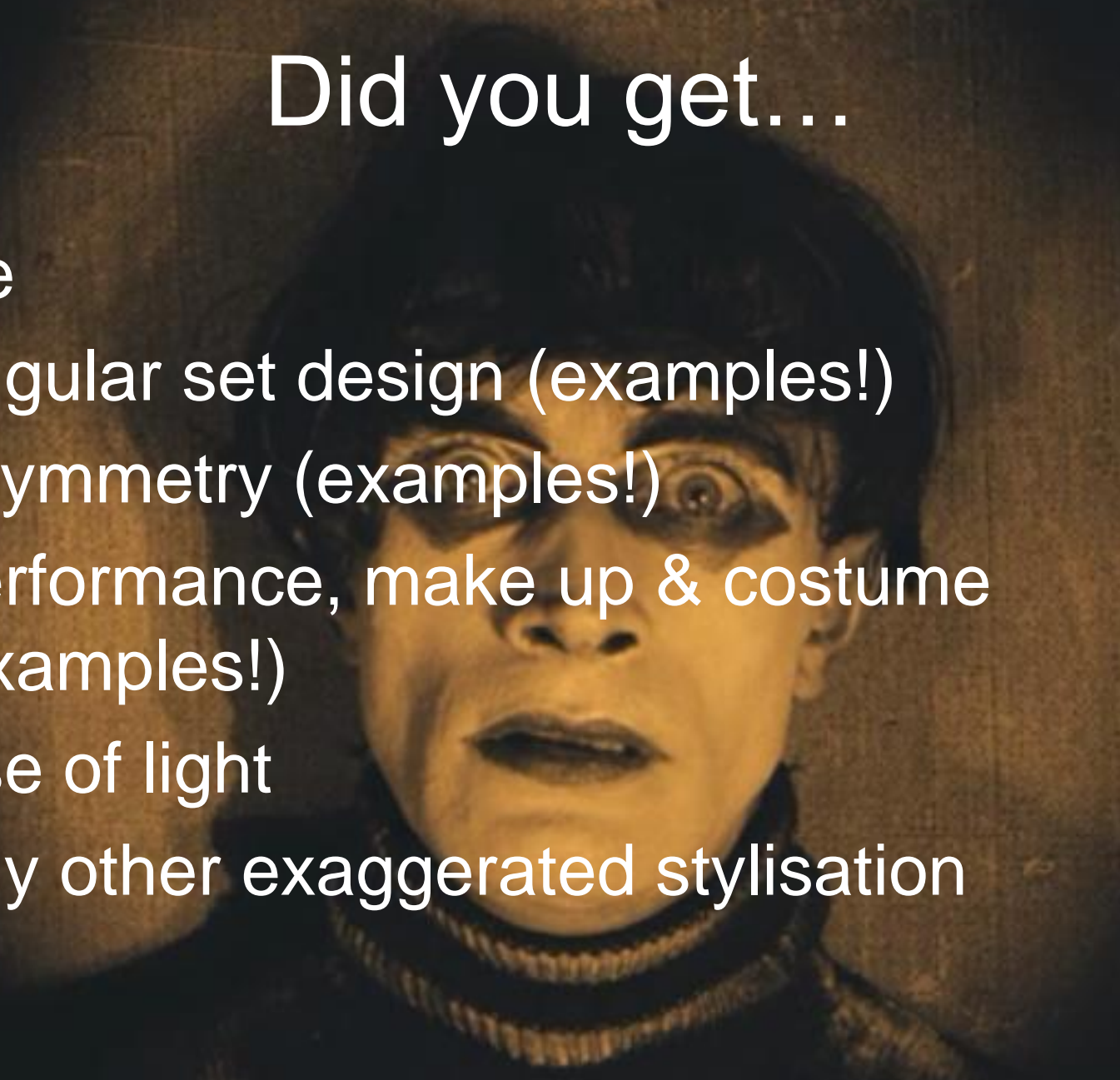
Your task

Analyse how key sequences from The Cabinet of Dr Caligari reflect the film's context in style and theme.

Did you get…

Style

- Angular set design (examples!)
- Asymmetry (examples!)
- Performance, make up & costume (examples!)
- Use of light
- Any other exaggerated stylisation

Did you get…

Context

- Unstable society
- The parallels with the war experience
- Middle class (bourgeois) fear of lost status
- Hysteria
- Fear of the outsider
- Supernatural terrors
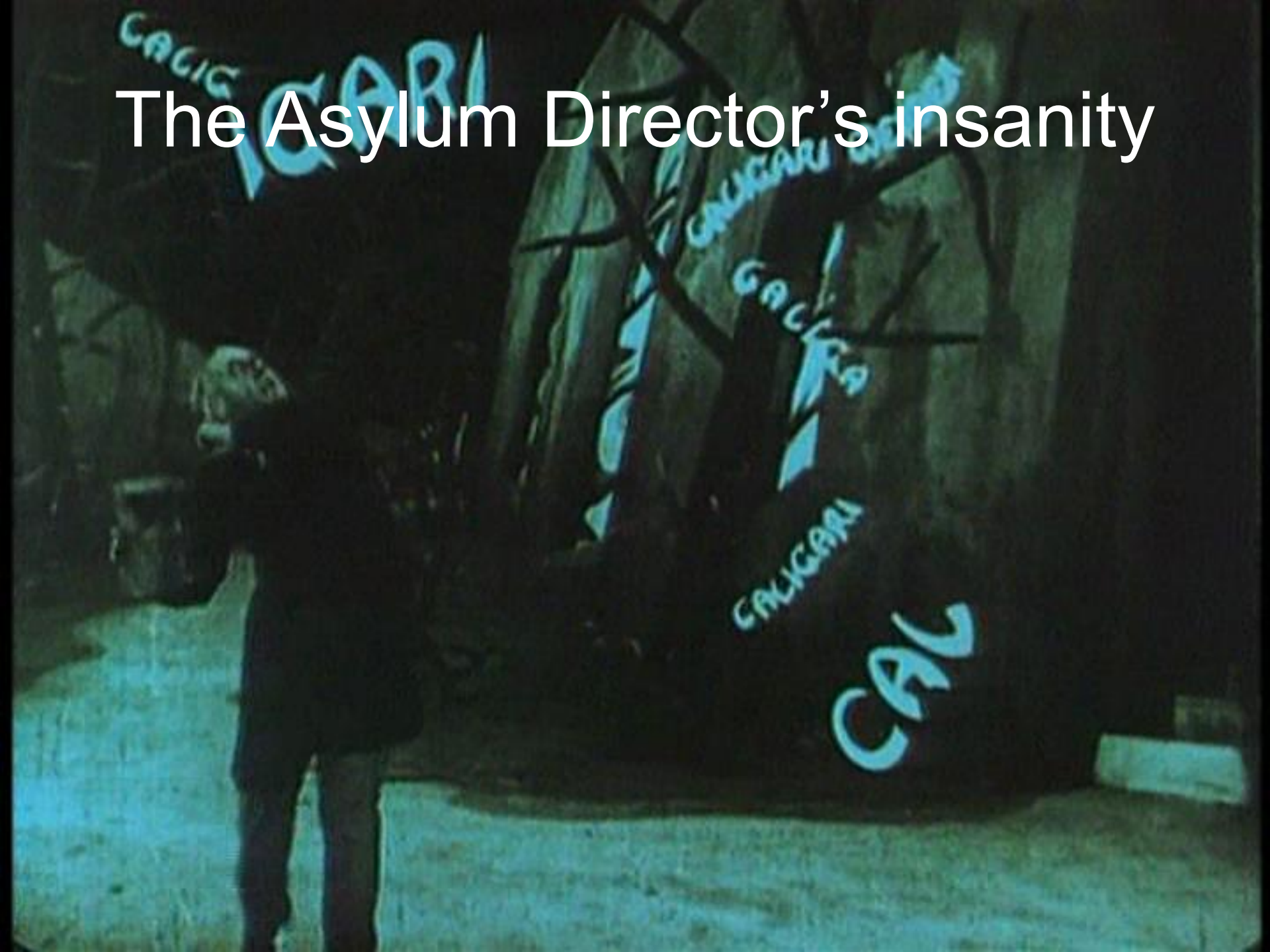- The nation 'sleepwalking to destruction' (Hans Janowitz)

Jane visits Caligari

The Kidnap of Jane

The Asylum Director's insanity

The final sequence