Hanna Paulouskaya, "Entry on: Caligula [Калигула (Kaligula)] by Nikolai Smirnov", peer-reviewed by Elżbieta Olechowska and Elizabeth Hale. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2019). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/800. Entry version as of November 07, 2026.

Nikolai Smirnov

Caligula [Калигула (Kaligula)]

Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (1989)

TAGS: Caligula





We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	Caligula [Калигула (Kaligula)]
Country of the First Edition	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR)
Country/countries of popularity	Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics
Original Language	Silent, subtitles in Russian
First Edition Date	1989
First Edition Details	*Калигула* [Caligula (Kaligula)]. Directed by Nikolai Smirnov. Tashkent, 1989, 6 min.
Running time	6 min
Genre	Animated films, Cameraless animation films , Science fiction, Short films
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Creators



Nikolai Smirnov , b. 1950
(Director)

Nikolai Smirnov (Николай Смирнов) studied in the Soviet Union, at the Tashkent Theatre and Art Institute at the director's department (1973). He worked at Uzbekfilm studio making animations in 1983–1991. Most of them were fairy-tales rooted in Uzbek folklore and tradition (e.g. *Farukh and Zumrad*, 1984; *Судья и странник* [A judge and a Traveller], 1987, together with Piotr Amirov).

Source:

Profile at animator.ru (accessed: July 16, 2019)

Bio prepared by Hanna Paulouskaya, University of Warsaw, hannapa@al.uw.edu.pl

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Additional information

Summary

This short animated film is a post-apocalyptic science fiction story about the destruction of the world as a result of brain experiments on rats.

It begins with a close-up of an ancient half-destroyed bust of Caligula. We see elements of the sculpture – one eye, a nose, a cracked forehead, an ear, hair, and a drop (of sweat?) flowing down his face. When the camera moves away, we see that the head is lying among ruins and rats are running among them. A rat climbs on the head, and looks directly at the camera.

The scenery changes. There is a sea and a lighthouse in a distance. In the foreground there is a branch of a tree and a toy.

The next shot shows a highway out of the city. It is late in the evening. The cars look futuristic. They are going away or straight towards the camera. Near the highway, there is the dump site with the head.

There is a family in one of the cars – a boy, and his parents. They are looking through the windows of the car. In the light of passing cars we see that many rats are running into a ruined building. Its stairs, walls, ruins are depicted in Piranesi style. The rats, the cars and the boy are the main protagonists of this episode. At some point, the family and a rat sitting in a broken window of the building, are looking straight at each other. After a close up shot of the rat, its story begins.

A man in a futuristic mask and a protective suit descends deep underground in a glass elevator. He has a box. We see a lab, where the man experiments on rats. There are three rats under a glass bell. The man gives them a piece of an apple. They eat it together and ask for more. Afterwards, the man takes one rat aside. He operates on its brain – presses an area of the brain with a pin. He returns the rat under the glass bell. Now he can change the rat's level of aggression, and he increases it. The rat sees everything in red and thinks the other rats want to attack it, even though they are friendly. The rat attacks two others and kills them. It has a red diode in the head. The man reduces aggression. He takes off the mask. We see his wrinkled face and a blank look. There is a drop of sweat flowing down his face. A similar drop of sweat flows through the face of the Caligula statue. A rat with a red drop of blood is lying on the window sill.

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The family having seen the story continue on their way and look ahead. They close the window. We see the highway, the dump site, the ruins. The view changes to the seaside and the lighthouse. Maybe it is the destination of the family. In the last scene we see Caligula's head and dead rats nearby. A rat with a red diode climbs on the head.

Analysis

The film uses Caligula as a metaphor. It does not present the story of the Roman emperor assuming that his figure is well known. The film uses most common stereotypical understanding of the image of Caligula as an insane horrible ruler. However we should notice that his sculpture is no less devastated than the city.

The question is what protagonist of the story is used to represent Caligula – the insane rat or the researcher? The flowing drops on the face of Caligula and on the face of the man in the lab may imply that it is the man. Although a researcher is usually a part of a bigger system and may not have real power, we do not see the system in the movie. As the story is told from the point of view of the rat, the researcher is omnipotent from this perspective. He is old, tired, lacking enthusiasm and energy. We do not know his motives nor his thoughts about the experiment. Perhaps the drop of sweat is a symbol of his concern and fear. In this case, he is presented as a humane person. However he continues to experiment, and does not cancel the level of aggression. The film's ending, presenting the rat climbing on the head of the sculpture, may suggest victory of the oppressed over its oppressor.

At the other hand, as the popular version of biography of Caligula states that his behaviour changed after an illness in October 37 AD (Suet. *Cal*. 27, 2), it may suggest that Caligula himself was an object of an experiment. In this case it would be the rat who symbolizes the monstrous emperor.

Seen by the eyes of the kid and his parents, the story emphasizes the oddity and abnormality of aggression. The family looks "normal", peaceful, and they cannot stay in this place. They choose to escape, similar to many other people in the cars. Looking through the car window and closing the window in the end of the story, they remain observers, not active protagonists.

Actually, it is striking that we do not see anybody who would try to stop the aggression and the disease. The researcher has reduced the

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level of aggression, but he has not canceled it, nor raised the level of empathy. There is no hero figure who would try to stop the experiment (what seems to be necessary in a Hollywood production). The authors of the film show only abnormality of the situation, not ways of changing it.

The child's figure of the film highlights the universality of the issue and the child's involvement in the conflict. It is not a story about the researcher and the rats, it is a story about the changing world, which includes children in the same measure as adults.

As the film was made in 1989, during the Fall of Nations in the countries of the Soviet bloc (Poland, Hungary, East Germany, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, and Romania), we may read the film as a political allusion to the declining Soviet society that has no perspective for a change for better, and its people choose to leave it. However, the film is metaphoric and evokes first of all more general interpretations.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Caligula
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Animals Child's view Emotions Future Historical figures Science Utopia and dystopia
Further Reading	**Information about the film in movie databases:** animator.ru (accessed: March 31, 2019).

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