



# TREASURES FROM THE YALE FILM ARCHIVE

AN ONGOING SERIES OF CLASSIC AND CONTEMPORARY FILMS PRESENTED IN 35MM BY THE YALE FILM STUDY CENTER

WEDNESDAY

JANUARY 31, 2018

7:00PM • WHITNEY  
HUMANITIES CENTER

PRESENTED WITH SUPPORT FROM  
PAUL L. JOSKOW '70 M.PHIL., '72 PH.D.



Towards the end of his life, Austrian-born director Fritz Lang (1890-1976) was fond of telling a story about how Nazi propagandist minister Joseph Goebbels had offered him the top position in the German film industry soon after the Nazi Party came to power in 1933. Hours after Goebbels made the offer, the story goes, Lang packed his bags and fled to Paris, not waiting even a day to remove money from his German bank account.



Alas, that story of a morally uncompromising director immediately leaving his adopted homeland in protest of Nazi rule is, to put it kindly, a bit more complicated than Lang would have liked. Lang did flee Berlin, but not until months after the supposed meeting with Goebbels. He did go on to direct a quartet of unambiguously anti-fascist movies in Hollywood in the early 1940s, but he was also a dedicated German nationalist in his youth. His last pre-war German movie, *DAS TESTAMENT DES DR. MABUSE* (1933) was indeed banned by censors for its implicit criticism of the Nazi Party, but Lang was also admired by Goebbels and Hitler for his monumental, mythological Weimar-era epics *DIE NIBELUNGEN* (1924) and *METROPOLIS* (1927).

Although Lang's heroic escape story may not quite jibe with reality, its murky, fatalistic tension between truth and fiction is a pretty perfect encapsulation of what Lang did so well in over four decades as a filmmaker: walk a fuzzy line between grandiose fantasy and hard-boiled documentary, imbuing the wild imagination of the former with just enough gritty detail from the latter that even the most outlandish scenarios bore a haunting, poignant resemblance to an all-too-recognizable modern reality.

Lang's 1931 urban crime film *M*, a landmark early sound movie and proto-noir that was the director's favorite of his own work, may be the best example of Lang blending conspicuous artifice with documentary realism in the service of creating a chilling, entertaining, unforgettably provocative exploration of the manifold dangers of modern life in the big city. Peter Lorre makes his film debut as Hans Beckert, an inconspicuous, cherub-faced petty bourgeois in 1920s Berlin who is also a serial killer of children. The highly organized forces of the police and the criminal underworld, along with the panicked and hysterical general public, all desperately seek to find Beckert before he takes his next victim.

Set in tenement courtyards, crowded city streets, smoke-filled police interrogation rooms, and other gloomy urban locales that would become the standard backdrops for American film noir in the decades to come, the movie was shot entirely on constructed sets over six weeks at the Staaken Zeppelinhalle studio just outside Berlin. Lang's first sound movie, *M* was shot two-thirds in sound and one-third silent, integrating a highly expressive soundtrack of mundane city noises (e.g. honking cars, clanging clocks) with sequences of awed, contemplative silence before the forces of order pitted against an agent of chaos. But in a city suspended between the lingering trauma of World War I and the imminent rise of Nazi rule, *M*'s greatest ambiguity lies in just whom, exactly, the audience should sympathize with and whom they should most fear.

Lorre's bug-eyed child murderer is indeed a monster, but is there not something also worrisome about the frenzied masses, the ruthless criminals, the uncompromising police? "Gradually, and at times reluctantly," Lang wrote in the *Los Angeles Herald Express* in 1947, "I have come to the conclusion that every human mind harbors a latent compulsion to murder." While Beckert clearly falls into that everyman-turned-monster camp, under the wrong circumstances, could the same happen to me or to you, too?

DIRECTED BY **FRITZ LANG**  
CINEMATOGRAPHY BY **FRITZ ARNO WAGNER**  
PRODUCED BY **NERO-FILM AG**  
(1931) 117 MINS.  
STARRING **PETER LORRE, INGE LANDGUT,  
OTTO WERNICKE, THEODOR LOOS, GUSTAF  
GRÜNDGENS, FRITZ ODEMAR, AND PAUL KEMP**

NOTES BY **TOM BREEN**

**DID YOU KNOW:** *M* IS OFTEN REMEMBERED FOR ITS USE OF GRIEG'S "IN THE HALL OF THE MOUNTAIN KING" AS LEITMOTIF, A TUNE WHICH LORRE'S CHARACTER WHISTLES THROUGHOUT THE FILM. LORRE HIMSELF COULDN'T WHISTLE, THOUGH, SO THE WHISTLING WAS PROVIDED BY THE NOTORIOUSLY UN-MUSICAL LANG, WHOSE TUNELESS WHISTLE WAS WELL-MATCHED WITH LORRE'S UNBALANCED CHARACTER.

**NEXT UP:** DIRECTOR ANG LEE'S BREAKTHROUGH FILM, THE TAIWANESE-AMERICAN CO-PRODUCTION **THE WEDDING BANQUET**. TELLS THE STORY OF SIMON AND WAI-TUNG, A GAY COUPLE IN MANHATTAN, AND WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WAI-TUNG'S PARENTS DEMAND HE MARRIES A WOMAN IN ORDER TO CONTINUE THE FAMILY LINE. THE AWARD-WINNING ROMANTIC COMEDY SCREENS IN 35MM ON **SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 11 AT 2:00 P.M.**

The following article by Fritz Lang originally appeared in the German newspaper *Die Filmwoche* on May 20, 1931. It was reprinted in *Fritz Lang: His Life and Work* (2001).

Striding in seven-league boots, the miracles we experience by the hour in our everyday lives have caught up with the 1,001 tales of Scheherazade and left them behind. Or do you think that any remotely normal Central European who needs to get from Berlin to Paris as fast as possible would choose a winged horse if a racing car were available, or a flying carpet if he could take an airplane? When it comes to surpassing the dreams in Aladdin's garden, there is no need even to think of Baby Green's subterranean swimming paradise, with its magnificent displays of coral, glass, gold, and lapis lazuli. The Haus Vaterland at Potsdamer Platz or a Luna Park with a semblance of modern management are quite sufficient in the end. You only have to keep your eyes open for what is around you! All the newspapers report human tragedies and comedies, anomalies and universalities,



*Fritz Lang (left) with cameramen Karl Vaß and Fritz Arno Wagner on the set of M.*

on a daily basis, and these reports are so fantastic, so accidental and romantic—or whatever else you like to call them—that no dramaturge for a big corporation would dare to suggest such material, lest he be confronted with a resounding chorus of derisive laughter at the improbable, chance, or kitschy conflicts. That's life. So I thought it fitting to reflect the rhythm of our times, the objectivity of the age in which we are living, and to make a film based entirely on factual reports.

Anyone who makes the effort to closely read the newspaper reports about the major homicide cases of the past few years—e.g., the ghastly double murder of the Fehse siblings in Breslau, the Husmann case, or the case of little Hilde Zäpernick, three crimes that are unsolved to this day—will find a strange similarity of events, circumstances that repeat themselves almost as if natural laws were at work, such as the dreadful psychotic fear of the general public, the self-accusations of the mentally inferior, denunciations unleashing the hate and the jealousy that have built up over years of living side by side, attempts to feed the police investigators false leads, sometimes on malicious grounds and sometimes out of excessive zeal.

Bringing out all these things on the screen, separating them from the incidentals, seems to me to confront a film, a film based on factual reports, with a more substantial responsibility than the artistic reproduction of events: the responsibility of sounding a warning from real events, of educating, and in this way ultimately having a preventive effect. It would go beyond the scope of this brief comment to dwell on the means open to such a film to draw attention to the dangers that, given an incessantly growing crime rate, spell threat and, sadly, all too often, disaster for people at large, children and youngsters in particular; to illuminate the ordinariness and banality with which they announce themselves; to educate; and, most important of all, to have a preventive impact. It hardly needs stating that the artistic reproduction of such a murder case implies not only the presentation of events in concentrated form but also the extraction of typical phenomena and the typification of the killer. For this reason, the film should give the impression at certain points of a moving spotlight, revealing with greatest clarity the thing on which its cone of light is directed at the time: the grotesqueness of an audience infected with a murder psychosis, on the one hand, and the gruesome monotony with which an unknown murderer, armed with a few candies, an apple, a toy, can spell disaster for any child in the street, any child outside the protection of his family or the authorities.

There is one motif used in this case that seems to illustrate particularly well how fantastic real events have become: the idea that the criminal caste, Berlin's underworld, would take to the streets on its own initiative to seek out the unknown murderer, so as to evade greater police activity, is taken from a factual newspaper report and seemed to me such compelling cinematic material that I lived in constant fear that someone else would exploit this idea before me.

If this film based on factual reports helps to point an admonishing and warning finger at the unknown, lurking threat, the chronic danger emanating from the constant presence among us of compulsively and criminally inclined individuals, forming, so to speak, a latent potential that may devour our lives in flames—and especially the lives of the most helpless among us—and if the film also helps, perhaps, even to avert this danger, then it will have served its highest purpose and drawn the logical conclusion from the quintessential facts assembled in it.