

ASPHALT (1929)

Dossier curated by Tony Kaes

A film of shimmering lights and deceptive surfaces, Joe May's *Asphalt* is a luminous work of late Weimar cinema. It epitomizes the Straßenfilm ("street film") genre that emerged from the post-war fascination with urban modernity. This genre features the city as its central protagonist, depicting it as an alluring yet treacherous space where excitement and moral danger coexist. Inaugurated by Karl Grune's *Die Straße* (The Street, 1923), the genre dramatizes how the modern metropolis seduces and corrupts its inhabitants, particularly the 'ordinary man', whose encounter with the city's temptations leads to ruin.

This pattern is evident from the beginning of *Asphalt*. The protagonist is a young, disciplined police officer and the embodiment of state authority. We first see him directing traffic with dramatic aplomb. But the city has other designs on him. A flirtatious jewel thief named Else catches his attention and draws him into a world of sensuality and deception. What starts as an attempt to uphold the law spirals into moral collapse when the officer inadvertently kills a romantic rival. This premise foreshadows the fatalistic narratives of later film noir, in which respectable men are undone by beautiful yet dangerous women.

While the plot follows a genre template, the film distinguishes itself through its production values and visual inventiveness. May collaborated with the renowned cinematographer Günther Rittau, who had worked on Fritz Lang's *Die Nibelungen* (1924) and *Metropolis* (1927). Rittau's mastery of the "unchained camera" produced a kinetic visual language resulting in spectacular images. Sweeping overhead shots, made possible by the new camera crane, reveal the city's monumental architecture, while tracking shots glide along neon-lit boulevards, and extreme close-ups capture the charged glances exchanged between the illicit couple. The handheld camera adds tactile immediacy to interiors, and Rittau's attention to inanimate object, such as shop windows, door handles, and jewellery, invests them with psychological resonance.

Aesthetically, *Asphalt* is firmly rooted in the Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity) movement, which emerged in the mid-1920s as a reaction against the emotional excess and stylization of Expressionism. New Objectivity favored unsentimental realism, precise detail, and an observational approach that often borrowed from documentary

practices. In *Asphalt*, this manifests itself in the film's fascination with surfaces — polished streets, glimmering fabrics, and illuminated shop windows — and in its heightened sensitivity to gestures and behaviors. Even the smallest details, from the cut of Else's dresses to the rhythm of urban traffic, are carefully orchestrated to reveal character and social milieu.

At the same time, the film draws on the Kammerspielfilm tradition established by Lupu Pick's *Scherben* (Shattered, 1921) and perfected by F. W. Murnau's *Der letzte Mann* (The Last Laugh, 1924). Hallmarks of the form, such as intimacy, a focus on "little people," and sharp contrasts between public spectacles and private spaces, are present throughout *Asphalt*. May uses lighting and camera movement to reveal psychological states, leading viewers from the glittering public realm of the city to the claustrophobic interiors where moral decisions are made. The film contrasts these two spheres — the glittering modernity of the exterior city streets and the stifling domestic space of the young officer's home — as being irreconcilable.

The timing of *Asphalt*'s release gives it special historical significance. It premiered in March 1929, just months before Berlin saw the arrival of *The Jazz Singer*, the American "talkie" that signaled the swift end of silent cinema. In early 1929, all major German productions were still silent films. However, by the end of 1930, the industry had almost completely converted to sound. *Asphalt* thus stands at the threshold of a technological rupture, showcasing the silent era's final visual triumphs before synchronized dialogue reshaped the movies.

The opening sequence is a self-contained abstract montage of industrial images. Filmed at night, it shows workers pounding flaming-hot asphalt into the street surface, their silhouetted bodies contrasting with the glow of the molten material. May uses superimpositions to create a layered, hypnotic rhythm, recalling the abstract city symphonies of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* and Walther Ruttmann's *Berlin, die Sinfonie der Großstadt* (both 1927). The gleaming asphalt becomes a central metaphor for the modern metropolis as a surface culture obsessed with polish and appearance, concealing instability beneath. During the Weimar period, the term "asphalt" itself became shorthand for cosmopolitan modernity — fast-paced, dazzling, and morally ambiguous. As early as 1928, nationalist critics such as Joseph Goebbels twisted this into the anti-Semitic slur "asphalt culture," denigrating the perceived moral laxity and internationalism of urban life in Berlin.

Produced by Erich Pommer, who was famous for his 1927 mega-production of *Metropolis*, *Asphalt* was another of Ufa's ambitious projects in terms of concept and execution. With the exception of a few on-location shots, such as an aerial view of Berlin taken from an airplane, the film was entirely staged at the Neubabelsberg studios, where a 400-meter-long street set was reportedly illuminated by 23,000 light bulbs. At the time, it was Europe's largest studio set. This monumental artificial cityscape, built by Erich Kettelhut (who was also the chief architect of Lang's *Metropolis*), enabled May and Rittau to choreograph light and shadow with absolute control, creating a heightened urban reality. The spectacle of electric light aligned the film with Berlin's own embrace of illumination as a symbol of progress, as seen in the 'Berlin im Licht' festival in October 1928. This three-day celebration bathed the city's streets and buildings in electric light to entice shoppers and tourists.

At the center of the film's drama is Betty Amann, a twenty-three-year-old German-born American actress whose performance embodies the Weimar 'New Woman'. With her bobbed hair, chic wardrobe, and self-assured sexuality, Amann's Else is both a product of and an emblem for the modern city. Initially, she appears as the archetypal vamp: cool, manipulative, and dangerous. However, as the story progresses, she evolves into a self-sacrificing figure willing to accept punishment on behalf of her lover. This transformation is reminiscent of Louise Brooks's Lulu in G.W. Pabst's 1929 film *Pandora's Box*, which also offers a complex portrayal of modern femininity that defies simple moral categorization.

Thematically, *Asphalt* stages a confrontation between two moral orders. On one side is the fast-moving, glittering culture of the modern city, driven by displays of consumption and appearances. On the other is the rigid, patriarchal morality of the police officer's family home, rooted in Prussian discipline and duty. Against this backdrop, the wayward son's father, a retired police officer himself, is forced to arrest his own son. From a contemporary perspective, the film's resolution — the jewel thief's imprisonment and the young officer's return to his parents — appears to represent a traditional return to the established order.

However, this ending is also unexpected because it undermines the film's celebration of sensual pleasure and urban excitement. After all, *Asphalt* revels in the very things it condemns, lingering on luxury goods, fashionable interiors, and the erotic charge of illicit encounters. The abrupt ending can also be interpreted as a warning sign of the crisis of modernity and the fading myth of the New Woman. The stock market crash that

occurred a few months after the film's premiere in 1929, coupled with a rapid rise in unemployment brought an early end to the glamor of the Golden Twenties in the Weimar Republic.

This interplay between seduction and critique lies at the heart of the film's enduring fascination. The camera participates in the culture it depicts, choreographing scenes of looking and being looked at with self-awareness. In one scene, Else's reflection in a shop window doubles her image, suggesting the multiplicity of urban identities and the act of self-display.

By merging the observational realism of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) with the psychological intimacy of the *Kammerspielfilm* and setting both within an electrically lit, studio-built city, *Asphalt* achieves a synthesis that is rare in late silent cinema. The film captures the dialectic of Weimar modernity — its technological optimism and moral uncertainty, as well as its transgressive novelty and its nostalgia for order. More than a genre film, *Asphalt* is a meditation on the city as a space of both liberation and regulation. (It is no coincidence that the protagonist is an officer who regulates the city's chaotic traffic.)

Today, *Asphalt* is considered a jewel of late silent film, notable for its formal elegance, thematic complexity, and its position on the cusp of the sound era. Celebrating and critiquing the culture of its time, the film embodies the era's tensions between tradition and modernity. Above all, however, it is a lasting testament to the visual power of silent cinema.

This introductory essay builds on my contribution to the catalog for the San Francisco Silent Film Festival, which screened Asphalt on November 16, 2025.

NOTE

The accompanying dossier has two chapters. **The first chapter**, 'The Making of Asphalt', contains historical documents discussing the film's elaborate production, particularly the efforts to recreate a modern neon-lit city street in the studio. It also touches on the marketing of Ufa's new film star Betty Amann, who like Louise Brooks was American. **The second chapter** addresses the broader question of the fate of the New Woman in the Weimar era — a question to which *Asphalt* may offer a possible

answer. This chapter traces the rise and fall of the New Woman between 1924 and 1933 in light of contemporaneous debates about sexuality and gender roles. The documents chart a trajectory from challenging the old order to submitting to it. While none of these historical articles mention *Asphalt* (or any other film), they nevertheless resonate with our film, shedding new light on it — for us, in our moment.

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