# THE MAKING OF "ASPHALT"



Erich Pommer (with hat), Joe May, Günther Rittau (Camera), and Gustav Fröhlich

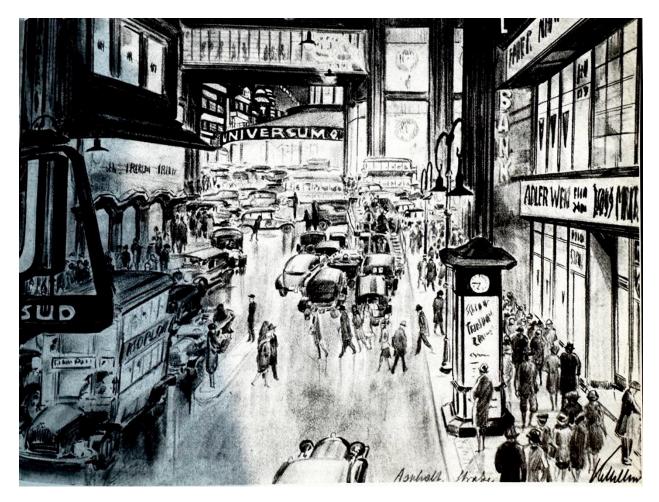
### ERICH POMMER — About the Film

First published in "Kritische Filmschau," in Deutsche Filmzeitung April 12, 1929

This film was inspired by the visual potential of a specific milieu and its effect on the lives of the people who live there. When making a film about a particular location you realize how influential the setting can be and how it can affect an actor's performance and emotional investment. This makes the film more meaningful. Every film becomes more grounded and connected. The tragicomedies of life, both large and small, become

more powerful and moving. The dramatic visuals and plot developments transform it into a powerful furioso. All of these elements exist within the broader context of the overall narrative. Consequently, all the visual elements of the setting will reinforce the internalisation of individual scenes and their emotional tensions.

The expressive potential of the screen enables such intense visual designs. This transforms the film from a distant event into a universal and moving experience. The setting provides many such moments. Despite their apparent limitations, these moments can have a significant impact on people's lives. Consider a street in detail: it may merely be a passageway, but it can also become an atmosphere that significantly affects everyone's life. In this way, the street becomes more than just an environment or backdrop. It becomes a setting that shapes our lives. Fate unfolds. The course of a person's life changes naturally yet inexplicably. The backdrop comes to life, influencing people's lives with its charisma. The street becomes a symbol of human life, with its endless intertwining destinies.



Erich Kettelhut, Sketch for Asphalt -- Straße

### **ERICH KETTELHUT** — Asphalt

Chapter "Asphalt" in Kettelhut, *Der Schatten des Architekten*, ed. by Werner Sudendorf (Berlin: bellevile, 2009), pp. 216-218.

[. . .] While reading the script, I wondered whether it would be possible to find a street in Berlin where we could film day and night in heavy traffic and incorporate all the conditions specified in the script. I asked May about it. "Come with me," he replied, "I'll show you the street." He led me into the large central hall. "If we open the six large gates that separate the three halls from the outside and from each other, we have a wide and long area. There you can build the street as required by the script." I must

have looked at him quite incredulously, because he laughed out loud: "Everything has been discussed with Correll and Pommer. The studios will be cleared out at the beginning of next week, then you can start right away."

There was a lot of talk and publicity about this street at the time. [...] Ufa followed with its press service. I am reproducing the article here in full: "A street construction project by three studios. In order to fully exploit the atmosphere of metropolitan asphalt photographically and artistically, which is not possible without artificial lighting, architect Erich Kettelhut is building a street complex for the Joe May film by Erich Pommer's Ufa production company *Asphalt* in Neubabelsberg, which will probably be the largest film set of its kind. The modern and technically advanced equipment of the studios makes it possible to build the street through all the halls of the new studio and also to attach a large outdoor building complex to it. This will give the street a length of over four hundred meters." [...]



The studio doors are open to the street



Screenshot from Asphalt — All subsequent images without captions are taken from the film

### **MAX PFEIFFER — Asphalt**

In Film-Kurier (March 9, 1929)

Nothing in film is more challenging than matching the lighting conditions of an outdoor street scene with those of the indoor continuation.

This was one of the main challenges we faced when producing Asphalt, directed by Erich Pommer and produced by UFA for Joe May. The set, which spanned three of the largest studios at the Neubabelsberg UFA facilities, was enormous. Construction of the extensive street complex began, covering a total area of 6,000 square metres and including several intersections and cross streets. Department stores, car showrooms, hotels, and high-end shops brought the street scene to life. A large square where several streets intersected was intended to create the illusion of cosmopolitan traffic.

To extend the set beyond the street and create the illusion of an infinite horizon, we opened the huge studio gates and continued the street far into the distance.

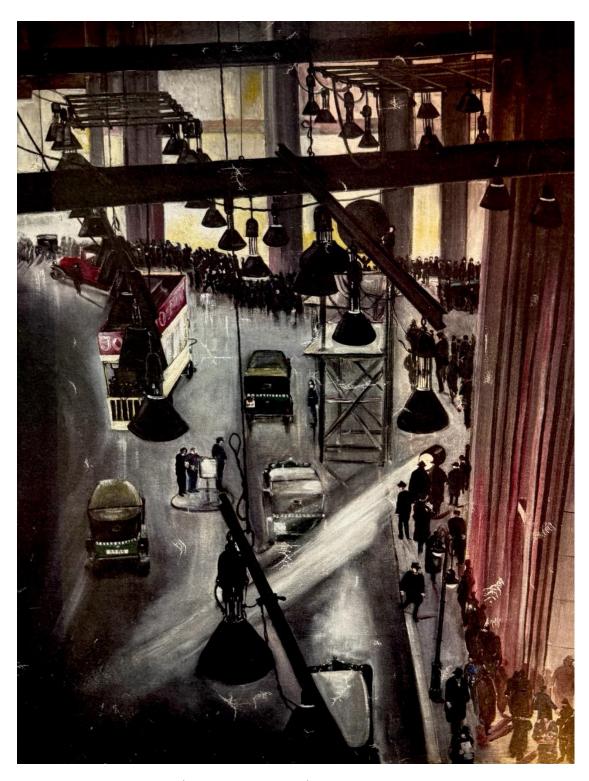
To create traffic around the square and in the streets, hundreds of buses, cars, trucks, and motorcycles were "hired" for these scenes in Neubabelsberg. To keep this bustling traffic flowing amid more than a thousand extras, five large-scale entry and exit points were created in the studio.

Gustav Fröhlich played the hero of these scenes, portraying Sergeant Holk, a traffic police officer working in the middle of the large square. However, several real traffic police officers were needed to assist him with the much more difficult task of directing cars through the entrances and exits.

Night shots posed a particular difficulty. Since the end of the street had been built outdoors, it was only possible to shoot late in the evening to coordinate the outdoor lighting. The same applied to the interior scenes. The main actors in these sequences—Hans Albers, Paul Hörbiger, Karl Platen, and Kurt Vespermann—were busy at the theatre from 7 a.m. every day. For this reason, filming could only begin at 11:30 p.m. each night and lasted until the early morning.

Another complicated matter was the start of the plot. We had to transition seamlessly from an aerial view of the street to our opening in the jewelry store on that same street. This could only be achieved by ensuring the cameras were fully mobile.

We overcame this challenge by using a brand-new type of mobile tower construction. The camera moves seamlessly from the daytime shot to the night-time shot along the street and back again. It then turns around and rises higher, beginning in the jewelry store and showing close-ups of the main characters. These shots are intended to make the camera movement appear natural, giving the viewer the impression that the motion is continuous and effortless.



Rudi Feld, In the studio (oil painting, 1929)



### JOE MAY ON THE "ASPHALT"

A New Erich Pommer Film — in: Film-Kurier March 12, 1929

A huge street was built in Babelsberg. Not just a facade, as is usually the case, but a wide, sweeping street with real shops, where part of the action takes place.

In the middle, as a calming influence amid the flurry of activity: the traffic cop. With his arm outstretched, he directs the surging stream of traffic here and there. The traffic really did "surge." Countless cars, a bus, and many hundreds of extras worked day and night. They created the backdrop for a large-scale feature film that also had the ambition to build a psychological plot within the framework of what was possible in cinema.

Three people worked on the story for the film. Rolf Vanloo came up with the idea, Fred Majo and Hans Szekely wrote the screenplay. They were certainly influenced by Joe May, one of those directors who don't just take on any book if they like the material, but who refine every detail, from the manuscript to the final cut.

There are a few photos from the filming of this movie that perhaps speak more clearly than anything else about the director's contribution to this work. It is a series

of images in which you can see the director acting out the scenes, not limiting himself to just saying what he wants, but showing exactly what he expects and what he is thinking at every moment of the action with every movement. This has resulted in a major advantage, but also a minor disadvantage.

The presentation is excellent throughout. One could almost say that there is not a single ill-considered movement from the first to the last scene.

But the whole thing is too detailed, especially at the beginning. It flows somewhat slowly, perhaps even a little sedately, and only has a few small highlights here and there – encouraging, uplifting, compelling – that keep the interest alive and make you eager to see what happens next. This happily avoids what would inevitably have happened with another director, namely boredom and a loss of interest.

The whole thing becomes magnificent towards the end. There is sensation, surprise, outstanding acting, suspense – in short, almost everything you could ask for in a good film. The whole thing fades away in a quiet ritardando, perhaps an echo of Pommer's American experience, who does not want to end any scene with a bang.

In this film, just as at the beginning of Pommer's new era in Germany, as in "Heimkehr" (Homecoming), there is a woman whom we knew virtually nothing about until now. Betty Amann, an actress, not outstanding, not sky-high, but interesting with a certain provocative character with acting skills whose true talent cannot be fully assessed after her first performance.

She plays the girlfriend of a major criminal who falls in love with the young police officer during the two days in which the film's plot unfolds.

The development of this love is psychologically interesting. What may at first be only theater then turns into flirtation, eventually becoming so great that the woman, who was afraid of the police, turns herself in to the judge and goes to prison to protect her lover.

This lover, the policeman, is Gustav Fröhlich. He has been given a role here that suits his particular acting skills. He has to play a kind of nature boy, a lover who has nothing of the tailcoat and claque about him. He makes an impression through the suggestive power of his acting and, under Joe May's direction, achieves a perfection that will resonate throughout the world.

Alongside him in a small episode are Hans Adalbert Schlettow and Albert Steinrück, who appears for the second time this week in a major, powerful role, reminding us once again of what German cinema has lost with his departure.

Among those who appeared before the curtain at the end and bowed in gratitude, Günther Rittau, the cinematographer, was missing. This is regrettable, because the purely visual elements, just like Erich Kettelhut's sets, played a major role in the film's success. The symphonic images at the beginning of the film, which show the pace of the big city in cross-fades, are – apart from the idea – things that can primarily be credited to the cinematographer.

Conversely, a small sensational addition that won loud applause on the open stage can be credited to the scriptwriters, who anticipated the safe-cracking in Kleiststraße with almost minute precision.

The Ufa-Palast has excellent outdoor advertising, created by Rudi Feld, and a good, crowd-pulling film that can make up for some of the shortfall caused by the cold weather almost everywhere, not only in Berlin but also in the provinces.



Ein Joe May-Film der Erich Pommer-Produktion der Ufa

Nach einer Filmnovelle von ROLF E VANLOO / Drehbuch: FRED MAJO, HANS SZEKELY und ROLF E VANLOO

REGIE: JOE MAY

Gustav Fröhlich / Betty Amann Hans Adalbert Schlettow Albert Steinrück / Else Heller



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des Kunns ist ant geernachend, aus verrat Gra-gientität und ganen Blick Weif am Abend.

Eiter unspranschnete Regielentung.
Guster Frichtlich von überwähitgender Gestal-tungskraft. Hamente, die alss Herz greifen unbestrittener Krisig.

Schwiesberg Friedenauer Lekul-Anoniger.

.. Wie Joe May die brausende Symphon der Großstadt ebnlängt, das baprugt seine f mische Vorannität . Der Abend.

VERLEIHBETRIEB DER UNIVERSUM-FILM AKTIENGESELLSCHAFT BERLIN SW 68 KOCHSTR. 6-7



### HANS H. REINSCH — Psychology of the Neon Signs

First published as "Psychologie der Lichtreklame," in Das neue Berlin 1929 (Heft 8), 154

The street, usually bathed in black, and the gloomy square no longer exist. The reflections of the apotheoses and light sources bring it to life. The physical and shadowy elements in the nighttime image of the bic city have disappeared and been destroyed, the surface has been reduced to nothing, and instead, light fights against stone and monotony, soullessness, and ghostly darkness!

The light source itself appears to the viewer to float freely in space, while actual surface sources appear at different distances due to their varying strength of light. The arrangement and colorfulness enliven the night, especially when they change, fade, flare up, and only the direction of the source is detectable, but by no means its distance.

This has a practical and optical effect, as the conquest of the third dimension is complete and illuminated advertising in this sense must be regarded as a fighter and conqueror above all other forms of advertising.

But illuminated advertising is also destructive: darkness, the dullness of architecture shrouded in night, and its shadowy gigantism have given way, dissolved, while illuminated advertising continues its conquest, like television and radio, like space travel – and the rest of illuminated advertising became power and advertising impact!

But it has also built things up! Daytime advertising has been trumped because nighttime advertising has greater advertising power than daytime advertising, and today businessmen illuminate their shops down to the last corner. Apotheoses stand upright and at right angles and deep to the building line and direction of traffic, because the parallel position – such as shop window boxes – is impossible!

[. . .] America is also advancing architecturally in this dissolution of the building plan and is tearing open the street and square space even further, breaking down the boundaries between shops and traffic space. Air and sunlight also have free access, and glass architecture has broken through in modern hygienic, natural awareness.

This moment of new architecture and illuminated advertising was introduced by the Dessau Bauhaus in Germany and secured a leading position in our lighting and construction industry.

Illuminated advertising is only effective if it is, as it were, an "advertising theater," just as the shop window should be! However, it is true that the abundance of illuminated advertising can make it difficult for people to find their way around a space, and that light sources as apotheosis and store lighting can, due to reflections, especially in damp weather, endanger traffic and the safety of individuals! This is a psychological flaw in some illuminated advertising, and there is enough research to be done on how far light intensity and spatial disruption can be mitigated.

One way would be to coordinate the different types of light with each other, another would be indirect lighting.

Even simple street lighting should be considered advertising. Confusing pedestrians is not advertising, but rather provoking the opposite, and therefore, as a tip for the future,

the most effective illuminated advertising may be indirect lighting of the space – in this case, the traffic area – as the coming form with the greatest appeal.



Night shooting for Asphalt in the studio

### Statistics for "The Largest Film Set Ever Built in Europe"

- 2,000 amps for lighting
- 14-meter-high facades
- 23,000 light bulbs for neon signs
- 1,000 square meters of glass for display cases and shop windows
- 2,500 square meters of real plaster (200 workers worked for 12 days to lay it)
- 6 days of work for between 500 and 1000 extras
- First use of a mobile camera tower

- 6-10 cameras positioned at various street corners
- A 400-meter street running through 3 studios and open spaces.

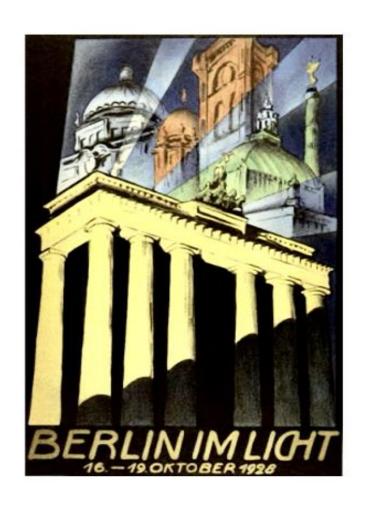
(Source: UFA Theaterdienst 1929)

### **ELECTRIC LIGHT AS SPECTACLE**

Kettelhut wrote about the uses of electric light in the filming of Asphalt, which began in October 1928.

"The power consumption for this giant set was horrendous, and the number of lighting technicians and electricians needed was unprecedented. When Biermann, the chief lighting technician, whistled to turn on the lights before filming began, all the lights in the other halls, including those in the dressing rooms, workshops, and offices, had to be switched off and all machinery had to stop. Even in Neubabelsberg, the power was greatly reduced." (Der Schatten des Architekten, p. 221

**Also in October 1928,** the 'Berlin im Licht' festival was inaugurated to showcase and celebrate the electrification (i.e. modernization) of Berlin. For three nights, all available electric lights were turned on to illuminate façades, monuments, and shop windows.





For a short documentary about 'Berlin im Licht' in October 1928, click here

## **MARKETING A NEW STAR**





Betty Amann, die schöne Verlührerin, im Pommer-Film der Ula "Asphalt", und Gustav Frühlich

# DIE GROSSE VERFÜHRERIN

### H.U. Brachvogel — The Great Seductress'

First published in *Der Kinematograph* (March 17, 1929)

[. . .] "Vamp" is the name given to the dark, seductive woman — Vamp — an abbreviation of vampire!

The "vamp" is the embodiment of sin — the alluring, sweet, hot sin — the incarnation of the evil principle in a very seductive form —! The vamp is the seductress par excellence — and in its purest form! The task of the vamp is to seduce actively — to seduce credibly and genuinely — but not in such a way that the sympathies of the audience are jeopardized. The men in the stalls must be able to understand the blond lad who succumbs to the dark woman, but of course only to the extent that they find the "rediscovery" of the blond lad's happiness in the last act completely understandable! The women in the stalls must find the vamp star ravishing, fabulous, with a slight dose of envy and longing. — but only to the extent that proper blonde happiness ultimately prevails and the dark, fascinating vamp must disappear! [...]



Betty Amann (1905-1990) Born to German-American parents, raised in the United States, and discovered by Joe May and Erich Pommer. After *Asphalt*, she played in minor roles in Germany before returning to the US in 1931.



### "Asphalt"

### by Betty Amann

In: General-Anzeiger für Dortmund... (Aoril 4, 1929)

A new film starring Amann will be shown tomorrow at the Ufa-Palast.

I know the word "asphalt" is a sore spot for my fellow Berliners. However, I have no intention of writing another lament about the dangers of wet asphalt. For me, the word evokes nothing but joy.

Asphalt is the title of the first film in which I played the female lead. It was directed by Joe May for Erich Pommer's UFA production company. Much of the action took place on a large street constructed at the new Babelsberg UFA studios for the film. It was on this street's asphalt that Joe May guided my first tentative steps in film.

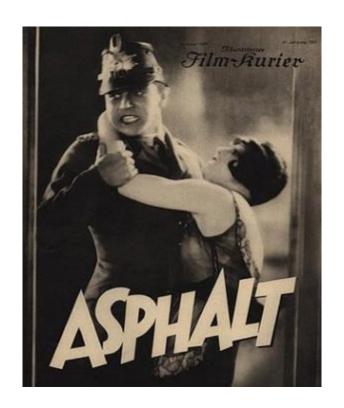
I'm sure everyone understands why asphalt sends a joyful shiver down my spine. However, I must confess that my love extends unreservedly to the asphalt of real Berlin. I especially love the wet streets of Berlin—I'm not sure if you can relate. They may be dangerous and impractical, but to us women beauty is much more important than practicality to us women. And beautiful they are. The streets wind through the city like shiny black rivers between steep cliffs. When colorful neon signs are reflected in the puddles, it looks as if colorful bubbles are rising up from deep below. I like walking through the streets in the evening while and dreaming. Most men don't understand that at all. I think they're more sober in that respect there than we women are. But go and take a look at Berlin in the evening.

The city is enchanted by an abundance of colorful lights. The shop windows display countless treasures—so many that not even star salaries could buy them all: Silks, furs, and pearls! It's like an Oriental fairy tale full of treasures. And the many people jostling and pushing each other, with everyone living in their own world left alone with their own little destinies. It's all much stranger than it seems.

Unfortunately, I've also had an unpleasant experience on these beautiful yet impractical streets. One day, I drove into town to do some shopping. The car stopped in front of the store, and I got out. But the car didn't stop—it skidded! I skidded too and fell, tearing my stockings and new dress in the process. However, this unpleasant incident led me to make a new acquaintance. As I lay helplessly on the wet asphalt, two huge, white-gloved hands suddenly grabbed me and lifted me up. "Well, young lady, why are you lying there?" the policeman asked kindly as he lifted me up and set me on my feet. Then, he gathered all my things. What a nice guy! Now, whenever I drive down Leipziger Straße, we greet each other warmly. I always think of the wet Berlin asphalt and the film Asphalt. This association is all the more striking because I also have a conflict with a police officer in the film, albeit a far more complicated one. The cop in the film, Gustav Fröhlich, is not as friendly as the cop from Leipziger Straße. He arrests me first....



# **REVIEWS**



### FRITZ WALTER — Asphalt

First published in Berliner Börsen-Courier (March 12, 1929)

This film is a telling example of how attempts to incorporate new and contemporary spheres of life into German cinema fail due to the tenacity with which one clings to old and outdated emotional content. Indeed, how new forms are deliberately and systematically, even when they are only beginning to take shape, quickly fused with these old clichéd emotions. Asphalt—need we say more? The variety of representational possibilities that this programmatically metropolitan theme offers film is enormous. Certainly, the difficulties lie precisely in mastering this diversity. But the contemporary novel has long been on the way to new means of representation: the novel *Manhattan Transfer* by the American John Dos Passos, for example, attempts to

show the myriad and diversity of metropolitan destinies through the parallel depiction of many human life stories. Must we say that the simultaneity and juxtaposition of several events is also the given form of expression for film?

But what does asphalt mean in the language of film? A struggle between duty and love. The case of a good young sergeant, son of respectable parents, who falls into the clutches of a thief and prostitute. Don José on the city pavement. Carmen on Kurfürstendamm. Juste milieu under arc lamps. No wonder that under this false perspective, the big city also suffers. One views its natural manifestations with that dark and solemn seriousness that stiffens detail into symbol. The policeman who regulates traffic becomes a statue; buses, trams, and cars take on the appearance of mythical creatures.

The banality of the film script would be unbearable if it weren't for a man like Joe May directing. In the rhythm of the images, in the contrasts, transitions, and correspondences of the images, he achieves masterful results together with the excellent photography by Günther Rittau. The director's influence is also evident in an actor like Gustav Fröhlich, who has never been so simple and restrained. Albert Steinrück shows in an episodic role—one of his final film roles—once again the full range of his comedic talent. Only with its young stars does Ufa have no luck. Betty Amann, announced as a new discovery, seems cut out of the cover of an American magazine; but in her movements, she lacks even the cuteness of this type.

The American film model is beginning to prove disastrous because it has been misunderstood. This film, produced by Erich Pommer, is a textbook example of this. The external perfection and technical effects are impressive, but the substance of the content has been allowed to shrink. They do not consider that they will never achieve the originality and immediacy of technical effects like the Americans; whereas it is precisely in terms of content that German film could and should renew itself.



### **HANS WOLLENBERG** — Asphalt

First published in *Lichtbild-Bühne* (March 12, 1929)

The film ends exactly where it should begin. The only tragic aspect is the discrepancy between the external environment with its asphalt and the rhythm of the cosmopolitan city—striven for with remarkable means—and the lack of credibility in the internal human process. Joe May brilliantly captures the rhythm of the evening street, prepared by an excellently executed montage, and the atmosphere of the asphalt, making excellent use of the resources available to him. However, we don't believe him when he appears as a traffic cop in the middle of the ocean or as a guide leading his group through twists and turns. Nor do we believe his partner, who transforms from a sophisticated, thieving prostitute into a noble individual.

Let's free the great director Joe May from false film sociology that doesn't suit him! After Heimkehr and Asphalt, let's give him roles that showcase his unique talent, which we long to see again.

Gustav Fröhlich fails to convince us of his character's inner and outer development as a traffic cop. Sergeant Holk doesn't exist—nor does the thief played by Betty Amann in her debut role. While Betty Amann's outward style à la Lya de Putti is pleasing, she is only convincing when playing primitive, coquettish characters. Once the great inner transformation occurs and the soul emerges, it's all over. It's unfair to judge a young artist whose first role was predetermined.

Another wistful and grateful encounter with Albert Steinrück (Sergeant Holk's father), one of the few physiognomies that are always convincing. Else Heller, at his side, is outwardly a good mother figure, but her emotional exuberance betrays her as anything but a sergeant's wife. Schlettow, the "friend" and safecracker, gives a compelling performance in a minor episode, which currently seems unnatural and out of place in the plot. Albers, Vallentin, Vespermann, Hörbiger, and Valetti all deliver lively performances. Lieske plays a lively role.

Günther Rittau's photography and Erich Kettelhut's sets are outstanding. They were invaluable to Joe May. Together, they give the film its outward brilliance and richness that constitute its value—including its audience appeal. The audience applauded at the end.



### SIEGFRIED KRACAUER

### **Asphalt**

First published in Frankfurter Zeitung, No. 235, March 28, 1929

The film of this title is a prime example of artificially inflated pulp fiction. A pimp loves a thief: what a theme for a pulp novel. But what happens? Instead of presenting the material cheaply, with the left hand, in a trashy and glossy pink manner, as befits the subject matter, it is transported from the literary underworld to the bel étage. A city street over 400 meters long has been created, with more than 23,000 light bulbs burning. And so the inner world is also transformed into a permanent fairy tale. What should remain hidden or only be revealed as a result is psychologically developed at length, as if it were a comfortable fable and not an event that lends itself only to the quick grasp of pulp fiction. Every movement of the policeman's sweetheart is depicted in

such detail in close-up that you can see her individual eyelashes; a detailed psychological X-ray of the policeman himself is drawn up; and to fill in any gaps, a vast amount of petty bourgeois morality is crammed in. But such exaggeration does not suit the unchosen plot. Precisely because it is too elevated and elaborate, its insignificance shines through everywhere, and the arrangement, which is inappropriate for its aspirations, ultimately reveals itself to be decorative artistry. This failure to live up to the content is all the more sad because Joe May, the director, delivers a technically superb performance. He has mastered the finer points of his craft and can do whatever he wants. Not many prose writers would be able to describe the noble couple's journey in the taxi as vividly as he does. The close-ups are also used and maintained with stylistic confidence, and the wandering camera skillfully reveals the interplay between people and spaces. It is a pity that, as so often in Germany, technical understanding is indulged at the expense of knowledge of spiritual meanings. Asphalt here too. – Albert Steinrück is one of the main characters. The recently deceased walks around as if he were still alive, and it is almost impossible to comprehend that one can appear this way and be dead at the same time. Gustav Fröhlich plays the Schupomann: good physiognomy and range of gestures, but psychologically too sophisticated towards the end. His partner Betty Amann is gifted at facial expressions and, thanks also to the director, often shines seductively. (...)

