

HISTORICAL ESSAYS AND REVIEWS



Problems in Sound Film Design: Moving Away from Naturalism

First published as "Probleme der Tonfilmgestaltung: Los vom Naturalismus," in *Film-Kurier* 13, no. 3 (January 5, 1931). Translated by Alex H. Bush. [Reprinted from *The Promise of Cinema: German Film Theory, 1907-1933*].

The following article from Film-Kurier on January 5, 1931 appeared a few days before Lang started shooting his first sound film, M, and four months before its premiere. The article summarizes an interview with Lang without quoting him directly. Although Fritz Lang was the last prominent German director to make the transition to sound, his contributions to sound film aesthetics were enduring. M (1931) not only extended expressionist principles into the era of sound cinema but also directly thematized acoustics within the filmic narrative itself, for example in the defining whistle of a serial killer. Lang's statements challenge the association of sound technology with increasing realism. In this regard, he resists long-standing efforts to resynchronize the voice and body, lending a long afterlife to the uncanny splitting introduced by media technologies in the late nineteenth century.

According to Fritz Lang, there exist various small opportunities for the beginnings of a sound film dramaturgy that brings with it a certain “moralism” in the nonidentity of sound and image.

The fact that the ear cannot even recognize sounds unless they have been made familiar by habituation already imbues sonic backgrounds with a certain unrealism. For example, once when Lang was on a walk, he believed he heard the gurgling of an intermittent garden sprinkler, and when he got closer, it turned out to be the crackle of burning wood.

Moreover, the imperfect technological options themselves contribute another kind of tonal unreality: only very rarely do natural sounds produce an identical copy of the original event in the recording apparatus. They are replaced with sounds created artificially given the technological possibilities, which do not resemble the intended sound in their origin but nonetheless produce that sound in the end.

Together, perhaps these two elements—the ear’s gift for fantasy and the contortions of technology—can produce a “sound language” in isolated cases.

Lang does not believe that a generalized sound symbolism is attainable. The spoken word will remain as an unavoidable factor of realism, and even of the theatrical stage. For this reason, it will frequently be difficult to translate image montages into sonic form, for sound spreads as a spherical wave identical on all sides; no sound “shot” can change the imprint of a sonic expression—whereas the visual can be approached from many different angles and creates a different impression each time.

Only in specific instances will a sonic climax that is identical to the image progression be possible with sound montage; for example, when depicting a strike. As its outbreak approaches, the soundtrack will pass from the individual people still deliberating over the strike to sounds from human masses and machine noises, constantly getting louder—this sound will also be laid over the images of the deliberations—and finally to ever louder, no longer identifiable tonal forms, which will obscure all speech, all the details of the proceedings, and lead, at the moment of the strike’s outbreak, to an explosive climax, then suddenly break off in order to demonstrate that the workers are at rest. This would be an example of the small, occasional opportunities that exist for sonic symbolism.

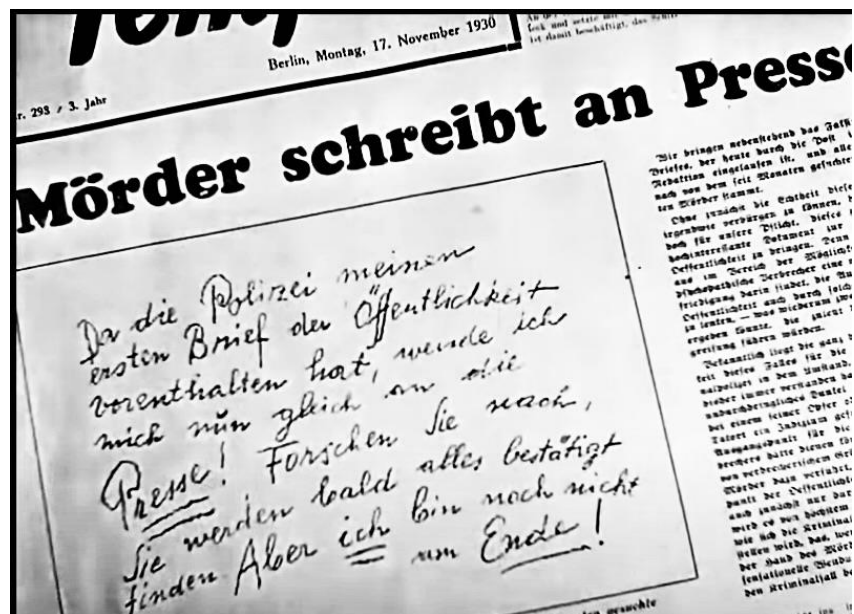
A rejection of absolute identity between image and sound, which could perhaps be called the “unreality” of sound film, has the same goal of all art: to create the greatest possible room for the spectator’s imagination, which in any case is shut off when the sound is reduced to “only” speech.

Here, perhaps, lies the path to a new dramaturgy, which would bring in external noises only if they are related to the action. For example, we hear the bang of a door only when it is important to the story; now he is outside, we learn, without having to see an image. Steps become audible only when, for example, another person is waiting for someone and the moment of arrival is absolutely indispensable for the progression of the plot. Or an entire scene could be concentrated on one face whose movements evoke reactions to events that are only audible. For the moment, these are small ways to extract a certain unreality from the unimaginative sameness of image and sound, an unreality that will once again force the spectator to do imaginative work rather than laying out everything for him in advance.

Whether a more general sound symbolism, a distinctive design system for sound, can come from this dramaturgical divergence between sound and image cannot be predicted at the present moment.



Screenshot from M



This screenshot from *M* shows a facsimile of the letter written by the fictional child murderer and published by *Tempo*, a Weimar tabloid that also existed outside of the film. The specific date, "Monday, November 17, 1930," contributes to the illusion that *M* is a documentary set in the present.

FRITZ LANG

My Film "M" — a Factual Report

First published as "Mein Film M — ein Tatsachenbericht" in *Die Filmwoche* No. 21 (May 20, 1931).

The modern wonders of everyday life have caught up with and overtaken those of the 1001 Nights. Or do you think that an ordinary Central European who has to get from Berlin to Paris as quickly as possible would get on a magic horse when my racing car is at his disposal, or on a flying carpet when he can get there by plane? To surpass the dreams of Aladdin's garden, one need not even think of Baby Green's underground swimming paradise with its wonders of coral, glass, gold and lapis lazuli. The Haus Vaterland on Potsdamer Platz or any reasonably modern amusement park will do. Just look around! Every day, every newspaper carries reports of human tragedies and comedies, of the strange and the commonplace, and these reports are so full of fantasy, or blind chance, or romance, or whatever you want to call it, that no dramaturge of any

importance would dare to propose such material without having to endure a resounding mocking laugh at the improbability, or coincidence, or kitschiness of the conflicts. That's life. - It seemed right to me to adapt to today's pace of life, to the objectivity of the times we are living through, and to base a film on purely factual reports.

If you take the trouble to read the newspaper reports of a major murder case in recent years, such as the horrific double murder of the Fehse siblings in Breslau, or the Husmann case, or the case of little Hilde Zapernick, three criminal cases that remain unsolved to this day, in most cases you will find a strange coincidence of events, an almost regular repetition of the accompanying circumstances, such as the terrible fear psychosis of the population, the self-accusations of the mentally inferior, denunciations in which the hatred and all the jealousies that have built up over years of living side by side seem to be released. Attempts to mislead the Judicial Police, sometimes out of malice, sometimes out of overzealousness.

All these things, clearly explained in the film and excluded from the secondary events, seemed to me to give the film, the film of factual reports, a task that allows it to go beyond the task of artistically reproducing events: to give a warning and an explanation of real events, and thus ultimately to have a preventive effect. It would be beyond the scope of this brief statement on the subject of "Factual Reports: A Film" to go into more detail on the possibilities of such a film: to make the dangers of an ever-increasing crime rate clear to the general public, and especially to children and young people, at the very beginning, in the everyday and banal nature of its first appearance, to educate and, above all, to have a preventive effect. Of course, the artistic representation of such a murder case requires not only the conciseness of the events, but also the selection of typical things and the typification of the murderer. This is why the film sometimes seems like a wandering spotlight, showing most clearly what it wants to point out: on the one hand, the grotesqueness of psychosis, and on the other, the terrible simplicity with which an unknown killer, with the help of a few sweets, an apple, a toy, can become a deadly trap for any child on the street, any child not protected by his family or the authorities.

The assertion made at the beginning of these lines about the fantastic nature of real events seems to me to be particularly characteristic of a motif that was used in this case and that I found in a large number of Berlin newspapers: the idea that the criminal world, the Berlin underworld, was on its own looking for the unknown murderer in order to undermine the activities of the police.

The idea that the criminal world, that Berlin's underworld, is looking for the unknown murderer on its own, in order to undermine the activities of the police, comes from a factual report in a newspaper and seemed to me to be such a strong motif, both

materially and cinematically, that I was constantly in fear that someone else might anticipate my exploitation of this idea.

Can this film of facts contribute to highlighting the unknown lurking danger, the chronic danger that threatens our existence as a latent source of fire, especially for the most helpless among us, the children, due to the constant presence of people with a pathological or criminal disposition? If the film contributes to the prevention of this danger, then it will have fulfilled its best task and drawn the logical conclusion from the quintessential facts it has gathered.



Screenshot from M – For crowd scenes, Lang hired non-actors from the street



The police commissioner is responding to the letter printed in *Tempo* that is on the desk in front of him. Lang's essay on *M* (below) also appeared in that widely read tabloid.

Fritz Lang

The Face of the Murderer

First published as "Das Gesicht des Mörders," in *Tempo* (May 11, 1931).

"Could you have imagined that? Could you have imagined the Meyers—Schütte, Lehmann, Müller, Schmidt, and so on? He looks like he can't count to three! I haven't liked his behavior for a long time. There's always been something treacherous about him. But you never know..."

No, because we don't! Everything said afterwards is nonsense. The idea that the eye is a mirror of the soul has long since become obsolete. The notion that the eye is a mirror of the soul is outdated. The human face has evolved to conceal intentions, desires, and thoughts. Thousands of years of evolution have taught us to hide our intentions so as not to reveal them. True intentions are hidden from opponents in the general struggle for existence. This makes the eye a poor indicator of a person's nature. Yet, the public still believes it is. There is such a thing as a distinctly criminal physiognomy. It is characterized by a low, receding forehead; broad cheekbones; a depressed nose; and deep-set eyes. These features are considered "criminal." They are said to identify

criminals. However, this cliché is too simplistic, and criminalists who rely on it would be mistaken. The ideal detective would use such physiognomic clues during investigations. This is every lawbreaker's desire. Yet, the superstition of "criminal physiognomy" can be eradicated.

The famous poisoners of Louis XIV's time, the Brinvilliers and the Montespan, for example, looked like angels. If the face and eyes are the mirror of the soul, how could a Großmann or a Haarmann live next door to other tenants for years without arousing suspicion? Großmann lived in a four-story tenement building in eastern Berlin. None of the eighteen families in the building suspected his gruesome activities. The same was true for Haarmann in Hanover. Denke kept his victims in his house in the middle of a Silesian village for years. He pickled them in barrels without arousing suspicion. No one suspected that these seemingly harmless people were true beasts. The victims of the atrocious Düsseldorf mass murderer could not recognize his depravity from his facial features alone. Yet, the superstition about murderers' physiognomies cannot be eradicated.

It is an age-old dramaturgical or directorial trick to exploit this idea. The inextinguishable fairy tale of the typical criminal physiognomy is imprinted on the audience's psyche and influences casting decisions. The trick is to give someone with a bulldog's face the soul of a compassionate person who couldn't hurt a fly. The real villain, whose soul is capable of hatching horrible plans, is given the appearance of a harmless, cheerful bourgeois. In these times of ever-increasing crime, it's important to point out repeatedly that this isn't the work of a talented author or director but rather a trick of life. The "famous" mass murderers are our flesh and blood. The anomaly of their brains, which fills us with profound horror, is not imprinted on their faces. In the film *M*, one woman says to another, "But he doesn't look like a murderer." She is answered: "That's the problem!" Another woman says, "Anyone next to you could be a murderer!" A third woman adds, "Anyone next to you could be a murderer!"



This is a screenshot of last scene in *M*, which is reminiscent of mythological figures who control human destiny: the Moirai in Greek mythology, the Parcae in Roman mythology, and the Norns in Norse mythology.

THEA VON HARBOU

Why a Movie like this?

First published as "Warum gerade ein solcher Film?!" in *Berliner Volks-Zeitung* No. 220 (May 12, 1931).

The first person I spoke to about the basic idea of our new film looked at me with a bewilderment that bordered on disbelief and said -- Finally: "Well, you've chosen a funny topic!" In the weeks that followed, anyone who entered our study unprepared might have thought they had stumbled into a poorly concealed murder chamber. The abundance of all pages of material far exceeded our expectations and could no longer be stored in any drawer. On all the tables and armchairs were piles of files, newspaper cuttings, murder posters and photographs, which were about perpetrators and victims. Gradually becoming very familiar with our subject matter, we forgot to shudder at the headlines and pictures, most of which were not calculated for the faint of heart, and only

became aware again through the petrified faces of our visitors that we were allowed to have a museum around us, - we had indeed piled up an archive of horror ("Kartothek des Grauens") so to speak.

At that time, during this period of preparation, hardly anyone was able to understand that I, as a woman, was able to deal with this appalling subject matter in such depth that my knowledge and aptitude in the field of certain murder cases would have passed any experienced detective inspector. But there was no other way for me to the goal that my husband and I had constantly had in mind - to be quite honest, actually since the day little Hilde Zäpernick died in such a horrible way.

The eeriness of the unknown murderer, who had only become tangible through his deed and had faded back into obscurity, haunted me for weeks; and even stronger than this was the helplessness with which the general public, but especially a child, confronted this unknown.

There is a clever, somewhat bitter proverb that says: "When the child has fallen into the well, cover it up". But this "well" cannot be covered up even after a catastrophe has occurred, nobody knows where to find it. We walk and drive day after day along streets, across squares, past yards where children play, go to school, come home, run this or that errand for their mother, for their neighbor, and no one is able to vouch for the fact that the same fate, to which little Hilde Zäpernick fell victim is not lurking on the next street corner for one of these children.

What is being done to protect children on the streets? Not nearly enough! Fathers and mothers take care of them and monitor their steps – that is, as they have time. But what can the hundreds of thousands of working men and working women do to monitor their children? How can a man who works from morning to evening in the factory care for the safety of his children? How should the woman who has to go to work in plants and offices be responsible for the safety of her children's lives?

Well, the children are looked after by the welfare authorities, supervised by the schools, - but haven't the facts taught us with cruel sobriety that everything that happens is not enough to protect children from the hand of a murderer? And are the children who survived the horrific shock of brutalization by sexual pathologists less lamentable, less of a tragedy than those whose lives were extinguished at the hands of a murderer?

The authorities do a lot to children from the dangers of urban traffic. Every streetcar warns the child against the recklessness of running after a ball on the embankment. Each of us involuntarily stretches out our hand when a child sets foot on the road as

soon as a car gives the signal fifty meters away. But how are we supposed to protect them from the unknown, from what, like any temptation, puts on the friendliest mask to drag them to their doom?

Only by making each and every one of us a little more responsible for the common good - by making our conscience more receptive to the needs of people whose children are as good as defenseless, unless they are protected by chance. The exhortation: More protection for children! sounds so self-evident that it seems almost banal, and yet far too few have heard it and understood that the realization of this demand is just as deeply rooted in the social problems of our time as the fight against unemployment and the housing shortage.

That's why such a movie! This movie is not a fiction, it is a report. It shows a child tragedy - a mother tragedy – that arises from tiny harmless things and can arise anew every day. None of us has the right to play the indifferent and say: "What's it to me?" It's everyone's business! Everyone is responsible! You are too!



Elsie's mother is a washer woman — Screenshot from M



GILLES DELEUZE

Cinema 1 – The Movement-Image

Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986; origin. 1983), p. 153

In *M*,

is the real duel between M and the police or society, or rather between M and the underworld which does not want him? Does not the real duel remain elsewhere? Finally, it might be external to the film, although internal to the cinema. In the scene of the underworld tribunal, the bandits and the beggars vindicate the rights of the crime habitus or mode of behavior, crime as rational organization, and criticize M for acting through passion. To which M replies that this is what makes him innocent: he cannot do otherwise; he only acts through impulse or affect, and at precisely this moment, and only at this moment the actor acts in an Expressionist way. Finally, is not the true duel in *M* between Lang himself and Expressionism? It is his farewell to Expressionism, it is his entry into realism as *The Testament of Dr Mabuse* will confirm (in which Mabuse disappears, giving way to the frigid realist organization).

CONTEMPORARY REVIEWS



Fritz Lang's First Sound Film

In: *Film-Kurier* No. 110 (May 12, 1931)

The eagerly awaited Fritz Lang movie "M" opened yesterday. Hardenbergstraße seemed to be filled with this cinematic event last night. Cars were backed up. Crowds of people blocked the sidewalk in front of the Ufa-Palast am Zoo.

The police on the street had to deal with a crowd similar to the one their colleagues in the movie would later face on the screen.

Reality mirrored Lang's work. The same picture at both screenings: crowds, both screenings sold out. And before and after the screenings, a crowd eager to discuss the movie.

Everyone interested in the film was there, all the prominent figures from Berlin's intellectual and artistic circles, from the world of finance, representatives of the authorities and ministries. The entire Berlin film world attended the successful premiere.

In addition to the premiere guests, Lang's large community, which he had built up through his previous films, was also present. The theme, accessible to all, had attracted visitors from all walks of life. It was a brilliant setting for the glamorous premiere of a major German film.



HANS FELD

Fritz Lang's Sound Film "M"

First published as "Fritz Langs Tonfilm M," in *Film-Kurier*, Nr. 110 (May 12, 1931)

The motion picture ["Lichtspiel"] has finally become a weapon in the culture wars.

A piece of the complex questions of the time was formed into a piece of the time.

This is the great German film of Fritz Lang.

Like his antipode, the creator of mountain and nature films, Arnold Fanck, Fritz Lang stands with both feet firmly on German soil.

Both venture out of the cultural circle of their country into the wider world; neither is bound by borders, precisely because they do not deny their attitudes or cover them up with concessions. (...)

Is this an appeal against the death penalty?

The murderer, when caught, finally cries out the curse of his heritage, of being forced to commit his crimes. The women, on the other hand, and not only those on the screen, demand that he be rendered harmless by destruction.

For or against? It doesn't matter; everyone has to decide for themselves. Shakespeare also gives Shylock the human cry, "If you prick us," without making the fictional monster any more sympathetic... or realistic.

(This leaves aside the question of whether it is better to eliminate causes than to tinker with consequences.)

With a logic devoid of sentimentality, cinema demands a statement on a fundamental question of the present; that is crucial.

This is a Fritz Lang production.

The miracle of the script has been polished to perfection. Not a single passage is superfluous; the dramatic effects are harmoniously distributed.

The harmony of sound and language has created a sense of brevity. Sequences such as those depicting the psychosis of a murderer or the precise work of the identification service are, in the context of the whole, masterly pieces of reportage. (...)

Image and sound are separated as a matter of course. Wherever conformity would be duplicated - and thus halve the effect - equality is replaced by illustration: teichoscopy, which gives the word a plastic background. (And the first generous attempt to pave the way for asynchrony.)

Eighty actors are involved, along with extras of the most authentic kind. All are directed by Lang and used to great effect. The Killer: Peter Lorre, captured on camera with the nuances of an extraordinary mime artist. An individual who is not overwhelmed by the monumentality of his surroundings. Within the work as a whole, he is penetrating and movingly human. The beginning, no less difficult than it is appealing, is surprisingly successful.

Otto Wernicke (...) proves to be the only worthy opponent. His naturalistic power is as effective in the movie as on the stage. Gustaf Gründgens, on the other hand, offers exaltation instead of power; he is more of a con man than a cabinet maker. (...)

A German movie that is far ahead of world standards; a new record has been set. In addition to its technical excellence, it is enriched by its poetic quality.

The individual case of a murderous outsider is expanded into an outline of the environment. (This is an advance analogous to that made on the stage by Brecht and Piscator).

A Fritz Lang film, a document of a cinematic era in which it was worth living.





HANS WOLLENBERG

A New Film by Fritz Lang

Published as "Ein neuer Film von Fritz Lang," in *Lichtbild-Bühne* No. 113 (May 12, 1931)

The cry of "Poets speak up!" was met with an impressive response when it was loudly and clearly heard.

Thea von Harbou's poetry was featured in Fritz Lang's production. The production premiered last night at the Ufa-Palast am Zoo. It had been a long time since such a significant film had been shown. Only such a film elevates the art of cinema and provides a stage for performance arts.

The profound, spellbinding effect experienced yesterday at the Ufa Palace could only come from a work born of poetic intuition and artistic mastery of form. Without hesitation, Thea von Harbou's piece can be considered one of the most creative works of the year. Stage designs of the year: Zuckmayer's *Hauptmann von Köpenick*, with which it shares its inspiration from real events and use of reportage to convey a creative, poetic message.

Film has what stage drama does not to fulfill its purpose: the intellectual expansion of its effects and the heightened prerequisites of a means of expression destined to reach and speak to millions. Thea von Harbou achieved this. We thank her for it.

The theme: Even if this film about a child murderer had not burst onto the scene amid the slowly subsiding vibrations of the Kürten trial, it would still be powerful. This power stems from timeless human sources that elevate the film above "factual reporting" and elevate it to the realm of poetry. Only in this way—elevated to poetry—can the film adaptation of this theme be achieved: by portraying the serial killer as artistic material.

The film must depict his subjective situation and the objective impact of his actions. The latter must be presented with sweeping exposition for dramatic balance, but with an incredible capacity for vivid imagery. The mother's discovery of the gruesome scene and the wave-like spread of effects from the regulars' table to the street and throughout the city—the police, in all their ramifications, right up to the cabinet—are all so convincingly recreated that it sends our nerves into a real-life frenzy.

Finally, it is a brilliant, sociologically heightened vision of the reflex reaction to professional criminality. The organized underworld feels threatened by the actions of the mass murderer. They even use the organizational and technical means of modern crime to attack the monster. They draw a sharp line between human and beast.

However, at the center of this grandiose painting, Thea von Harbou places the child murderer. He is such a gruesome figure that only a poet would dare give him form. This is where the film's great success lies. It sets the film apart from other crime films, such as *Mabuse*. Its artistic weight distinguishes it from films like *Mabuse* and *Spies*. The psychological (or psychopathic), the sociological phenomenon of murder for pleasure, takes on a vivid, blood-red reality.

The abyss opens up before us, revealing its gruesome depths. A decisive, threatening, and compelling question suddenly arises: Is it possible to atone for an unspeakable crime? Through death, or by rendering a dangerous madman harmless? Or without?

Without expressing her own opinion, she weighs the pros and cons. The poetess points out the problems in a timelessly neutral manner, taking no position herself. Only one warning drowns out the diversity of arguments on the screen: "Guard your children!"

Fritz Lang staged this poem perfectly. Through images and sound, he creates a unified whole. It is perfect theater—a sound film full of its own logic. Overcoming rigid realism, it exists in a visual context. Powerful, authentic illusions emerge from the interplay of visual and linguistic elements. It is a masterpiece, setting a new standard for international sound film art.

Alongside superior modeling and virtuoso mastery, one senses a personal warmth and inner humanity that has been absent from his work for a long time.

The collaboration between the director, his team, especially cameraman Fritz Arno Wagner, poet Hasler, and the set designers is perfect. Every detail is as true to life as

the magnificent, turbulent crowd scenes. A wealth of people, a world passes by, and they are all alive!

Gründgens, Gnass, Odemar, Kemp, Lingen, the leaders of the "Zünfftigen," and Otto Wernicke's detective stand out among the historical figures. Above all: Peter Lorre, who achieved the nearly impossible by portraying the traits of the murderer who haunts your dreams.

Unbelievable!



Peter Lorre and Fritz Lang at a rehearsal for the café scene in *M*



HEINZ POL

Fritz Lang's Film about the Child Murderer

First published as "Fritz Lang's Film über den Kindermörder," in *Vossische Zeitung* No. 113 (May 13, 1931)

First, the good news: In his first sound film, Fritz Lang displays astonishing technical skill. Though broad, the plot flows clearly.

Especially at the beginning, which is excellent, there is a wealth of sharply observed details. These details are precisely photographed. The characters are well-developed. The ensemble cast makes a strong impression with its many excellent performances, though there are no stars. Peter Lorre's portrayal of the murderous gambler is memorable, but only at the end. However, Lorre's performance is unspeakably bad and exaggerated. It is so bad that it leaves a lasting impression.

Is this film worth watching? Not yet. However, precisely because the plot is so skillfully executed and the details are so excellent, Fritz Lang sets the thriller to such a high standard that it leaves the viewer with an artistic impression. This is precisely why the content of this film is so dangerous due to its apparent lack of bias. We are undoubtedly dealing with a top performance in the crime film genre, which has dominated the repertoire of German cinema.

Fritz Lang, a screenwriter by trade, had a second ambition: to deliver not only the best crime film but also the most relevant crime film. You see, evil is so close. Isn't he, Kürten? Is he not relevant enough? He is. There's nothing wrong with Fritz Lang's film.

In fact, the film would have been better if Lang had stuck to the first quarter. Up to that point, the film is about an unknown child murderer who is causing unrest throughout Berlin. The police turn to the public for help. Then, we see a brilliant, technically innovative, and effective investigative report on the Berlin criminal police solving major crimes. It is a serious matter: The man who has already brutally murdered eight children is no ordinary thief or burglar.

We thought so too. But suddenly, the film takes a turn. One topical issue is not enough. Fritz Lang and his nine co-writers decided this. "We need a second one. Otherwise, it won't be the best crime film of all time." Once again, evil is very close at hand: Berlin's underworld and its ring clubs. One could produce an informative report on the nature of these clubs. No one would take offense to such a report because the truth is neither "brutalized" nor "depraved." In this Fritz Lang film, however, nothing of reality is shown. Instead, each of these criminals are portrayed as heroes or admirable individuals. They want to defend themselves against a child murderer because he is ruining their business. It's strange logic, but did Lang invent it for that reason? So they can get away with burglary?

They carry out the burglary using the latest tricks in a large office building. Is the office building the child murderer's hiding place? The raid alone takes half an hour.

But even this part of the film is not the climax. Lang saved that for the end. For that, he needed a third sensational event. He didn't have to look far. What is currently being discussed in Germany? The problem of the death penalty. Lang addresses this serious issue, which is unfortunately exploited by party politics. He transforms it into a technically grandiose yet internally untruthful and dangerous final apotheosis: the underworld.

Lang snatches the child murderer away from the police and holds court over him. Should he be killed? The "crooks" form a veritable court of justice and assign a defense attorney to the murderer. This creates an almost complete illusion, even for the audience. An unparalleled dialogue ensues, full of contortions and unusual phrasing.

Naturally, the murderer breaks down, claiming that he is being persecuted for psychological reasons. He claims that an overpowering force is at work within him. This is a point of contention for opponents of the death penalty. But there is also a point of

contention for opponents of opponents of the death penalty—and a major point of contention is the criminals themselves, who are considered the best experts in this field.

The vote was overwhelmingly in favor of immediately executing the child murderer. However, just as they were about to carry out the sentence, the police intervened. The film has been approved by the Berlin film censorship board without any cuts. We are opposed to film censorship. Even if we weren't opposed to it before, we are now.

Truly enlightening works that responsibly address a problem, such as *Kinder Vor Gericht*, are banned. *M* deals with the most controversial sensitive topics in criminalistics and sexual pathology. It is a technically and artistically accomplished thriller in which criminals are romanticized as heroes. In doing so, they can condemn even greater criminals to death. It is a deeply antisocial film that confuses concepts. It is permitted to be shown.



SIEGFRIED KRACAUER

Underworld

First published as "Unterwelt," Frankfurter Zeitung (May 18, 1931).

The underworld is not only thriving in Chicago, it has also become fashionable in Berlin. Here, the ring associations have taken over tourism, so to speak, on their own initiative. The "Immertreu" association organizes parties, sending out lithographed invitation cards, and charges a high price for the pleasure of being a guest. Why break in when you can make money more easily? I assume that the snobs from western Berlin experience a similar thrill on such occasions as they did at the Piscator premieres in the past. There they were in the midst of a sham revolution, here they are in the "milieu," which is also real. Today, citizens are attracted to all powers that lie beyond the bourgeois boundaries. I just don't know whether the increasing popularity of the Ring association festivals is a sign of the bourgeoisification of criminal organizations or of the disappearance of the concept of property.

The film industry has recently been exploiting the general public's interest in the goings-on in the underworld. Above all, the Fritz Lang's Nero film *M*, which is now premiering, is dedicated to them. It is the artistic masterpiece of an extraordinarily talented director. From *Die Nibelungen* to *Metropolis* to a big-city police film with all kinds of twists and sensations—a long journey, the direction of which is entirely justified. After all, the shirt is closer to us than the skirt, and a mass murderer affects us more in this day and age than, say, Hagen. However, Lang only exposes the myth in order to mythologize current events.

“A city is searching for a murderer. Two very different groups of people, the criminal investigation department and the underworld organization, search for his trail and find him...” The content summarized in these brief sentences of the program was produced with the participation of Thea von Harbou by a collective that carefully considered and took advantage of all possibilities to make an impact. Today, people love factual reports, so the film is based entirely on facts—police reconnaissance, incitement of the public, false confessions, raids, etc.—which are processed in a dazzling reportage. Certain paragraphs and tendencies are passionately discussed in public: the film follows them and wisely does not answer them. What is the point of professional honor for criminals? Should a child murderer who, like Kürten, is up to no good, be executed or just imprisoned? The collective puts these and other problems on display, so to speak. And since people don't like to be dismissed without a lesson, the film exhorts the audience to protect children who are at risk on the streets and to ensure that crimes are prevented in the first place.

With enormous effort, yet at the same time as rationally as only the most experienced expert could, Lang has staged this play and reportage plot. The virtuosity of his arrangements is admirable under all circumstances. How he heightens the mother's anxious wait for her little daughter; how he brings to life the horror that surrounds the murderer—I am thinking of the scene in which he buys his little victim a balloon, of his whistling, of his brief rest behind the arbor of a suburban café—how the interplay between the police, the press, the street crowd, the criminal world, and the beggars' organization is handled: it is cinematically skillful and put together with a strong hand. The need to give everyone everything has, of course, led to breadth. Some passages, instructive in themselves, become tiresome, however skillfully they are incorporated, and in the quest for excessive clarity, various sections also come across as far too crude and stylistically incongruous. They could be deleted. Lang brings nothing new to sound film, except that he largely maintains visual freedom, makes well-calculated transitions, and sometimes separates the characters from their words. But overall, the dialogues prevail.

The aforementioned tendency toward mythologizing achieves lavish effects, which unfortunately are not what the subject matter requires. It seems as if Lang cannot let go of the Nibelungs; in any case, the grand opera with its apotheoses pursues him even into the criminal material. He should have carried his accusation through to its conclusion in a way that corresponds to our social reality. Instead, he deviates from it and heroizes criminality. For the sake of pompous mass appearances, the search for the child murderer requires ransacking a huge office building under cover of night and then sitting in judgment over the culprit. It looks so grand, but it is completely unrealistic and negates the usefulness of the preceding reportage. Again and again, this facade culture, this Wilhelmine splendor. If Lang could bring himself to suppress his desire to show off, he and we would fare better.

Peter Lorre, who is set in a precisely defined acting milieu, is a terrifying murderer. Formless gentleness turns into terrible obsession, slack and bestial features alternate with each other. It is a pity that excessive use is made of rolling eyes and that the facial expressions in the final act are too strongly emphasized.



GABRIELE TERGIT

Fritz Lang's M: Filmed Sadism

First published as "Der Fritz Lang-Film: Der Film des Sadismus," Die Weltbühne 27, no. 23 (June 9, 1931), 834-835.

The murder film M exemplifies the swiftest opportunism. The beast was just in court, and already on the screen!

In this film, there is everything the censor usually cuts, even in the most harmless varieties: the murderer reaches into his pocket and sharpens the knife—a scene cannot be more sadistic.

The state is mocked; the mobsters are heroized [. . .] A hymn of praise to the asocial; a hymn of praise to the violent. It romanticizes criminality of the worst kind! Vigilante justice is presented as true justice. The police are dismissed with a wave, and the detective is photographed from below like the Soviet people photographed Kerensky or old tsarist generals.

The murderer tries to flee the secret mobster court judging him. He is stopped by four strapping fellows. It is a typical lynching scene. At the premiere, a lady in the back screamed: "The guy ought to be quartered!"

This film stimulates the rawest instincts, the cruelty lurking everywhere. But in other aspects: Never was a bloody Wild West film in the outlying cinemas more tasteless.

Because things become truly evil only when raw and uncivilized sentiments mix with the most refined and highly civilized abilities!

Perhaps the name/ Kürten no longer inspires enough horror; Kürten, who did not shy away from cannibalism. But imagine someone presenting the deeds of the butcher Denke within a clownish frame!

There is also a humor of horror, a humor that is typically Northern German, the humor of Holbein and Dürer, Cranach and Bruegel, but also the humor of Munch and Kubin, a humor that is both mad and cosmic at once. One could envision a murder film by Stroheim drawn according to the fantasies of E. T. A. Hoffmann, a fleeting nightmare: "Humanity is at its best when it shivers." But this is a case of the flattest burlesque humor! [. . .]

Alongside the silliness, there is sentimentality. In Film Reporter, Buster Keaton, in his greatest scene, politely lifts the knife that the cruel Chinese dropped as he attempted to take down Keaton. It is touching because it is grotesque and serves as no more than a symbol. Everyone senses that all tender, good, and unknowing creatures similarly hand the knife to their executioners. But here naturalism is constructed from the grotesque, and when the little child bends to give his murderer the knife, it is merely a thick coating of sentimentality.

The film as a whole is neither touching nor gruesome. Rather, it is tastelessly calculated to please instincts favoring trashy criminal fiction and sadistic tales, for which an execution was a popular festival fifty years ago.

When Peter Lorre portrays the murderer's drivenness, the bestial fear, and the horrific power of a degenerate species in a nearly poetic, superbly acted outburst, and one of the exalted mobsters calls out, "Guy must wanna claim Paragraph 51, we know what dat is," enthusiastic applause erupts from the premiere audience. Every killer becomes an expert on the ethics of murder. Every member of the Berlin underground embodies the stuff of myth! Is it all merely a farce, what mankind dreams of in the way of noble humanity and what was later established scientifically through precise research into the human psyche? Are the insane also guilty, as was thought two hundred years ago? Paragraph 51 accounts only for mental insanity; it has not yet recognized the spiritual variety. It all depends on this "yet."

Human beings are so constituted that they are habitually quick to rest, quick to seek a victim. Scratch a little, and you find a Tartar. There were many Tartars in the UFA-Palast at the premiere. There would not be so much to say about this film if Lang were not regarded as the leading representative of German film and if this were not the standard by which German creativity is judged.

This film is certain to create the effect of skilled tastelessness everywhere. The most shocking thing for us is that, three weeks after the Kürten trial, Lang and Thea von Harbou have made themselves part of the exploitation of horror for the sake of the box office. They have brought Satan himself into the business calculation, and lacking all respect and seriousness, minted little pennies of success out of the needs of mothers robbed of their children and out of the terror of an entire city.

Will anyone dare to show this film in Düsseldorf as well? Will Fritz Lang in his smoking jacket and Thea von Harbou in her white dress take a bow there too?

In the same issue of The Weltbühne (June 9, 1931), Rudolf Arnheim refutes Tergit's criticism in "Eine Minute Pause (A One-Minute Intermission)" by pointing out contradictions in her arguments:

[. . .] A poet celebrating spring and love will be admonished to address the drama of the times. However, if someone films the story of the Düsseldorf killer—a subject of interest and concern to many—he will be accused of exploiting the public mood and appealing to the infamous "base instincts." If the censor makes cuts in *The Threepenny Opera* because it glorifies crime and mocks the police, there is an uproar. If the censor does not ban M, people adopt the same arguments as if they had never been contested. Because they dislike Fritz Lang, people tend to forget that writers from Shakespeare to Wedekind have extensively praised anti-social elements and romanticized criminals. [. . .] They describe the "almost poetic outburst or, at least dramatically speaking, powerful outburst" which the murderer uses to defend himself, only to ignore it because the other side is not allowed to speak, which, on other occasions, would be considered undemocratic. They measure the film on the strength of the audience's reactions, although they never do that when tearing apart a kitschy operetta. They advance highly contestable arguments, even when valid ones exist, because they have no original opinion and merely oppose their enemy. [...]

MORDAUNT HALL

The Duesseldorf Murders

In: *The New York Times* (April 3, 1933)

Based on the fiendish killings which spread terror among the inhabitants of Düsseldorf in 1929, there is at the Mayfair a German-language pictorial drama with captions in English bearing the succinct title "M," which, of course, stands for murder. It was produced in 1931 by Fritz Lang and, as a strong cinematic work with, remarkably fine acting, it is extraordinarily effective, but its narrative, which is concerned with a vague conception of the activities of a demented stayer and his final capture, is shocking and morbid. Yet Mr. Lang has left to the spectator's imagination the actual commission of the crimes...

For the full transcript, click [here](#)

MORDAUNT HALL

Clever Dubbing

In: *The New York Times* (April 16, 1933)

* * * Clever Dubbing.

"M"—the German film drama based on the Düsseldorf murders of 1929—is now to be heard with English voices substituted on the original scenes. This production, now at the Mayfair, is the cleverest example of a dubbed picture. And it should be stated that Peter Lorre, who figures in the principal rôle, that of the Murderer of little girls, does speak his lines in the penultimate episode.

In making this picture Fritz Lang, believing that it would have a wide circulation in English-speaking countries, took into consideration the fact that the English voices would have to be dubbed, therefore he avoided close-ups of actors talking to the audience, and some scenes were produced specially for the dubbed version. The characters in speaking sometimes hide the movements of their lips, either by lighting a cigar or by turning their heads.

It is true that some of the voices do not seem suited to the characters, but what they say is always understandable. There are occasional lines spoken in a cockney dialect, which is all very well for persons who are obviously Londoners, but when they happen to be denizens of the Düsseldorf underworld one does not expect them to speak like those hailing from Lambeth or Whitechapel.

The reason for offering the dubbed version after having tried out the German-language edition was that the superimposed subtitles were not enough to satisfy the patrons at the Mayfair. It was found that the audiences wanted to understand all that was said by the characters, and as this film is expected to be shown in other sections of the United States it was deemed wise to switch from the German version to the dubbed English one.



Advertisement for *M* in New York in May 1933. This dubbed version had moved from the Mayfair to the President theater on Broadway.