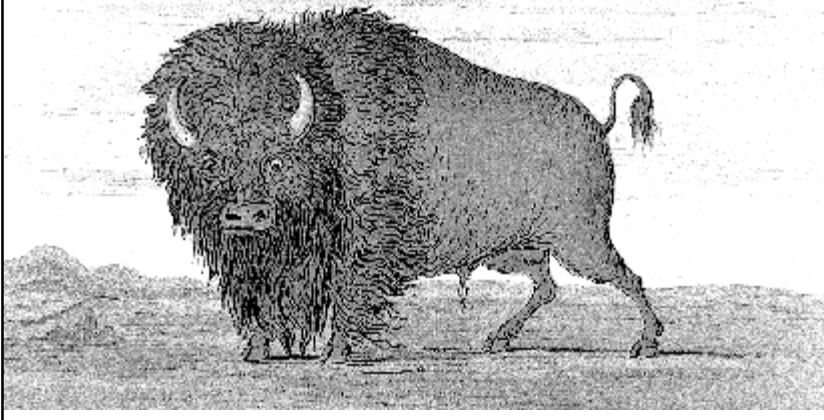


The Buffalo Film Seminars



Conversations about great films with Diane Christian & Bruce Jackson

M (1931, 117 minutes; also 105 and 108 min. German versions and a 99 min US version)

Also Known As: *M - Eine Stadt sucht einen Mörder* (1931)

M. - Mörder unter uns (1931)

Peter Lorre....Hans Beckert
Gustaf Gründgens....Schraenker
Ellen Widmann....Madaem
Beckmann

Inge Landgut....Elsie Beckmann
Otto Wernicke....Inspector Karl
Lohmann

Franz Stein....Minister
Theodor Loos....Police
Commissioner Groeber
Friedrich Gnaß....Franz the
Burglar

Fritz Odemar....Dynamiter
Paul Kemp....Pickpocket with 6
Watches

Theo Lingen....Bauernfaenger
Georg John....Blind Beggar
Karl Platen....Nightwatch

Directed by Fritz Lang
Writing credits Paul Falkenberg,
Egon Jacobson(article), Adolf
Jansen, Fritz Lang, Karl Vash,
Thea von Harbou

Produced by Seymour Nebenzal
Music by Edvard Grieg (from
"Peer Gynt")

Cinematography by Fritz Arno
Wagner

Film Editing by Paul Falkenberg
Art Direction by Emil Hasler and
Karl Vollbrecht



FRITZ LANG (5 December 1890, Vienna, Austria—2 August 1976, Beverly Hills, Los Angeles) directed 47 films, from *Halbblut* (*Half-caste*) in 1919 to *Die Tausend Augen des Dr. Mabuse* (*The Thousand Eye of Dr. Mabuse*) in 1960. Some of the others were *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* (1956), *The Big Heat* (1953), *Clash by Night* (1952), *Rancho Notorious* (1952), *Cloak and Dagger* (1946), *Scarlet Street* (1945). *The Woman in the Window* (1944), *Ministry of Fear* (1944), *Western Union* (1941), *The Return of Frank James* (1940), *Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse* (*The Crimes of Dr. Mabuse*, *Dr. Mabuse's Testament*, *The Last Will of Dr. Mabuse*, 1933), *Metropolis* (1927), *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler* (*Dr. Mabuse, King of Crime*, *Dr. Mabuse: The Gambler*, *Inferno* 1922) and *Harakiri* (*Madame Butterfly*) (1919). He appears in a number of interesting interview films, among them Jean-Luc Godard's *s20 Cinéma de notre temps: Le dinosaure et le bébé, dialogue en huit parties entre Fritz Lang et Jean-Luc Godard* (1967). And he plays a movie director making a film in Godard's classic, *Le Mépris* (*Contempt*, 1963). The BFI site has the 1962 National Film Theatre interview with Lang on line at <http://www.bfi.org.uk/features/lang/interview.html>. Michael Grost's excellent critical bio of him on line at <http://members.aol.com/MG4273/lang.htm>. There's a good deal of Lang material on line at the British Film Institute web site: <http://www.bfi.org.uk/features/lang/>.

PETER LORRE (László Löwenstein, 26 June 1904, Rózsahegy, Austria-Hungary [now Ruzomberok, Slovakia]—23 March 1964, Los Angeles, California, USA, stroke) had only one uncredited screen-role before his star-turning performance in *M*—as a dentist's patient in *Die Verschundene Frau* (1929). He is probably best known these days for his performances as Ugarte in *Casablanca* (1942) and Joel Cairo in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941). His last film was *The Patsy* (1964). In the 1930s he starred in nine films about a detective named Mr. Moto. Some of his other 87 films were *The Raven* (1963), *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea* (1961), *Silk Stockings* (1957), *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1956), *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1954), *Beat the Devil* (1953), *The Chase* (1946), *Arsenic and Old Lace* (1944), *The Mask of Dimitrios* (1944), *Crime and Punishment* (1935), and *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934). The Nazis used footage of him in *M* in what is probably their most famous antisemitic propaganda film, *Die Ewige Jude* (*The Eternal Jew*, 1940)

FRITZ ARNO WAGNER (5 December 1894, Schmiedefeld am Rennsteig, Germany—18 August 1958, Gottinga, Prussia) has cinematographer credit on 129 films, the earliest of



which is *Der Galeerensträfling* (1919). The last was *Ohne Mutter geht es nicht* (1958). He also did Lang's *Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse* (1933), F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens* (*Nosferatu the Vampire*, 1922), and G.W. Pabst's *Die 3 Groschenoper* (*Threepenny Opera*, 1931) and *Das Tagebuch einer Verlorenen* (*Diary of a Lost Girl*, 1929).

from Fritz Lang. *His Life and Work. Photographs and Documents*. Edited by Roif Aurich, Wolfgang Jacobsen & Cornelius Schnauber. Jovis. 2001. Berlin

Lang himself often expressed the idea that two aspects [artistic & personal] converging in one person still had to be viewed separately. His discretion and the legends he invented about himself make it all the more essential to proceed from his biography, to step back a bit from the personage of the film director so as to obtain a 'complete' view of Fritz Lang. From there we can focus on the various periods of contemporary history: the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, the Weimar Republic, the early Hitler era, emigration, remigration.

His on-screen commitment in the fight against Nazi Germany was a known fact. Unknown until now was how intensively Lang interceded personally for his colleagues in exile—for example for Kurt Pinthus, Hans Sahl, Egon Erwin Kisch, and Berthold Brecht—or how Lang cultivated contacts with both left-wing and conservative German exiles. His chief concern was to strengthen resistance against Nazi Germany.

He maintained close ties with philosopher Theodor W. Adorno.

No matter how we evaluate his nostalgic and conservative political attitude in Germany during the 1920s and early 1930s, exile appears to have altered Fritz Lang. And this change suggests itself not only in his anti-Nazi activities. Many years later he did not fail to express his indignation at the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy; and he also felt compelled to make sarcastic comments about the conservative Governor of California, Ronald Reagan.

He wrote that he was finished with Germany: "I'm unable to rid my mind or heart of the Hitler era."

[Born Vienna on December 5, 1890 Baptized 'Friedrich Christian Anton Lang' December 28th, 1890. His godfather was Christian Cabos, purveyor to the Austro-Hungarian imperial court. Parents agreed at ceremony to raise the child as a Catholic. In 1900 his mother Pauline Schlesinger Lang converted from Judaism to Catholicism at the rectory of a town near Salzburg. Lang stayed in Paris 1913-14, took painting courses, left in July 1914 as anti-German sentiment rose after the murder of Jean Jaurès—a socialist who had worked toward French-German rapprochement. Lang joined the army on January 12, 1915, voluntarily enlisted. Russian front, reconnaissance, bravery citations. Wounded in trench warfare, shrapnel splinter probably in eye, declared unfit for troop duties 5/18.]

We have learned that films have different laws than the theater and that film drama has merely something superficially in common with drama on the stage; we also learned that film has different laws than novels and novellas: it was a new art form, and this fact was tremendously important for those who were involved with all their hearts in the artistic development of film. For all art, but for film in particular, the most important law is that a person must be profoundly moved and obsessed with his own work.

And against this background, Lang finished his talk in a fashion which could hardly have astonished his audience.

On May 15, 1924 the 'Conference for Cinema Reform' was opened at the 'Urania,' Vienna's adult education center. The conference saw film as 'a great cultural feat and a first-rate medium of popular entertainment.'

[The former head of the Film Department of the Foreign Ministry in Berlin, Robert Volz, spoke out in favor of film censorship. Lubitsch's *Die Flamme* was shown as was Lang's *Die Nibelungen*. Lang attacked what preceding speakers had said "bringing forth very bold and biting views. . . and indulging in tales of his own personal difficulties with the film industry and censorship.]

Lang spoke very clearly and loudly against the very existence of film censorship, saying he did not believe a people

to whom the state had documented its belief in its political maturity by giving it the right to vote, needs a guardian just because some claim it is not mature enough to know what might be good or bad for it. The situation is unacceptable, for example, when a censorship board objects to a poster for the *Nibelungen* film because Siegfried is shown skewered by a spear, while a poster for *Blaubart*, the circus pantomime, can be seen on an advertising pillar, and shows skulls, naked women and blood merging in a lovely still life. I have nothing against the state introducing restrictions for youths, it's fine with me, but it should not dictate for adults the kind of relaxation, regeneration and fortification their nerves need.

And now, ladies and gentlemen, I have arrived at the point of departure for the artistic development of a film drama. People who have experienced something as ghastly as a world war, people who are busy working and dealing with life have different views from those snobbish commentators who just go along with events, who sit in their club armchairs—not that I have anything against club armchairs—and try to force their artistic outlook on their fellow beings, while their own highest moments probably amount to the helpless stammerings of a bundle of nerves number by cocaine. The working person, is, thank God, too healthy not to feel a longing in his blood, the recurrent longing for the primeval ideal of humankind, for the vigorous man, the virginal girl and the virtuous woman. Proceeding from these components, this is where regenerating our people's strength starts and along with it film drama's. . . . And please, do not condemn the sensationalist films of earlier years, for they made the rational development of the film drama possible; we saw the errors of this genre and based on them learned new forms of this novel art. . . .

He cried out two words to them, two words "that during the two years it took to produce the *Nibelungen* my colleagues and I had constantly envisioned, two words which I rediscovered at the premiere of the *Nibelungen* about ten days ago in London, that were in German on the coat of arms of the Prince of Wales: 'Ich dien' ('I serve)."

"What I want: to create an art—perhaps a new art—with the aid of the moving image and its nearly unlimited technical possibilities, and in general give artistic form through my films to the final great problems facing mankind."

My film *M*—a factual report

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 read closely the newspaper reports these days about a major homicide case of the past few years . . . will find a strange similarity of events in most instances, circumstances which repeat themselves almost as if natural laws were at work, such as the dreadful, psychotic fear of the general public, the self-accusation of the mentally inferior, denunciations unleashing the hate and all the jealousy which 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, 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 of ultimately having a preventive effect.

On May 27, 1932 the movie *M* was shown again at U.T. cinema on Berlin's Kurfürstendamm and, according to the latest press reports, highly applauded. *Der Angriff*, a rabble-rousing National Socialist newspaper edited by Josef Goebbels, carried a notice in which the movie was subordinated, on ideological grounds, to the National Socialist interpretation of law and Peter Lorre in the leading role was stigmatized as the prototype killer, the impression being amplified by a caricature. This virtually anticipated the inclusion of sequences from the closing scene of Lang's movie in the anti-Semitic propaganda films *Juden ohne Maske* (1938, Walter Böttcher, Leo v.d. Schmiede) and *Der Ewige Jude* (Fritz Hippler, 1940) for no

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other purpose but to denounce Lorre as a Jew and thus a child killer.

"Fritz Lang's movie *M* is showing again in the Ufa-Theater on Kurfürstendamm. Only today we have heard that yet another sex killer sentenced to death has been reprieved. Current events have caught up with *M* again. Apart from its purely cinematic fantasy, this movie is the best argument against the opponents of the death penalty. The killer (Peter Lorre) has lost nothing of his gruesome repulsiveness to this day" (*Der Angriff*, No. 111, May 31, 1932)

Discussion on *M* centered more around the implications for criminal law than on the crimes and criminal investigation procedures. "This evening watched Fritz Lang's *M* with Magda, Fantastic! Counters all sentimental humanitarianism. For the death penalty! Well done. One day, Lang will be our director," noted Joseph Goebbels, the later Minister for Enlightenment and Propaganda in his diary on May 21, 1931. However, Lang, had made it clear a number of times that "he had definitely not wanted to make a film advocating the death penalty, but had merely presented for discussion objective arguments for and against the death penalty alongside the basic tenet of the film: 'protect your children'" (*Lichtbild-Bühne*, No. 121, May 21, 1931). It was precisely his supposedly undecided attitude on the question of the death penalty—the subject of heated discussion in Germany in spring 1931 and one instrumentalized for party political reasons—that Lang came under attack a number of times from Protestants, among others.

[Axel Eggebrecht w/ reference to Peter Lorre] "We got to know one another around the time he was playing, with unparalleled sensitivity, a sex-killer in *M*, directed by Fritz Lang. This classic film has always been important to me, because I have never again observed that fruitful, and at the same time, alarming impact a great actor can have on viewers who are no longer able to distinguish between the real person and the person portrayed."