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Script by Thea von Harbou and Fritz Lang
Based on an article by Egon Jacobson
Produced by Seymour Nebenzal
Cinematography by Fritz Arno Wagner
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Peter Lorre...Hans Beckert
Ellen Widmann...Frau Beckmann
Inge Landgut...Elsie Beckmann
Otto Wernicke...Inspector Karl Lohmann
Theodor Loos...Inspector Groeber
Gustaf Gründgens...Schränker
Friedrich Gnaß...Franz, the burglar
Fritz Odemar...The cheater
Paul Kemp...Pickpocket with six watches
Theo Lingen...Bauernfänger
Rudolf Blümner...Beckert's defender
Georg John...Blind panhandler
Franz Stein...Minister
Ernst Stahl-Nachbaur...Police chief
Gerhard Bienert...Criminal secretary
Karl Platen...Damowitz, night watchman
Rosa Valetti...Elisabeth Winkler, Beckert's landlady
Hertha von Walther...Prostitute

September 4, 2012
Fritz Lang, M (1931, 117 min)
Pariserinnen, 1922
rosa Diamant, 1926
at St. Helena
barcarolle d'amour
of Night, 1932
Dr. Mabuse, 1934
Amphitryon, 1939
Der Fall Rainer, 1940
Girls Behind Bars, 1948
Du bist nicht allein, 1949
Südsee, 1954
Darling, 1958
The Chronicles of the Gray House, 1957
It's Easy to Become a Father, 1958
La belle aventure, 1962
La chanson d'une nuit, 1964
The Patsy, 1955
The Best of Broadway, 1955
All Star Revue, 1952
Rheingold Theatre, 1954
Route 66, 1962
The DuPont Show of the Week, 1963
The Red Skelton Hour, 1960
The Jack Benny Show, 1961
The Story of Mankind, 1957
Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea, 1964
The Best of the Past, 1961
Five Weeks in a Balloon, 1900
The Haunted Castle, 1920
Das Kriegergrab, 1921
Die geschlossene Kette, 1920
Das Martyrium, 1920
Das Skelett des Herrn Markutius, 1919
Der Galeerenstraftrager, 1919


Austrian-American director and screenwriter, was born in Vienna, the only child of middle-class parents. His father, Anton Lang, was a municipal architect. His mother, Paula Schlesinger Lang, had been born Jewish but had converted to Catholicism early in life. Lang was educated at the local Volksschule (primary school), and moved on to the Realschule (secondary school) in 1901, where he specialized in architecture, since Anton Lang intended his son to follow the paternal calling. “Yet I had heard too many of his complaints about the disadvantages of his profession to feel much enthusiasm at the prospect,” Lang said. His own ambition at the time was to become a painter. He was also, like his parents, a regular and enthusiastic theatre-goer.

Early in adolescence Lang suffered a serious illness, during which he had a vision of Death. As he later described it: “I saw myself face to face, not terrifying, but unmistakable, with Death. Made of black and white, light and shade, the rib cage, the naked bones….I don’t know whether I should call the fear I experienced at that moment one of fear. It was horror, but without panic….I recovered quickly. But the love of death, compounded of horror and affection…stayed with me and became part of my films.”

Still following his father’s wishes, Lang enrolled in 1908 at the Technische Hochschule to study architecture. He was very soon bored and instead began studying art at the Vienna Academy of Graphic Arts, where he was strongly influenced by Klimt and Egon Schiele. He also made the most of other opportunities that Vienna offered. “I was precocious and started having affairs very early. Viennese women were the most beautiful and the most generous women in the world.” To help pay for his studies, Lang occasionally worked as master of ceremonies at two of the city’s cabarets, Femina and Hölle (Hell). This activity finally exhausted his father’s patience, so around 1909 Lang ran away from home—“something every decent young man should do”—and made his way to Brussels, where he lived by selling sketches in the cafés.

After unwittingly getting himself involved in an art-faking racket, Lang headed for Munich, where he studied art at the School of Arts and Crafts under Julius Dietz. In 1910 he embarked on a long sea journey, which took him to North Africa, Asia Minor, China, Japan, and Bali. On his return to Europe he settled in Paris, renting a studio in Montmartre and studying at the Académie Julien. He made a living by designing clothes and selling postcards, watercolors, and cartoons, and also began to take a serious interest in the cinema: “I already subconsciously felt that a new art…was about to be born.”

Painting, though, was still his main interest, and he was preparing his first exhibition when war was declared. Lang just managed to get himself on the last train across the French border and safely back to Vienna, when, despite defective eyesight, he as called up for active service in the army.

Promoted to lieutenant, Lang served on the Russian, Balkan and Italian fronts, received several wounds (one of which cost him the sight of his right eye) and various decorations. “For four years I saw life stripped to its rawest, hunger and desperation and death—scenes that neither fiction nor the screen can ever picture.” While in military hospital he began writing film scripts and sold two of them to Joe May, at that time one of Germany’s leading producer-directors….

Early in 1918 Lang was declared unfit for further service. Whiling away his time in Vienna, he was offered a part in a Red Cross play, and after driving the fee up to 1,000 kronen he accepted. Among the audience was Erich Pommer, head of the Decla film company in Berlin. Pommer was unimpressed with Lang’s acting ability but struck during a subsequent meeting by his ideas on the cinema, and offered him a contract with Decla as a scriptwriter.

Lang arrived in Berlin shortly in September 1918, shortly before the end of the war. His first scripts for Decla…were all three directed by Otto Rippert, and received good reviews. By the time they were released, Lang had already persuaded Pommer to let him direct a film. Halbblut (The Half-Caste, 1919), filmed in five days to Lang’s own script, was a triangular melodrama with its apex the half-caste of the title, first of the many femmes fatales in Lang’s films. No prints of Halbblut are extant, nor of his next picture, Der Herr der Liebe (The Master of Love, 1919), of which little is known; but both were successful enough for Pommer to let Lang embark on a major production, the first episode of an adventure serial, Die Spinnen (The Spiders).

The influence of Feuillade (whose Fantômas series Lang would have seen in pre-war Paris) and of Hollywood’s Pearl White-style cliffhangers can be detected in the episodic, comic-book construction of Die Spinnen. The first part, Der Goldene See (The Golden Lake, 1919), contained all the standard ingredients: a sinister, all-powerful secret society, with masked minions to execute its nefarious designs; a (supposedly) irresistible and demonic temptress; and intrepid and resourceful hero; hidden Inca treasures, exotic locations, last-minute rescues, human sacrifices, snakes, all thrown together with a blithe disregard for verisimilitude or narrative structure. The acting was none too subtle, either. But Lang and Pommer evidently knew their public; the film was hugely successful on release, establishing Decla as one of the major German companies.

Before continuing Die Spinnen, Lang was assigned to direct Harakiri (1919), a version of David Belasco’s oriental weepie, Madame Butterfly, on which Puccini had based his opera. The film survives only in one fragile, rarely shown print, but was praised at the time for its “vivid realistic picture of life as it is.” Lang’s next film
was to have been Das Kabinett des Dr. Caligari (1919), on the scenario of which he collaborated; but distributors were clamoring for the next part of Die Spinnen, and Caligari, much to Lang’s disappointment went instead to Robert Wiene. Das Brillantenschiff (The Diamond Ship, 1920), episode two of Die Spinnen, provided the mixture as before, with an even more convoluted plot.

By this stage in his career Lang had already evolved his working method, which entailed meticulous preparation of every aspect of filmmaking. Carl de Vogt, who played the hero of Die Spinnen, noted that Lang “was dominated by a fanatical love for the cinema and the demands he made on his actors were enormous….In contrast to other directors he always knew exactly what he wanted. He was indefatigable in his work and never self-indulgent.” Theo Lingen, another of Lang’s actors, recalled that “one did what one was told to do the to letter of the timetable, by which I mean that no improvisation was tolerated. Everything…was fixed and calculated in advance. This might suggest…pedantry, but that is the exact opposite of the truth: the mastering of all aspects, the intelligent use of this method, and the conviction that technology can only be mastered by technology—these were probably Lang’s main strengths as a film director.”

To supplement his income, Lang had continued to take occasional assignments for Joe May while working at Decla, and had been assistant director on May’s Die Herrin der Welt (The Mistress of the World, 1919). Now, annoyed over his loss of Caligari and the rejection of his Spinnen scripts, Lang signed a contract with May to direct Das Wandernde Bild (The Wandering Image, 1920). No prints are know to exist of this film….It was also his first collaboration with Thea von Harbou, the popular novelist who was to coscript all his films until his departure from Germany in 1933.

Lang and von Harbou next wrote a two-part exotic adventure, Das Indische Grabmal (The Indian Tomb) which Lang expected to direct but which May arrogated to himself. Since he never much liked May but had a high personal regard for Pommer, Lang returned to Decla (or Decla-Bioscop, as it mad become through a merger), taking von Harbou with him, and directed the last of his “lost” films, Kämpfende Herzen (Struggling Hearts, 1920). The film’s alternative title was Die Vier um die Frau (Four Around a Woman), apparently a fair summary of the plot.

In Germany Lang was by now recognized as one of the foremost directors, though he was as yet little-known abroad…. “In Europe,” Lang later wrote about the post-war period, “an entire generation of intellectuals embraced despair….Young people engaged in the cultural fields, myself among them, made a fetish of tragedy.”

Lang always deprecated references to his films as “expressionist,” maintaining that he never restricted himself by conforming to a single artistic fashion. Nonetheless, expressionism—the visual distortion and stylization of reality to express psychological states and heighten emotional response—undeniably influences many of Lang’s films, if never to the extremes of Wiene’s Caligari, with its contorted, aggressively two-dimensional sets. In Der Müde Tod (Destiny, 1921) the vast wall, extending beyond the confines of the screen, that surrounds Death’s realm, the misty vastness of the cathedral in which burn countless candle-souls of humankind, and the storybook toy-town, all draw on expressionist elements in their design. Lotte Eisner even regarded much of the film as deliberate parody of expressionism, especially the Chinese episode….This episode also featured the film’s most impressive special effects, including a miniaturized army and a journey by flying carpet. These were much admired and emulated. In the United States, Douglas Fairbanks bought the distribution rights but delayed the release until after the premiere of his own Thief of Bagdad, which copied several of Lang’s best tricks. Meanwhile Lang, now internationally famous, began work with von Harbou on a two-part crime thriller, Dr. Mabuse der Spieler (Dr. Mabuse the Gambler, 1922).

In some ways Dr. Mabuse returns to the world of Die Spinnen. Mabuse is a fiendish mastermind, a man of a thousand disguises, gifted with sinister hypnotic powers, leader of a gang of criminals and cutthroats. During the course of the complicated plot he manipulates the Stock Exchange, steals treaties, murders, runs crooked gabling dens. abducts women; finally brought to bay by a determined public prosecutor, he goes mad, and is taken away babbling incoherently.

Von Harbou and Lang took pains to stress the contemporary relevance of the Mabuse films. The two parts, Der Grosse Spieler (The Great Gambler) and Inferno were respectively subtitled Ein Bild der Zeit (A Portrait of the Age) and Ein Spiel von Menschen unserer Zeit (A Play About People of Our Time). Today, to claim any kind of documentary realism for such overblown melodramatics may seem ludicrous, but at the time the suggestion was evidently found credible. “The film is a document of our time,” wrote a reviewer in Die Welt am Montag,”an excellent portrait of high society with its gambling passion and dancing madness, its hysteria and decadence, its expressionism and occultisms. An article in BZ am Mittag described the films as “a condensation of the spirit of the age, a playful re-enactment….Not one important symptom of the postwar years is missing.”

The protean personality of Mabuse—resourcefully played by von Harbou’s first husband, Rudolf Klein-Rogge—dominates the action, manipulating all the other characters and events. Even the police seem reduced to a mere rival gang—as so often in Lang’s films, villains and heroes, crime and justice tend to become interchangeable. Mabuse remains memorable not for its limping and flawed plot but for the darkly brooding atmosphere Lang creates, a disturbing compound of hysteria and fatalistic passivity.

In August 1922, a few months after the release of Dr. Mabuse, Fritz Lang and Thea von Harbou were married. It was a second marriage for both of them. Von Harbou had separated quite amicably from Klein-Rogge, who readily continued to appear in Lang’s films. Lang’s first wife, about whom little is known, had been a Russian Jew from Vilna. She had died in 1920 —according to some accounts, she killed herself on learning of the passionate affair between her husband and von Harbou.
Dr. Mabuse was enormously successful, both in Germany and abroad, and on the strength of it Pommer announced an even more ambitious project: a two-part epic superproduction, Die Nibelungen (1924). The basis for Lang and von Harbou’s script was not Wagner’s operatic tetralogy but the original medieval epic, Das Nibelungenlied, on which Wagner had also drawn. Preparations for the massive production took nearly two years, and shooting lasted nine months. During filming, Decla-Bioscop merged with UFA. Lang was now the star director of the world’s largest studio outside Hollywood.

Siegfried, the first part of Die Nibelungen tells how the hero slays a dragon, meets and marries the Burgundian Princess Kriemhild, and is killed through the treachery of Hagen and the jealousy of Brunhild, an Icelandic princess whom he has wooed on behalf of Kriemhild’s brother, Gunther. “For sheer pictorial beauty of structural architecture, Siegfried has never been equalled,” wrote Paul Rotha….

Arguments over whether Lang, however unwittingly, was creating fascist cinema have inevitably clustered around Die Nibelungen. Hitler and other leading Nazis certainly admired Siegfried greatly (Kriemhild’s Rache less so), and after Lang’s departure from Germany it was revived in a sound version, complete with chunks of Wagner. The film’s grandiose architecture evidently influenced Speer in his staging of the Nuremberg rallies, as well as Leni Riefenstahl’s notorious propaganda film, Triumph des Willens.

Metropolis (1926), “an exaggerated dream of the New York skyline, multiplied a thousandfold and divested of all reality” (Lotte Eisner), was by far the most ambitious film ever produced in Germany. Originally budgeted at 1.9 million marks, it eventually cost over 5 million, took nearly a year to shoot, and ruined UFA. The company was refused a state subsidy and passed into the control of Alfred Hugenberg, a millionaire industrialist and press baron with Nazi sympathies. Lang envisioned a repressive technological future (set in the year 2000), in which the gulf between the classes has become brutally absolute. The ruling aristocracy lead lives of idle luxury in sunlit gardens, while the workers, housed in subterranean caverns, have been reduced to a soulless army of slaves….Luis Buñuel, reviewing Metropolis in 1927, described it as “two films glued together by their bellies.” Most critics, then and since, have agreed with him. The plot of the film is puerile, incoherent, and feebly motivated, culminating in an embarrassingly trite and sentimental ending. Lang himself claimed that he “detested [the film]after it was finished,” and admitted that “you cannot make a social-conscious picture in which you say that the intermediary between the hand and the brain is the heart—I mean that’s a fairy tale—definitely.”

Visually, though, Metropolis is superb, and remains so even in the face of modern megaproductions….Although a commercial disaster, Metropolis was widely shown and hugely influential. Countless sci-fi films owe a debt to it….Disappointed by the financial failure of Metropolis, Lang now formed his own production company, Fritz-Lang-Films, to release through UFA. For its first project, Lang and von Harbou reverted to the proven box-office values of Dr. Mabuse, applying them with minor modifications to the world of international espionage….Despite all the parallels Spione (The Spy, 1928) improves greatly on Dr. Mabuse in both pacing and atmosphere….Once again, Lang conceded scant moral superiority to the forces of law; espionage and counterespionage operate in the same ethical jungle.

Lang had originally planned to include a space-ship sequence in Metropolis but was forced to abandon it by the film’s spiraling costs. He now returned to the idea for his last silent picture, Die Frau im Mond (The Woman in the Moon, 1929), in which an ill-assorted band of scientists, capitalists, and stowaways travel to the moon in search of gold. Lang took great trouble over the technical details of the rocketship and its launching, calling in Herman Oberth and Will Ley as scientific advisors….Many of Lang’s silent films—especially Metropolis and Dr. Mabuse—suffered mutilation at the hands of foreign distributors. Lang was much angered by this, though he could do nothing about it; but he could and did object when UFA proposed that Die Frau, along with other current films, should be converted to sound. Since the film had been planned silent, that—he insisted—was how it should be shown, without even added music or sound effects. As a result of this quarrel. Lang broke completely with UFA and even contemplated giving up filmmaking to become a scientist. Luckily, he reconsidered, and went on to make what is generally recognized as his finest film.

When Lang announced his new project, his first sound film, under the working title of Mörder unter uns (Murderers Among Us), he encountered unexpected hostility. Anonymous threatening letters arrived, and he was refused use of the studios he wanted. Not until he explained that the film was to be about a sex murderer did opposition cease. The Nazis, apparently, had assumed the title referred to them. Based on the real-life case of Peter Kürten, who had terrorized Düsseldorf in the 1920s, M (1931) shows city shaken by mounting hysteria as children are murdered and the police flail ineffectually, arresting suspects at random. Finally, the underworld organize themselves to trap the killer, since the increased police vigilance is disrupting their activities; child-murderers, Lang suggests with Brechtian irony, must be discouraged, since they are bad for business.

In M, for the first time in Lang’s work, style and content fuse into a taut, effective whole. The brooding urban menace that he had brought to Dr. Mabuse and Spione, the dark fatalism of Der Mörde Tod, the acute spatial instinct of Siegfried and Metropolis, are at last placed at the service of a plot that needs no apology. Sound is used creatively and dramatically, with no hint of ineptitude, to counterpoint and enrich the images, often overlapping across scenes to achieve fast narrative ellipses. Violence, as Lang always preferred,
is suggested rather than shown: a child’s killing is conveyed by a ball rolling out of a bush, a stray balloon caught in overhead wires—thus (as Lang wrote) “forcing each individual member of the audience to create the gruesome details of the murder according to his personal imagination.”

As Franz Becker, the murderer, Peter Lorre’s performances made him deservedly world-famous. Squat, chubby, and vulnerable, obsessively whistling his snatch of Grieg (performed by Lang since Lorre couldn’t whistle), smiling with a shy kindness as he buys his victim a balloon, grimacing before a mirror in an attempt to grasp his own monstrosity, he presented a chillingly plausible incarnation of helpless schizophrenia.…

Although it encountered censorship problems in a few countries, M enjoyed widespread success. Some critics found the subject-matter “disgusting,” but most were enthusiastic. Graham Greene vividly likened the film to “looking through the eye-piece of a microscope, through which the tangled mind is exposed, laid flat on the slide: love and lust, nobility and perversity, hatred of itself and despair jumping at you from the jelly.” M rapidly achieved classic status, confirmed by Joseph Losey’s ill-advised remake of 1951, in which the action was transferred to Los Angeles. Lang dryly commented that, when Losey’s film was released, “I had the best reviews of my life.”

Seymour Nebenzal, for whose Nero Films Land had made M, urged him to make a new Dr. Mabuse film. Initially reluctant, Lang gradually began to see possibilities in the idea of his master-criminal directing operations from within the lunatic asylum in which, at the end of the earlier film, he had been incarcerated. In later years Lang consistently maintained that Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse (The Last Will of Dr. Mabuse, 1933) was intended as “a veiled comment on Nazism,” and that he put Nazi slogans into the mouth of the deranged criminal. This seems slightly improbable, since von Harbou, who coscripted as usual, was by this time a keen member of the Nazi party. On the other hand, the film was certainly found subversive enough to be banned by Goebbels.

Mabuse himself dies midway through Das Testament; but by then he has gained control over the mid of the director of the asylum, Dr. Baum, through whom his orders are transmitted to his gang. After Mabuse’s death his spirit continues to possess Baum who goes steadily out of his mind and by the end of the film has been completely taken over, like Norman Bates in Psycho, by his alter ego. As Mabuse/Baum’s chief opponent, Lang reintroduced the stolidly humorous Inspector Lohmann (played by Otto Wernicke), who had headed the police investigation in M.

As with Spione and the earlier Mabuse films, the plot of Das Testament is less interesting than the atmosphere of tangible menace that Lang creates. The opening sequence is especially effective….Menace is inexplicable, impersonal, and ubiquitous.

Soon after Das Testament had been banned by the newly elected Nazi government, Lang was summoned to an interview with Goebbels. Apprehensively, he presented himself in the customary formal dress. Goebbels—“he was a charming man when he wanted to be”—explained that he and Hitler had much admired Metropolis and Die Niebelungen, and invited Lang to head the Third Reich’s film industry. Lang expressed his gratitude and delight. “I could only think ‘How do you get out of here?’ I wanted to get some money out of the bank. Outside the window there was a big clock, and the hands went slowly round.” Goebbels talked on. At last Lang could make a polite departure, but the banks had closed. He rushed home, grabbed all his loose cash and portable valuables, and caught a train for Paris, leaving behind his wife, his money, his extensive art collection, and his position as Germany’s foremost director. “I must begin again. It is not easy. But, yes, it was good. I was arrivé—fat in my soul, fat around the heart. Darling, too much success…oh, it is not good for the man.” Thea von Harbou remained behind in Germany where she continued to make films for the Nazis. She and Lang were divorced about a year later.  

Like most prominent European filmmakers, Lang had received frequent offers from Hollywood, but he had always turned them down. Now, however, when David O. Selznick arrived in Paris on a talent hunt, Lang accepted a contract with MGM, and sailed for America in June 1934. Not for the first time, Hollywood, having acquired its “trophy” (Lang’s own term), had trouble deciding how to display it. For eighteen months he stayed on MGM’s payroll without directing a single foot of film. Part of the reason was that the studio heads had grown wary of “Prussian aristocrats” like Stroheim and Sternberg and suspected that Lang, with his monocle, formal manner, and exacting reputation, might prove another of the breed.  

Though frustrated at not working, Lang had no intention of wasting his time and set out to learn the language and the customs of his adopted country, becoming an American citizen in 1935. …

If a single consistent theme can be isolated from Lang’s œuvre, it would be the struggle of the individual against fate. But fate, for Lang, is not a metaphysical concept or a supernatural power. Even when—as in Der Müde Tod or Die Niebelungen—supernatural elements are introduced, they never decide the outcome; Siegfried’s Tarnhelm is merely an enabling device, an instrument, like a gun or a fast car. Lang’s fate is always some human force or factor—a criminal organization, social pressure, a psychological impulse within the individual. The socially critical aspect of this theme, implicit in his German films, became increasingly overt in his Hollywood output.  

Fury (1936), as Gavin Lambert has pointed out, “is not...about a lynching, but an almost abstract study of mob hysteria; this hysteria has a umber of results, of which the attempted lynching is one and the ferocious destructive bitterness it arouses in the victim..is another.”…
“Every serious picture that depicts people today,” Lang once remarked, “should be a kind of documentary of its time.”

Lang’s “social trilogy” [Fury, You Only Live Once (1937), You and Me (1938) as his first three Hollywood films are sometimes called, ended with a flop….The outbreak of war allowed Lang to return to a far more congenial genre. The sinister, pervasive criminal organizations of his German movies, dedicated to terror, destruction, and world domination, had become awful reality and taken over most of Europe; who better than Fritz Lang to depict the struggle against them? Lang’s anti-Nazi films, wrote Peter Bogdanovich, are “characterized by an intense personal involvement, a vivid awareness of the fascist mind, missing from other similar movies of the period.”...

François Truffaut identified Lang’s “favorite theme” as “moral solitude, a man alone, conducting a struggle against a semi-hostile, semi-indifferent universe”—an apt summary of Ministry of Fear (1944).

...Lang moved on to RKO to direct the last, and most individual of his three Westerns, Rancho Notorious (1952)....Lang’s career was now at a low ebb....One reason for this, he discovered, was that he was considered politically suspect, having associated with such “premature anti-fascists” as Brecht, Eisler, and Ring Lardner Jr.; he had, therefore, as a “potential Communist,” been blacklisted. He was only rescued from limbo after eighteen months by Harry Cohn, with whom Lang, unlike most people, got on well....

Lang’s stature within the industry—and to a lesser degree among critics—was diminished during his years in Hollywood. From the mid-1920s until 1933, Lang was recognized as the greatest director in Germany, and perhaps in Europe. By the time he arrived in the States, he was no more than one of the many distinguished European refugees; by 1950, he had become just another directorial hack and politically dubious at that. (Lang’s own independent temperament, and refusal to stay tied to any one studio, most likely contributed to Hollywood’s dismissive stance toward him.) The hope that he might repeat earlier glories by returning to Germany was disappointed. It was mainly during his retirement, when the overall shape of his career could be assessed, that Lang regained his status as one of cinema’s greatest artists. Pauline Kael rated him with Eisenstein, Gance, Griffith, and Welles as one “whose prodigious failures make other people’s successes look puny.”

...Throughout his films, both American and European, Lang created a distinct world, consistent and unmistakable, marked by the intensity of his vision. “Fritz Lang’s America is not essentially different from Fritz Lang’s Germany,” maintained Gavin Lambert: “it is less openly macabre, its crime and terror exist on a comparatively realistic level, but both countries are really another country, a haunted place in which the same drama constantly occur. ...

At his best, Lang is the greatest exponent of the Cinema of Paranoia. His films feed upon, and nourish, the irrational fear that nothing is as it seems, that a hidden menace lurks behind all bland appearances, and that even the most amiable of individuals—especially the most amiable—is a member of some vast malign conspiracy, from which we alone are excluded.

“No other director,” wrote David Thomson, “convinces us that the melodramatic threat of extinction in the crime movie is the metaphor of a much greater danger. ...Lang’s films begin in top gear and then advance into higher ratios unknown to other directors.”


In his famous 1961 television interview, ‘Le Dinosaur and le Bébé’, Jean-Luc Godard asked Lang which of his forty films he thought would last. Without skipping a beat. Lang replied ‘M’. Godard agreed. No discussion, no other title given. In a 1995 survey of several hundred German film critics and scholars M was voted the most important German film of all time. Current movie guides typically describe Lang’s film as an ‘acclaimed classic’ or a ‘masterpiece. ...

The making of M coincided with the rapid disintegration of the political and social structure of the Weimar Republic. In June 1930, when the first notices about Fritz Lang’s new, still untitled film project were published in Film-Kurier, the worldwide recession had reached Germany in the form of massive unemployment, rising criminality and political unrest....

Even more than serial pulp fiction, the daily press had played a major role in disseminating representations of crime. Serial killings were a favourite subject matter at the time of the Weimar Republic; serial crime reinforced the newspaper’s own seriality. ...

“I have distilled all typical events from the plethora of materials and combined them with the help of my wife into a self-contained film story. The film M should be a document and an extract of facts and in that way an authentic representation of a mass murder complex.”...

In his 1930 work journal, Lang recorded an idea for a scene in M that was never filmed: ‘War scene as an excuse of the child murderer before the underworld court.’ If ever there was a doubt that World War I figured in Lang’s mind as a subtext for M, this note dispels it. This scene might have been filmed as a flashback to Beckert’s traumatic experience that he war front. It might have explained Beckert’s drive to kill as a compulsion to repeat the murder he was forced to commit in combat. Freud’s work on war neurosis in 1918 shed light on what the film leaves unsaid. The mental breakdown of thousands of soldiers, Freud argued, were the result of an unsolvable mental conflict that spitted the ego: The conflict is between the ego of peacetime and the new war-ego of the soldier and it becomes acute as the peace-ego is faced with the danger of being killed through the risky undertakings of his newly formed parasitical double. Or one might put it, the old ego protects itself form the danger to life by flight into the traumatic neurosis in
defending itself against the new ego which it recognizes as threatening its life….

On 12 May 1931, one day after M’s premier, the League for Human Rights held a public debate about the death penalty. Using arguments from Lang’s film to discuss the pending fate of Peter Kürten, the League’s so-called abolitionists argued against the death penalty under any circumstances but met vociferous resistance….Although Lang always insisted that M was a plea against the death penalty, the film is ambiguous enough that Goebbels could note in his diary of 21 May 1931: ‘Fantastic! Against humanitarian sentimentality. For the death penalty. Well made. Lang will be our director one day.


FL: “It was important to me with M not only to examine what drives a person to commit such a dreadful crime as the murder of children but also to broach the topic of the pros and cons of the death penalty. However, the tenor of the film is not condemnation of the murderer but rather a warning to mothers. You have to take better care of the kids. This accent was particularly important to my then wife, writer Thea von Harbou. Together, we wrote the manuscripts of almost all my German films before 1933, and, of course, she also participated substantially in the development of this material. For many years, she was my most important collaborator and helper….

FL: M was my first sound film. At the time, there were hardly more sound films in Germany than you could count on the fingers of one hand. Of course, I had to come to terms with the new medium of sound….

At the time I realized that it wasn’t just possible to use sound as a dramaturgical device but essential. Some examples in M are when the silence of the streets—I deliberately left out the optional street noise—is suddenly pierced by the shrill police whistles, and you hear the unmelodic, recurring whistling of the child murderer, which gives wordless expression to his morbid impulses.

I also believe that M was the first to use the device of letting the sound or dialogue from the end of one scene run into the beginning of the next one, which not only accelerates the tempo of the film but also strengthens the dramaturgically necessary association of thoughts between two successive scenes. It was also the first time that dialogue in two parallel scenes—the repetitive discussion among the members of the union of criminals and inspectors gathered in the police headquarters about how to find the child murderer—was utilized so that the entire dialogue forms a whole, as it were. That is, when one of the criminals begins a sentence, the gist of what he is saying is finished by one of the police inspectors, and vice versa. Both methods later came into general use….

I don’t believe at all that film is bound by any rules. It is always new, and a principle that is right in one sequence can be completely wrong in the next one.


When Alfred Hitchcock started to be known, he was sometimes called “the English Fritz Lang.” After Hitler’s ascendance, Lang tells of being approached by Goebbels to run the Third Reich’s new film industry; Hitler was apparently a great admirer of his pictures, especially Metropolis. Lang ‘agreed to everything,’” and that evening, unable to get to the bank in time, he fled Germany for Paris, leaving almost everything he owned behind. Soon afterward he was notified that all his money and possessions had been confiscated. In the same year, 1933, Lang’s talented wife and collaborator, Thea von Harbou, divorced him and joined the Nazi movement. Lang soon came to Hollywood, where he made many fine pictures, but never achieved the respect or power he had in Germany, and ended up blind in Beverly Hills, sometimes being referred to as “the German Alfred Hitchcock.” …

FL: Our lives go by much faster than the lives of our parents. My parents went twice a month to see a play and then they discussed it with friends—it was an event; they absorbed two stories about human beings. But when you are used—as I was in 1912-14—to seeing a film every day or even twice a day. You are absorbing so much more—so many facts, so many stories about life. And so we don’t live slowly anymore and time goes much faster. When the problem comes up about the younger generation’s marriages going on the rocks, perhaps the question is, has a man or a woman enough with one other woman or man? Maybe you can absorb much more than before, including husbands and wives….

PB: How did the story for M [1931] originate?

FL: I discussed with my wife, Mrs. Von Harbou, what was the ugliest, most utterly loathsome crime and we thought at first it as the sending of anonymous letters—I think we even started to write a synopsis. But then we both decided that the most horrible crime was that of a child murderer. I had many friends in Berlin’s Homicide Department, which was called Alexanderplatz, and through them I came in touch with various murderers. Kürten, the infamous killer of Düsseldorf, I never met. Our story was finished before he was caught….

PB: Why do you like to work from newspapers?

FL: I think motion pictures are not only the art of our century, but to borrow a word from Abraham Lincoln, the art “of the people, for the people, by the people.” It was invented just at the right time—when people were ready for an art of the masses. Do you realize, by the way, what really made propaganda for the American way of life? American motion pictures. Goebbels understood the enormous power of film as propaganda, and I’m afraid that even today people don’t know what a tremendous means of propaganda motion pictures can be.. But anyway, where do we get our knowledge of life? From facts,
not from fiction. Naturally, you can learn a lot of things from novels and plays, but it is always seen through another man’s eyes. Don’t forget, in those days there was no television: today when there’s a riot, you see it; from Vietnam, you can see what a war in the jungle is. Before that, newscasts took a long time to come to the movie house, and only the newspapers were fresh information.

A director should know everything. A director should be at home in a brothel—which is very easy—but he should also be at home in the Stock Exchange—which is already a little more difficult. He should know how the Duke of Edinburgh behaves, how a worker or how a gangster behaves. Now, I would say it is impossible to learn all this out of experience. But the next best thing is to read newspapers—even if they are not objective, you can learn to separate the objective from the subjective.

PB: When you say a director should know everything, do you also mean the technical aspects of filmmaking?

FL: Yes, definitely. Erich Pommer, who was responsible for me, told me two things, which I followed: first he said, “Fritz, you have to tell a story with the camera. Therefore, you have to know the camera and what you can make the camera do.” Lighting is part of that; so is camera movement. You have to know the instruments with which you tell your story. The second thing he said was, “Never have an affair with an actress.” He didn’t obey it; I didn’t obey it. But I never did it—and never do it—during a picture. What happens afterward is my private business. But that during the shooting somebody should say to me, “Last night you said, ‘Sweetheart’ and ‘Beautiful,’ and today you order me around!”—nothing doing. It’s as simple as that. Good advice….

PB: Do you ever change things on the set?

FL: …to change something dramatically could spoil the whole picture. Every film has its rhythm and you must have this rhythm from the beginning….

PB: Did you have anything to do with the American version of M?

FL: No. After the war, the financier smuggled M out of Germany; he was much cleverer than I—he had all the contracts and everything. I had nothing, because Goebbels talked to me from one o’clock till three—the banks closed at two-thirty—and I left the country the same day without taking anything with me; and I never went back. My lawyer became an ardent Nazi, and years later when I asked for the contracts: “We were bombed out—I can’t remember anything.” A quarter of a century had passed and I couldn’t do anything—I was cheated out of all the money I should have earned. So here in the States, a man (he is dead too. I am the last dinosaur you know) came to me and said, “Look the financier would like you to do a remake of M.” I said, “If he doesn’t want to be slapped in the face, he’d better leave me alone.”

I had to go to the Philippines. My lawyer here said, “Fritz, you can be sure that nothing will happen,” because otherwise I would have prevented it. When I came back from the Philippines I found that my lawyer had left me in the lurch, and the picture was made by Mr. [Joseph] Losey. The financier tried to destroy all the prints and the negative of M, but for some reason—talk about fate—he couldn’t do it.

The Losey picture—I’ve never seen it—was released, and later I made a joke that it only played in an asylum for blind men, because it didn’t run very long. It was a big flop, and I never got such good reviews in my whole life as when this film was reviewed. My picture was a documentary of that period in Germany. I had talked with two or three mass murderers, I had seen all those horrible things, and, in my opinion, the murder was described efficiently enough as I did it: “I walk through the streets and then I come to. Have I done it? Have I really done it?” Mr. Losey, I found out later, had tried to explain him out of his environment and so on. He also made some, let me just say, unfair remarks about my film—that he thinks his is much better and that my film wouldn’t stand up nowadays….

PB: Do you like While the City Sleeps as much as M and Fury, which I understand are your favorite films?

FL: No, but I think—and this will only be proved by how it holds up over the years—that While the City Sleeps is at least an equally good picture….I think both M and Fury are honest films. M is much more honest than Fury, because, as I told you before, an honest motion picture about lynching has to be made with a different premise….M is practically the only picture I made in which nobody else had a hand except me myself. Maybe that influences me.

Also, don’t forget, M was the first picture about a sex maniac. A film without a love story was unheard of in those days. And if I hadn’t had that contract this film would never have been made….M and Fury are social criticisms about two very important things. I really put my finger on something.


Lang: I am always questioned about my “Expressionist period.” I respond with: “I don’t understand what you mean by that. I am always counted among expressionists, but I personally place myself among the realists. In films, it is too easy to associate ideas and images with things that don’t necessarily belong in the film in question….

I can’t say what I found in Expressionism; all I can say is that I used it, that I tried to master it. I believe that the more we tend toward simplicity, the more we progress.

Which brings me back to the Western. It is a genre full of simple ideas. Each year, there are new ones for the young, because each year there is a new generation. Critics say that in today’s war films there is nothing new. But what can one say about war that is new? The important thing is that we repeat it again and again.
To fight, that is what counts. If we think there is the smallest chance to succeed, we must continue to do what we believe is good. Perhaps this is a sort of martyrdom, even if I don’t believe it, but it is the essence of life, fighting for the causes we believe to be right. That is truly the problem that has always interested me—not obsessed or possessed me, because I was possessed only once—that’s all, in one way or another it is inevitable. You get caught in the works, and you can’t escape. But aside from that, what I always wanted to show and define is the attitude of struggle that must be adopted in the face of destiny. Whether or not the individual wins this fight, what counts is the fight itself, because it is vital.

You know, I have never made a film which made a compromise. That’s one of life’s important things, and which we have a tendency to forget. A producer—during the war—called me into his office, at a moment when I wasn’t working, and gave me a point of departure for a film. It was extremely favourable towards the war: I refused to make it.

To make a film for one person, whether producer, director, actor or critic, makes no sense. The cinema always has been and should continue to be a mass art.

COMING UP IN THE FALL 2012 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XXV:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Director</th>
<th>Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sept 11</td>
<td>The Four Feathers</td>
<td>Zoltán Korda</td>
<td>1939</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sept 18</td>
<td>Children of Paradise</td>
<td>Marcel Carné</td>
<td>1945</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oct 2</td>
<td>Kiss Me Deadly</td>
<td>Robert Aldrich</td>
<td>1955</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct 9</td>
<td>Lonely Are the Brave</td>
<td>David Miller</td>
<td>1962</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oct 16</td>
<td>Fail-Safe</td>
<td>Sidney Lumet</td>
<td>1964</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oct 23</td>
<td>The Stunt Man</td>
<td>Richard Rush</td>
<td>1980</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oct 30</td>
<td>Come and See</td>
<td>Elem Klimov</td>
<td>1985</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nov 6</td>
<td>Grave of the Fireflies</td>
<td>Isao Takahata</td>
<td>1988</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nov 13</td>
<td>Magnolia</td>
<td>Paul Thomas Anderson</td>
<td>1999</td>
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<td>Nov 20</td>
<td>Russian Ark</td>
<td>Alexander Sokurov</td>
<td>2002</td>
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<td>Nov 27</td>
<td>White Material</td>
<td>Claire Denis</td>
<td>2009</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dec 4</td>
<td>A Separation</td>
<td>Asghar Farhadi</td>
<td>2011</td>
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