

Fritz Lang's *M*

A textbook classic restored to perfection



13



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The roots of noir go back to German Expressionism, and there's no movie that's more German, Expressionist, or noir than Fritz Lang's masterful — and finally restored — *M* (1931). While this

story of the pursuit of a child-killer lacks one of the crucial elements of the genre, the femme fatale, the other components of noir are here in force. There's the dark cityscape, an unstable environment in which children play in the street singing chants about "black bogeymen" and murderers. There's the paranoid pathology of the individual in the person of the twisted Hans Beckert (Peter Lorre), who courts and kills his young victims for reasons he can't express or fathom, and a frenzied mob that brings its own brand of justice against him. Many of the classic noirs of the 1940s and later owe a debt to *M*'s obsessive attention to the details of the manhunt, with the most minute aspects of police procedure rendered. Most important, though, is the sense of doom that colors the film, a fatalism Lang renders through chiaroscuro lighting effects and enormous high-angle shots that suggest a malevolent spiritual presence hovering above the city and guiding its denizens to their doom.

M is based on the real-life case of child-killer Peter Kurten, the "monster of Dusseldorf," whose crimes of the 1920s were still recent enough to resonate in the viewer's mind. The film is divided into three distinct sections. In the first, Lang introduces killer, victim, and the desolate urban landscape in which the crimes occur. The style here is oblique and impressionistic — shots of a blind man selling balloons, a little girl taking the hand of a stranger, a ball rolling down a hillside and coming ominously to rest. The director's discreet rendering of the murder of Elsie Beckmann subtly implicates the viewer in what is *not* shown — as Lang wrote, "forcing each individual member of the audience to create the gruesome details of the murder according to his personal imagination." Typical of the powerful sensibility at work here is a shot of the balloon Beckert purchased for Elsie, a crudely formed clown; separated from her hand during one of the film's unseen "gruesome details," it ends up helplessly trapped by telephone wires.

In the second sequence, which makes up most of the film, Lang presents the two groups whose interests are most threatened: the police, who must satisfy an hysterical populace, and the criminal underground, whose economic interests are jeopardized by increased police scrutiny because of the killings. Typical of the director, the film sees the police and the criminals as indistinguishable, intercutting between parallel scenes of each strategizing on how to "kill the monster." Some of the police station footage has a fresh, almost documentary feel, as then-new technologies like fingerprint analysis are methodically examined. Of course, in spite of these innovations, it's the criminals, who have an extensive network of spies and just as much at stake, who trap Beckert.

Beckert's capture and mock-trial are the subjects of the film's final sequence. This is a justly famous scene, with Lorre brilliantly laying out the template for all future cinematic psychopaths. An ideal casting choice with his pudgy frame, bulging, mournful eyes, and panicked grimaces, he dominates *M* in spite of actually having relatively little screen time. His breakdown speech before the mob demanding his death gives a wrenching look into the mind of a madman. "But can I ... can I help it?" he screams. "Haven't I got this curse inside me? The fire? The voice? The pain? ... Who knows what it feels like to be me?"

Much has been made of Lang's innovative use of sound in *M*, and this aspect of the film benefits enormously from the restoration of the print. Most powerful is the recurring use of a motif from Grieg's *Peer Gynt*, a whistled phrase that becomes increasingly more ominous, functioning as both a lure for Beckert's victims and the cause of his downfall when the balloon seller recognizes it. (The whistler is Lang himself, because Lorre couldn't!)

It's generally agreed that *M* was critical in hastening Lang's departure from Germany in 1934. The Nazis weren't thrilled by the film's original title, *Murderers Among Us*; they assumed it was about them and tried to squash the production, even going so far as issuing death threats. Of course, in a sense they were correct. *M* is about more than the landscape of an unbalanced mind. With its palpable air of dread and its direct indictment of mob mentality, the film draws with frightening precision the dark contours of Nazi groupthink.

July 2000 | Issue 29

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