HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Ministry of Fear 1944

Fritz Lang (1890-1976)

OVERVIEW

> But it's… it's… it's fantastic. The whole thing.
> —Carla Hilfe, *Ministry of Fear*

Ministry of Fear (1944) is chronologically the third of Fritz Lang's five WW2 films which feature Nazis as villains (except for *An American Guerilla in the Philippines* that takes place in the Pacific Theater). Unlike the previous *Man Hunt* and *Hangmen Also Die*, the propaganda element in *Ministry of Fear* is played down in favor of a not-always-logical, somewhat dreamy plot which has resulted in an intriguing and stylized film.

Graham Greene. Right after he is released from a mental clinic, a man finds himself entangled with a ubiquitous Nazi spy ring in war-time London. The story is a significantly altered adaptation of Graham Greene's 1943 novel with the same title. Fritz Lang wanted to buy the filming rights himself (Bogdanovich, 65) but was outbid by Paramount Pictures—with which he signed a contract to direct the film version. Graham Greene was disappointed with Lang's take on his novel. His autobiography makes a terse reference to the film:

> The scenes in the mental clinic are the best in the novel, and it was surprising to me that Fritz Lang, the old director of *M* and *The Spy* [sic] omitted them altogether from his film version of the book, thus making the whole story meaningless (Greene, 105).

Apparently Lang did not disagree—he even said that he later tried to watch his film when it played on TV but fell asleep (Bogdanovich, 65). He was not enthusiastic to talk about it—a sentiment that he would display for very few of his films (another example is *The Blue Gardenia*). Arguably he felt that way because he was annoyed by the "denazification" (Kenny) of the plot by the scriptwriter Seton I. Miller (*The Adventures of Robin Hood*, 1938; *The Sea Hawk*, 1940). Following 1943's *Hangmen Also Die,* Lang wanted to make another anti-Nazi film but was "stymied" (Kenny) by Miller who was also the film's producer.

Wartime London. The backdrop of *Ministry of Fear* is London under the Blitz and the date on a letter points to a specific time period earlier in the war, May 1941 (Nielsen). Similar to Lang's 1941 *Man Hunt*, the Blitz scenes were all shot on Paramount studios, with Lang and cinematographer Henry Sharp (*Don Q*, *Son of Zorro*; *Duck Soup*) successfully recreating scenes in wartime London, notably a scene that takes place in an air-raid shelter and another one with German bombers targeting a munitions factory in the distance.

WWII Thriller. *Ministry of Fear* can be broadly grouped with some of 1940s World War II thrillers: *The Spy in Black* (1939) and *Blackout* (1940) directed by Michael Powell; *Bombsight Stolen* (Anthony Asquith, 1941); *This Gun for Hire* (Frank Tuttle, 1942); 1943's *Journey into Fear* (written by Oscar Wells). It also vaguely resembles Sherlock Holmes films that have WW2 plots and star Basil Rathbone—e.g. *Sherlock Holmes and the Voice of Terror* (1942) and *Sherlock Holmes Faces Death* (1943)—thanks to shared cast members such as *Ministry of Fear*'s alluring clairvoyant played by Hillary Brooke.

Alfred Hitchcock. Notwithstanding his negative view of the film, Graham Greene reportedly considered Lang to be a superior director compared to Alfred Hitchcock (McGilligan, 305). The latter had acknowledged that Lang's *Destiny* was a film that greatly inspired him. That he did not mention the director's other films was rather surprising since Lang's German films had caused cinematic stirs when Hitchcock was in the early stages of his career (Truffaut, 25). On the other hand, *Ministry of Fear* shows

Hitchcock's influence on Lang, particularly that of *The Man Who Knew too Much* (1934) and *The 39 Steps* (1935).

Design. Art director Hans Dreier—*The Docks of New York* (1928*)* and *Double Indemnity* (1944)—who had worked with Lang for *You and Me* (1938) gives the film its distinctive noirish look with appealing sets. The costumes—most striking being the clairvoyant's dress—bear the signature of Edith Head, whose many Oscar nominations and awards include *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) and *The Sting* (1973).

A Unique Film. Critic Glenn Kenny has deemed *Ministry of Fear* to be above all "a nightmare film" with a touch of surrealism, exemplified by the scene with the humongous scissors that recall *Alice in Wonderland* (Kenny). Writing in 1945, Bosley Crowther dubbed *Ministry of Fear* an "eerie package of mystery" (Crowther) and observed that "Mr. Lang has given the picture something of the chilling quality of some of his early German shockers". Two of Lang's favorite subjects—psychiatry and telepathy—supplement the espionage story in *Ministry of Fear*, which displays his typical motifs such as hands and clocks.

CHARACTERS

Stephen Neale. Neale and his wife had moved from South Africa to London because of her illness. She committed suicide with the poison purchased by Neale and he spends two years at a mental clinic.

Carla Hilfe. Austrian émigré is a co-director of the Mothers of Free Nations charity. She gets romantically involved with Neale.

Willi Hilfe. Carla's brother is revealed to be the leader of the spy ring that uses the Mothers of the Free Nations as a front.

Mrs. Bellane. As one of the spies working for Willi Hilfe, the clairvoyant plays a mind game on Neale during the séance to confuse and gaslight him.

Inspector Prentice. The Scotland Yard detective initially thinks Neale is delusional and suspects him to be the murderer of private investigator Rennit. When Neale presents him the microfilm, he is persuaded about the existence of the spy ring.

Cost/Travers the Tailor. One of the operatives working for Willi Hilfe's spy ring, Cost/Travers uses a tailor shop as a front.

Dr. Forrester. Author of the bestseller *Psychoanalysis of Nazidom*, the psychiatrist works as a consultant for the Ministry of Home Defense and is one of the Nazi spies.

George Rennit. The private investigator hired by Neale is killed (off-screen) by the spies.

SYNOPSIS

Stephen Neale fights his demons following the death of his wife and staying at the mental hospital. He stops by a fete and wins a prize cake, which triggers a commotion around him; moments later, at the London train, a blind man viciously attacks him. Once in London, he hires a detective and visits the office of the Mothers of Free Nations to locate the enigmatic fortune teller at the fete. The directors Willi Hilfe and his sister Carla offer to help him. They visit the fortune teller, who turns out to be someone else; nonetheless, they stay to participate in a séance. Among the participants of the party is Dr. Forrester, an eminent psychiatrist from the Ministry of Home Security and a shady man named Cost, whom Neale had seen at the eventful fete. A gunshot interrupts the session. When the lights are turned on, Cost is found dead and the pistol in Neale's pocket makes him the prime suspect. He runs away and seeks the help of Carla Hilfe; they spend an evening at the subway station during an air-raid alarm.

The Hilfes and Neale figure that all the charity volunteers were recommended by the psychiatrist Forrester—indicating his use of the Mothers of the Free Nations as a front for the spy ring. Forrester cannot be found at his apartment—where Neale survives a bomb-plot. At the hospital, a police detective explains the private investigator Neale hired was murdered and Neale happened to be the culprit. Neale is given a chance to vindicate himself and takes detectives to the site of his final encounter with the fake blind man at the train. In the crater, he is able to find the cake mostly intact, with a microchip hidden inside. They take it to the Ministry of Home Security. Officials at the ministry explain that the microfilm—which includes British embarkation plans and maps of English Channel minefields—could only have been stolen when Dr. Forrester was visited by his tailor Travers. Prentice and Neale go to the tailor's shop and find that Travers is the same person as Cost—evidently he had pretended to be dead at the séance in order to disconcert Neale. Seeing that he is trapped, Travers/Cost kills himself and officers scramble to round up the rest of the spy ring. Willi Hilfe admits that he is the chief of the spy ring and gets shot by his sister. The ludicrous ending that follows shows Neale and Carla Hilfe making marriage plans.

SCENES



A Peculiar Fete. Stephen Neale is released from a mental hospital where he has spent the past two years for the mercy killing of his terminal wife. Still tormented by his experience and eager to blend in with society, Neale visits a fete as he waits for the London train. At the cake booth, he fails to guess a cake's weight correctly and moves on to the palm reader's tent. Here, a certain phrase he inadvertently uses prompts the woman to disclose the correct answer in the guessing game. The seemingly innocent charity fete becomes Stephen Neale's initiation into a nightmare.

After leaving the tent, he stops by the booth and this time wins the prize thanks to the tip. As he is leaving with his cake, the dashing arrival of a blonde man causes a stir at the fete. Neale is told that a mistake was made at the contest but he refuses to return the cake and heads out to Lembridge station.



Eventful Train Ride. Amid German aerial bombardment targeting a nearby munitions plant, the train departs, with Neale sharing the compartment with a blind man—the spy is one of several supposedly blind men in Lang's films). His fellow passenger turns out to be faking blindness and viciously attacks Neale; he grabs the cake and hops off the train. Neale chases him to an abandoned cottage, which instantaneously gets struck and destroyed by a German bomb. Neale finds the man's pistol and leaves the scene.

Mothers of Free Nations. In London, Neale hires a private investigator to help him unravel the mystery. The eccentric PI Rennit waits outside as Neale visits the main office of the Mothers of Free Nations. He is amiably greeted by the directors Willi Hilfe and his brother Carla who are Austrian émigrés.





Willi proposes to join Neale on a visit to Mrs. Bellane, the fortune teller at the event. When they get to Mrs. Bellane's house, Neale finds that she is not the same person he interacted with at the fete. The medium (Hillary Brooke) sports a dress designed by Edith Head. The costumes—most striking being the clairvoyant's dress—bear the signature of Edith Head, whose many Oscar nominations and awards include *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) and *The Sting* (1973).

Nonetheless, Neale and his companion accept Mrs. Bellane's invitation to join a séance she happened to be hosting. The séance scene recalls *Dr. Mabuse the Gambler* and *The Thousand Eyes of Dr. Mabuse*;

A Séance and a Corpse. Among the participants of the party is Dr. Forrester, an eminent psychiatrist who works as a consultant for the Ministry of Home Security. A surprise guest is named Cost, who is none other than the blonde man that had come to the fete for the cake. Soon after the lights are turned off, Neale is irked by a woman's voice—evidently his deceased wife—blaming him for murdering her. Then a gun shot interrupts the session. When the lights are turned on, Cost is found dead and the pistol in Neale's pocket makes him the prime suspect. With Willi Hilfe's help, he escapes before the police arrive.

Neale's Divulgence. Neale manages to dodge a mysterious man with a bowler hat and goes to the private investigator's office. He finds it ransacked, with Rennit nowhere to be found. He then calls Carla Hilfe and they meet at a subway station just before an air-raid alarm is raised. The two spend the evening in the station which doubles as shelter and Neale tells her about his role in his wife's death—assisted euthanasia rather than mercy killing, as she had taken her own life by the poison he had purchased.





Stephen Neale's brief and inconsequential encounter with the psychic presents art director Hans Dreier's fascinating set design. Hans Dreier—*The Docks of New York* (1928*)* and *Double Indemnity* (1944)—who had worked with Lang for *You and Me* (1938) gives the film its distinctive noirish look with appealing sets.

The Spy Ring. With sunrise, the air raid is over and Carla takes Neale to the bookstore of a friend to hide. The Hilfes and Neale figure that all the charity volunteers were recommended by the psychiatrist Forrester—indicating his use of the Mothers of the Free Nations as a front for the spy ring. Forrester is a Nazi spy who works as a consultant at the Ministry of Home Security and the author of a best-seller—the Psychoanalysis of Nazidom.



When the bookseller requests that they drop a case of books to Forrester's apartment, Neale welcomes the opportunity to uncover more about the psychiatrist. When he and Carla get there, they are perplexed by the empty apartment—which suddenly gets rocked by the explosion of a bomb hidden in the bookseller's case.

The Microchip. Neale wakes up in a hospital and finds the mysterious man with the bowler hat sitting before his bed. The man identifies himself as Scotland Yard Inspector Prentice. With an intimidating presence, Scotland Yard Inspector Prentice seems to be a figure from Neale's nightmares.



Prentice curtly explains that Neale is the culprit for the murder of the private investigator Rennit, whose body was found by a river bank. Neale asks for a chance to vindicate himself and takes detectives to the site of his final encounter with the fake blind man at the train. In the crater, he is able to find the cake mostly intact, with a microchip hidden inside. They take it to the Ministry of Home Security.

The Tailor Spy. Officials at the ministry explain that the microfilm—which includes British embarkation plans and maps of English Channel minefields—could only have been stolen when Dr. Forrester was visited by his tailor Travers. Prentice and Neale go to the tailor's shop and find that Travers is the same person as Cost—evidently he had pretended to be dead at the séance in order to disconcert Neale. Seeing that he is trapped, Travers/Cost kills himself with a huge pair of scissors and officers scramble to round up the rest of the spy ring. Cost/Travers with his oversized scissors in one of those moments when *Ministry of Fear* turns surrealistic.



Carla Hilfe Versus Brother. Neale dials the number last called by the tailor and Carla picks up the phone. When he goes to the apartment to confront her, he finds that Willi Hilfe is also there. Carla's brother admits that he is the chief of the spy ring and has a copy of the microfilm sewn inside a jacket by the tailor. The two men have a brawl and the spy gets shot by his sister. The ludicrous ending that follows shows Neale and Carla Hilfe making marriage plans; he gets wacky when she brings up the subject of the cake. The comical ending has few fans and neither was Fritz Lang one of them.



THEMES

Melancholia and Mourning. Stephen Neale struggles not only with the loss of his wife but with his role in her death. It is revealed that he had not poisoned her—as the official investigation concluded—but she had taken her own life with the poison he purchased. His relationship with Carla not simply distracts him; it helps him overcome his feelings of guilt.

Parallels. Neale is one of several Lang characters who try to cope with death of a loved one. In *Destiny*, the Maiden is in denial of her fiancé's death. In this instance, the process of mourning in a Freudian sense is not successful (Gunning, 29). In *Metropolis*, the mad-scientist Rotwang builds a shrine to honor his wife Hel and the robot is modeled after her; *Die Nibelungen*'s Kriemhild never forgets her murdered husband Siegfried and turns into a wrathful avenger; In *Scarlet Street*, Chris Cross becomes psychotic and is tormented by thoughts of Kitty March after he kills her.

Individual and Society. Before he is released from the mental clinic, Neale tells the doctor that after spending two years on his own, "a sea of faces would be a good tonic" and "he is looking forward to being "pushed and jammed by the biggest crowds". Right away, his expectations are challenged. A charity fete, presumably among the least dangerous of social gatherings, turns into a sinister trap; Neale's companion on the train is a deadly henchman who fakes disability; the city itself hardly gives him a break as he encounters a procession of scheming and menacing characters including a psychiatrist, tailor, artist, psychic, and bookseller.

Enemy Within. Similar to Lang's *Man Hunt*, many of the characters in *Ministry of Fear* are spies. London is depicted as a hostile environment where anyone can be working for the enemy. Particularly interesting point (considering that the director was born in Vienna) is the spymaster Willi Hilfe's background as an Austrian émigré.

Psychiatry. Dr. Forrester joins the ranks of psychiatrists in Lang's others films: three appearances of Dr. Mabuse (1922, 1933, and 1960) as well as Professor Wanley in *The Woman in the Window.* He is the author of the best-seller *Psychoanalysis of Nazidom*. His profession turns out to be a smoke screen for his activities as a Nazi agent. Working as a consultant for the Ministry of Home Defense provides him with access to sensitive information. The film briefly features a second psychiatrist character, Dr. Norton from the Lembridge Asylum where Neale was treated for two years. This is a positive portrayal, with Dr. Norton showing sympathy for Neale's ordeal.

Discussion questions

Would you consider *Ministry of Fear* to be a film noir? Why or why not?

In what ways is *Ministry of Fear* different from propaganda and anti-Nazi films of 1940s?

The "nightmarish quality" of *Ministry of Fear* has been likened to Martin Scorcese's *After Hours* (1985) and Steve de Jarnatt's *Miracle Mile* (1988) (Nielsen, 449). How does *Ministry of Fear* (and the mentioned films or other relevant titles) relay this quality?

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