HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Burak Sevingen, MA

House by the River 1950

Fritz Lang (1890-1976)

OVERVIEW

House by the River—Fritz Lang's first film in the last decade of his directing career—is a period piece with a rural setting that makes it stand out from his films, which typically cast the spotlight on the modern city.

Source. In *House by the River*, a heinous novelist uses the river to cover up his sensational crime and all the while enjoys the publicity boost to his foiled writing career. The film is based on A.P Herbert's 1921 novel (which takes place by the River Thames) that was adapted to theater as *Flood Tide* (Somerville). The screenplay was written by Mel Dinelli, whose *Spiral Staircase* (1946) also featured a stately house. The presence of the river introduces an aquatic element to Lang's filmography that he would revisit with the fishing town of 1952's *Clash by Night.*

Turn of the Century. Lang does not specify the location and the period. Certain clues—such as the wall phone with magnetic crank and cylinder turntable—suggest that the story takes place in Fin de siècle United States. It is as if Lang's fascination with Modernity leads him to look back on its dawn.

The Score. The soundtrack is composed by avant-garde composer George Antheil who had written the composition of the Dadaist/Cubist film Ballet Mecanique. His other works in Hollywood included the 1936 Western *The Plainsman, In a Lonely Place* starring Humphrey Bogart (1950), as well as the experimental and dialogueless horror film *Dementia 55.*

The Cast. Louis Hayward plays the vicious main character in *House by the River*. Hayward was a star of adventure films such as *The Man in the Iron Mask* (1939) and *The Son of Monte Cristo* (1940). During his military service in WW2, he contributed as director (uncredited) to combat documentary ***With The Marines at Tarawa*** (1944) about the battle in the Pacific War. The novelist he plays in *House by the River* is a precursor of dastardly—and often failed—writers in later films, such as Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*, Johnny Depp in *Secret Window*, Sharon Stone in *Basic Instinct* and Luigi Pistilli in the 1972 Italian giallo film *Your Vice is a Locked Room and only I have the Key.* Dorothy Patrick's character is killed at the beginning of the film, after she resists her domestic employer's rape attempt. Her murderer then proceeds to posthumously frame her as a culprit—coincidentally, *Tarnished* happened to be the name of a film Patrick starred in the same year. Lang's *The Blue Gardenia* would bring up this theme more prominently with a female protagonist who fought slander.

In the Context of Lang's Filmography. While Lang directed about a film per year in his Hollywood career, *House by the River* came out a time when his output slowed. It is one of two Fritz Lang films (the other is *An American Guerilla in the Philippines*) released between 1947's *Secret Beyond the Door* and 1952's *Rancho Notorious*.

Writing in late 1960s, Peter Bogdanovich considered *House by the River* to be Lang's "least known work" (Bogdanovich, 14). Presumably, the film became better known since then—but it is possibly still a less viewed Lang film. One reason for this was that it was produced by a relatively small film studio and had a modest budget. Patrick McGilligan calls *House by the River* "Lang's real descent into the 'B' world (McGilligan, 369). On the other hand, for Tom Gunning, it is among his "most unified, disciplined, and imagistically powerful films" (Gunning, 369).

Themes. Among the film's themes are commodification of publishing, justice, and modernity. Class is another important issue and the question of inequality is addressed—a bold thing to do after the House Un-American Activities Committee's 1947 purge of artists suspected to have critical perspectives. Among

those targeted by the committee were Lang's collaborators in *Cloak and Dagger* and *Hangmen also Die!* (Gunning, 341). Sexual abuse is another topic that would resonate strongly with contemporary viewers.

CHARACTERS

Stephen Byrne. Stephen is an unsuccessful novelist who 'accidentally' kills the maid and frames his brother John for the crime.

John Byrne. Stephen's accountant brother helps him cover up the murder. John is mildly disabled.

Marjorie Byrne. Stephen's wife is close to her husband's brother and their relationship gradually intensifies.

Emily Gaunt. Emily is the maid murdered by Stephen at the beginning.

Mrs. Ambrose. Byrnes' neighbor is an observant older woman who has known the brothers since they were kids.

Flora Bantam. A secondary character, Flora is John's motherly maid who is initially very fond of her employer. He disregards her admiration and they have a quarrel over Emily's reputation—following which she quits her job. Eventually, her testimony contributes to Stephen's efforts to incriminate his brother for Emily's murder.

Inspector Sarten. Police officer has a minor role leading up to the inquest. He is interesting for being the least imposing and most unremarkable one among Lang's law enforcers.

SYNOPSIS

While his wife is away, unsuccesful writer Stephen Byrne sexually assaults and murders their maid Emily. His brother John, who has a soft spot for Stephen's wife Marjorie, helps him cover up the crime. The brothers dump the corpse in the river. Stephen circulates the rumor that the maid was a promiscuous thief who stole a couple of Marjorie's belongings before running away with her lover. Thanks to the buzz of the homicide, Stephen attracts the attention of the media and his previous book *Night Laughter* becomes a best seller; he eagerly starts working on a new one that he tentatively titles *The River*—it would later be retitled *Death on the River* and turn into an account of the murder.

Eventually, the sack containing the corpse reappears floating on the river. Stephen fails to retrieve it, but is relieved to learn that his brother's name was stenciled on it. Stephen acts increasingly obnoxiously; Marjorie and John become closer and she seems disposed to return his affection, turning Stephen even nastier.

The sack is found by the police and a murder investigation is launched. With his name stenciled on the sack, John becomes the primary suspect. He is not convicted of the crime, but is shunned in the town nonetheless. He looks depressed and Marjorie warns Stephen that his brother might be suicidal—which prompts him to devise a ploy to get rid of his wife and brother. He plants Marjorie's opal earrings in John's house, predicting that they would incriminate him for Marjorie's death after he had committed suicide. At the pier, Stephen knocks John unconscious and dumps him in the water. Stephen returns home and attempts to strangle his wife. John, who has managed to get out of the river, appears. Horrified by the appearance of his brother and the apparition of Emily, Stephen falls to his death.

SCENES

"The Tide Always Brings Them Back". Stephen Byrne is working on his novel in the garden pavilion of his river house—or he is trying to, with the next door neighbor Mrs. Ambrose constantly complaining about an animal carcass floating on the water. Ambrose and Byrne houses by the river were created partially in lovely matte painting.



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Stephen is done working on his manuscript—a close-up shot suggests it may not be rolling along nicely and provides insight into Stephen's mindset: "therefore sleep would not come to Roland Forbes, as it would not come to any man with troubled mind". Stephen spares the beetle walking on his manuscript.

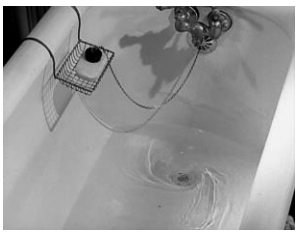


The novelist is a precursor of dastardly—and often failed—writers in later films, such as Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*, Johnny Depp in *Secret Window*, Sharon Stone in *Basic Instinct* and Luigi Pistilli in the 1972 Italian giallo film *Your Vice is a Locked Room and only I have the Key.*



Mrs. Ambrose and Stephen Byrne chat in the garden while Brynes' maid Emily Gaunt approaches them. It is getting late and Stephen prepares to go inside to wait for his wife Marjorie, who has been spending the day in the country. The couple's plan for the evening is to go to a party. Byrnes' maid Emily has brought the mail; it is another one of Stephen's rejected manuscript submissions. He is visibly frustrated. Emily will be sexually assaulted and killed in the following scene.

The following sequence anticipates the bathroom scene in Hitchcock's *Psyho*: Emily Gaunt drains the tub; Stephen hears the sound of water flushing down the pipe and looks up to the bathroom window. In a moment he will go inside and Emily will come down the stairs. Brilliant editing conveys repressed desire.









Murder at Dusk. Stephen is having a drink when the maid finishes taking a bath and comes down the stairs. Stephen leers at her, lurking in the shadows of the staircase. Clink of his glass creeps out Emily, who is now aware of being watched. She cowers to the shadows of the staircase, recalling Maria trying to seek cover from Rotwang's gaze and spotlight in *Metropolis*)



She is relieved when she sees that it's her employer. However, Stephen blocks her passage and attempts to grope her. Emily firmly resists and struggles to break free from his hold. Just then, Mrs. Ambrose happens to wander outside the house and Stephen forces Emily to hush. The nosy neighbor doesn't hear a thing and goes away. Only then Stephen realizes that he has strangled Emily. Her lifeless body drops to the floor.

Enter John Byrne. A knock on the door rattles Stephen. His brother John comes in and quickly figures out what just took place. Stephen persuades him not to involve the police. Apparently, John has a soft spot for his brother's wife and when Stephen lies about Marjorie being pregnant, he decides to help him cover up the murder. They put the corpse in a wood sack and drag it to a rowing boat. A little way off the shore, the brothers dump the sack and return to their homes.



Square Dance. Marjorie finds her husband to be in excellent spirits that night. At the party, he looks exhilarated as he calls out the moves of the square dance. John is irked by the disturbing elevation of his brother's mood. The scene also highlights class difference; the comfortable lifestyle of the town's well-to-do counterpointing with the two maids who play critical parts.



Another reference to the turn-of-the-century setting and early modern pastimes is a shot of Brynes' family album, showing the couple—in happier times—riding bicycles and playing tennis



Emily's Disappearance. Emily's disappearance soon makes it to the front page of the small town's newspaper. Stephen circulates the rumor that she was a promiscuous thief who stole a couple of Marjorie's belongings before running away with her lover. The only person bothered by Emily's reputation getting tarnished is the guilt-ridden John. He has a heated discussion over this issue with his maid Flora Bantam who consequently quits the job. Bantam was very fond of John—the end of her employment will make her sour and nearly cost John his freedom. In this scene from their happy times, Lang is underscoring the turn-of-the-century setting with Bantam calling John from a wall phone with a magneto crank.

Social and economic inequality is a recurrent theme in *House by the River*. The maids underscore that not everyone belongs to the upper middle circle of Byrnes and their acquaintances. Stephen and Marjorie Byrne employ a maid and a cook. They have a comfortable lifestyle—made possible by John who had given up most of his share of the inheritance in favor of his brother. John Byrne has a smaller house and is served by one maid.

The Rebirth of the Author. Marjorie notices that the news story features a portrait photo of Stephen taken from the family album. She deduces that he must have provided the photo to the press in order to associate himself with the sensational story. The news story refers to Stephen Byrne as "prominent citizen" and Emily is portrayed as a runaway. It reads: "In these turbulent times when so many young people becoming dissatisfied with country life have run off from their homes … the girl's parents, with whom she was not on the best of terms."



Thanks to the buzz, Stephen's previous book *Night Laughter* becomes a best seller and he eagerly starts working on a new one that he tentatively titles *The River*. Stephen's book signing day is a success and is capsulated with a nice composition that features his framed portrait (same one used by the newspaper, many copies of his *Night Laughter,* and a bust of Shakespeare)



The Return of the Sack. Stephen is enjoying his newfound success when he is startled by the reappearance of the sack. It is now floating back and forth with the tide. He goes out looking for it with the rowboat. After a while he spots the sack but fails to get a hold of it. Marjorie will soon observe that Stephen becomes "ghoulish."



Examples of Cronjager's cinematography: Stephen is framed by the wooden railing of the pier. The nautical theme does not prevent Lang from using one of his favorite compositions—showing guilt-ridden characters behind—typically metal—bars.



Sometime later, Stephen is greatly relieved upon learning that the sack actually belonged to his brother and had his name stenciled on it.

Strained Relations. Marjorie's relationship with her husband deteriorates with Stephen's obsessive interest in Emily's disappearance. She and John become closer and Marjorie seems disposed to return his affection. During one of their quarrels, Stephen accuses Marjorie of having an affair with his brother.

The Inquest. The sack is found by the police and a murder investigation is launched. With his name stenciled on the sack, John becomes the primary suspect. At the inquest, the testimony of John's disgruntled maid raises a few eyebrows and the prosecution is unable to present a conclusive case for his guilt. The only conclusion that emerges from the inquest is that Emily had run away with items stolen from Byrnes. Marjorie testifies, her respectability and fine dress counterpoints with the parents of Emily, who have to endure the slander as the reputation of their daughter gets tarnished.





Stephen's Ploy. John is shunned in the town and is considering going away. Marjorie urges Stephen to watch out for his brother—she fears that John might be contemplating suicide. The cue leads him to devise a plan to decisively frame his brother as the culprit. Another great example of Cronjager's cinematography shows Stephen lurking in the shadows of the house. He secretly takes Marjorie's opal earrings and plants them in John's house. Then he goes to his brother's place to see if he went ahead with the suicide. He finds John on the pier, but is disappointed to hear that he does not intend to kill himself.



Stephen then gets nasty and attacks him verbally. In an instant he knocks John unconscious with the boat chain and dumps him in the water. Confident that he got rid of his conscience-stricken accomplice, he returns home.

"**Death on the River".** At home, Stephen finds Marjorie reading the manuscript of his (evidently retitled) book *Death on the River*—apparently an account of the events surrounding his murder of Emily. He gets mad and viciously attacks her. Just as he is about to strangle Marjorie, John shows up at the door, staggered and all wet. In panic, Stephen runs to the staircase where he is terrified by an apparition of Emily Gaunt. The curtain is blowing with the wind and entangles his neck. As he trips and falls down the staircase, it strangles him

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

STEPHEN BYRNE Disagreeable (Lascivious, Unbrotherly, Adulterous, Ghoulish)

Stephen may not be in the same league with Lang's master villains, but he is quite wicked and dangerous.

Illustrative moments

Lascivious. Stephen is introduced as a sexual predator—but was Emily Gaunt his first victim?

Unbrotherly. Stephen first gets John mixed up in the cover-up and later frames him for the crime. The animosity between the brothers anticipates Lang's *Western Union* in which Vance Shaw and his brother settle their grievances with a deadly gunfight.

Adulterous. "I am beginning to wonder why he married me at all" grouses Marjorie. Stephen Byrne, "the prominent citizen" as described by the newspaper turns out to be adulterous—he tries to provoke Marjorie with his affairs by flaunting "cheap perfume can be very exciting". All the talk of decency is slowly revealed to be a façade of the lives' of the characters.

Ghoulish. Marjorie feels that her husband becomes "ghoulish" following the homicide and his eagerness to benefit from the publicity surrounding it.

THEMES

Society – (Modernity, Class, Promiscuity, Disability, Race, Commodification of Publishing)
Justice – (Justice)

SOCIETY

Modernity. *House by the River* invites us to stand at the threshold of modernity. It showcases a panorama of advances that have not yet ripened:

- Electric power is not available; gas lamps as well as candles are used for lighting.
- Telephones are available; John Byrne has one in his accounting office. In one scene, his maid Flora Bantam calls him from a booth at an apothecary. They both use wooden wall phones with magneto cranks.
- At the party, Byrnes take part in a square dance. The music is played by a cylinder phonograph—disc technology had not yet replaced the cylinders.
- Byrnes' two bicycles are parked in front of their porch. Apparently these have replaced a penny farthing—possibly not too long ago, since there is a high wheeler in storage in their basement.
- Photography has obviously been a part of the characters' lives for some time. Marjorie browses a photo album that is organized chronologically, beginning with Stephen's childhood and ends with their marriage. The town's newspaper uses an image of Stephen taken from this scrapbook to illustrate the story about the missing maid.

Mass produced items may be everywhere, but not everything is replaceable. Notwithstanding its crucial role in the plot, the wood sack is an important household item. Prior to the homicide, Stephen has borrowed it from his brother. John's maid informs him that she needs to have it back for gathering driftwood. The sack is personalized with John's initials stenciled on it.

Class. Social and economic inequality is a recurrent theme in *House by the River*. The maids underscore that not everyone belongs to the upper middle circle of Byrnes and their acquaintances. Stephen and Marjorie Byrne employ a maid and a cook. They have a comfortable lifestyle—made possible by John who had given up most of his share of the inheritance in favor of his brother. John Byrne has a smaller house and is served by one maid.

Stephen keeps referring to Emily Gaunt disparagingly as "dead servant girl" or "miss good servant girl". John's maid Flora Bantam is also nasty in her remarks about the murder victim. Instead of sympathizing with a peer, she emphasizes their difference—"I know I am only a servant girl … but I come from a very genteel family". The annoying character serves as comic relief and her high class aspirations are mocked by Mrs. Ambrose during the inquest.

Promiscuity. References to class difference are imbued with sexual overtones. Flora Bantam is particularly vicious about attacking Gaunt's reputation. She calls her "a proper hussy, scatting about night after night … a good for nothing trollop". Bantam herself is eventually attacked with a similar argument. "When an old maid is in love", Mrs. Ambrose speaks up in defense of John Byrne, "heaven protect the object of her affections if that love goes unrequited". The inquest concludes with the statement that "Emily Gaunt, dressed in her mistress' finery, went to some secret tryst … was murdered by person or persons

unknown". Instead of finding her killer, the investigation and media attention focus on the maid's alleged promiscuity.

Disability. The cause of John's limping leg is never explained but characters frequently refer to it. The maid Flora Bentam uses the inquest to get even with him for disregarding her admiration. The wood sack receives scrutiny as an important clue and she emphasizes Byrne's connection to the sack. She brings up his wood collecting as "the only sort of hobby possible for a man with his affliction". John's brother makes similarly snide remarks. A few hours after the murder, Stephen dances exuberantly at the party while John thoughtfully looks on from a distance. Marjorie says that "it must be very hard to love music very much but not be able to dance and be a part of things". Stephen replies that unless he was a "wet blanket", he could have participated in the square dance as the caller of the moves. His later comment interconnects disability with sexuality and class. "John is a cripple. He knows he has no chance with a girl of our class. It's not hard to believe that he carried on with a servant girl".

Race. This is a potentially interesting theme that Lang reportedly wished to explore— by casting a Black woman in the part of the maid Emily—but could not get the approval of the producer.

Commodification of Publishing. Not only does Stephen manage to avoid becoming a suspect in the investigation, he benefits from the publicity. His unsuccessful career as a writer takes off after he associates himself with the sensational story. We then see him signing his books at the bookstore. The seller mentions that he had prepared to "cash in" from the hype by rearranging the window display and getting ready a pile of Stephen's *Night Laughter.*

JUSTICE

Justice. The courtroom scene is a favorite of Lang and he uses it in several films. The inquest in *House by the River* is distinct for not having a jury. The trial itself is rather farcical and ends up producing no outcome. It is marked by Flora Bantam's attempt to defame her former employer John Byrne. Then, Byrnes' neighbor Mrs. Ambrose takes the floor and chides Bantam with a monologue. The audience has a good laugh but the inquest does not even come close to finding Emily Gaunt's murderer.

Discussion questions

In his interview with Peter Bogdanovich, Fritz Lang recounts that he "fought like a Trojan" to cast a black woman in the role of the victim (Bogdanovich, 75), the young maid named Emily Gaunt. The film's producers had firmly denied him the opportunity to do. How would such a change alter the course of events? What would be the ultimate difference of this version of the film?

Female characters in Fritz Lang's *Human Desire, the Blue Gardenia* and *House by the River* react to various forms of sexual abuse. How does Lang represent this issue? how would these representations be relevant in the context of contemporary debates?

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