HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Burak Sevingen, MA

Beyond a Reasonable Doubt 1956

Fritz Lang (1890-1976)

OVERVIEW

"I hated it, but it turned out to be a great success" Fritz Lang recalled about his last American film (Higham, 1972: 139). *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* was "shot under duress," due to conflicts with the producer and released in the September of 1956. Lang would return to Germany to direct the final films of his career.

The Concept.

> "Beyond a Reasonable Doubt: The term connotes that evidence establishes a particular point to a moral certainty and that it is beyond dispute that any reasonable alternative is possible. It does not mean that no doubt exists as to the accused's guilt, but only that no reasonable doubt is possible from evidence" (Stewart, 2006).

A publisher intends to demonstrate the unreliability of circumstantial evidence in capital cases. He collaborates with a writer, whom they meticulously frame for a sensational crime. The plan is to get him convicted and finally disclose their hoax—thereby mock the legal system with a scandal and expose death penalty as state sanctioned murder. However, a late plot twist eventually reveals that the writer had a sinister agenda of his own.

Unlike several of Lang's American films that were book adaptations, *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* is based on Douglas Morrow's original screenplay. Lang had prepared for it while working on *While the City Sleeps*, which was released the same year in May. Once again, Dana Andrews plays the leading man with another restrained performance.

Themes. Some of the notable themes are justice, capital punishment, power of news media, photography (specifically instant camera technology, which plays an interesting role), identity, mass production (i.e., many references to mass produced items with their prices mentioned), gender and class (a heiress briefly runs her deceased father's media empire; her character contrasts with the burlesque dancers).

Parallels. *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* shared a similar premise with John Sturges' 1946 film *The Man Who Dared*. Alfred Hitchcock's *The Wrong Man*—which revolved around an innocent man charged with a crime—had an affinity to it. Lang's film also anticipated Hitchcock's "greatest 50s fable of identity" *Vertigo* (1958) (Gunning, 449)—which "supercharged" (O'Donoghue) its "suppressed" (Pye) narrative. A remake of *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* was released in 2009 with the same title; it was directed by Peter Hyams and starred Michael Douglas.

Among other films that cast the spotlight on capital punishment are *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1982, Daniel Vigne), *Dance with a Stranger* (1985, Mike Newell), *A Short Film About Killing* (1988, Krzysztof Kieslowski), *Dancer in the Dark* (2000, Lars von Trier—starring Björk), *Dead Man Walking* (1995, Tim Robbins), *The Green Mile* (1999, Frank Darabond), *The Life of David Gayle* (2003, Alan Parker).

Langian Parallels. "You are not a slow writer, you just don't write", his fiancée tells *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt*'s Tom Garrett. An idle and dastardly writer was the antagonist of Lang's period film *House by the River* (1950). Lang's final work in Hollywood has many parallels and connections to his previous films. Media plays an important role in representing trials and shaping public opinion—as in *Fury*

(newsreels), and *You Only Live Once* and *The Return of Frank James* (newspapers). In *The Blue Gardenia* and *While the City Sleeps*, journalists not only report police investigations, but actively contribute to them. Powerful media figures in these films try to manipulate events in order to advance their careers. They prefigure the protagonists of *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt*, who try to hijack an investigation to use it for their own agenda. Another parallel is the featuring of the crime scene, which is an intricate part of the plot as in *M*, *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*, *Ministry of Fear* and *The Woman in the Window*—hence the focus on forensics. A newspaper photo represents the scene, similar to the maquette in *M* and the photo with graphics in *While the City Sleeps*. Another similarity is that a dead man's letter changes the course of events, as it does in *The Big Heat*.

Critical Assesment. His biographer McGilligan is skeptical about Fritz Lang's comment that *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* was a great success (McGilligan, 420). Nonetheless, the film has piqued the interest of cultural theorists as early as 1950s with the works of Raymond Bellour and Jacques Rivette. In his "The Hand" (considered by critic Chris Fujiwara to be "one of the most staggering pieces of film criticism"[Fujiwar), Rivette remarked on the film's lack of "embellishment" which made it "less the mise-en-scène of the script than a reading of its script" (Rivette). Characters, Rivette maintained, were more like "human concepts"—a sentiment later echoed by Stephen Jenkins who regarded them as "pure functions" and considered *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* to be "Lang's most abstract film" (Jenkins). Rivette's description of it as being "diagrammatic" has been reiterated by Tom Gunning, who regarded it as a "demonstration of Langian principles than a film itself"—which ultimately made it a "supremely inhuman film" (Eisner, 358).

Lang had launched his Hollywood career with three films that critically addressed social issues. After two decades, his last two American films showed a fresh perspective in his handling of such subjects. Critic and archivist Lotte Eisner observed that Lang's focus had shifted from specific problems like corruption to themes such as alienation and indifference[1]—which prevail in *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt*, an unusual Fritz Lang film that rewards repeated viewings like many others.

CHARACTERS

Tom Garrett. Garrett is the author of a successful novel and wants to prove that he is not a one-hit wonder. He is engaged to the daughter of Austin Spencer, an influential publicist and an opponent of capital punishment.

Austin Spencer. Spencer comes up with a plan that he believes would prove the illogicality of the death penalty in cases with verdicts based on circumstantial evidence. The plan gets derailed following his death in a car accident.

Susan Spencer. Garrett's fiancée is kept uninformed about the two men's secretive plan and gets progressively annoyed. After her father's death, Susan uses the influential newspaper to mold public opinion in favor of Garrett.

DA Rob Thompson. The ambitious and successful district attorney is known for getting guilty verdicts in capital cases; Austin Spencer criticizes Thompson for his eagerness to demand the death penalty.

ADA Bob Hale. Assistant District Attorney has long had a crush on Susan Spencer. At the end, he encourages her to inform the governor about Garrett's admission of guilt. With Garrett out of the picture—via execution—it looks likely that they would become a couple.

SYNOPSIS

Newspaper owner Austin Spencer wants to prove the fallacy of capital punishment; he thinks he can do so by pointing out the flaws in circumstantial evidence. Writer Tom Garrett, who is engaged to Spencer's daughter, is intrigued and the two men come up with a plan to mold the public opinion on the issue. Garrett self-incriminates himself in a randomly chosen murder case; their steps are carefully documented by Spencer to be later provided during the trial.

Garrett begins to spend time with a burlesque dancer named Dolly Moore, who works at the same club as the murder victim Patti Gray. She gets suspicious and alerts the police; Garrett is arrested. Meanwhile, his marriage with Susan Spencer is postponed.

Eventually, Garrett is linked to the Patty Gray murder. Consequently, the jury announces its guilty verdict. Before Austin Spencer can play his part in the scheme and make it public, he is killed in a car accident and all the records of the concoction are destroyed. Susan takes charge of the media empire and mobilizes it to influence the outcome of the trial.

Garrett is poised to receive a pardon from the governor. Just before his release, he meets with Susan and admits that he had in fact been married to the victim and had killed her after she blackmailed him. Susan is disturbed and informs the governor; the pardon is negated and Garrett is taken back to his cell in the death row.

SCENES

Execution. An opponent of capital punishment, newspaper owner Austin Spencer takes his future son-in-law Tom Garrett to witness a state execution by electrocution. The condemned is taken from his cell to be electrocuted. Garrett and Spencer are among the audience)





Following the gruesome experience, they have a chance encounter with the ambitious District Attorney. Spencer and DA Rob Thompson have a quick debate about capital punishment, specifically those cases with guilty verdicts that were based on circumstantial evidence. Tom Garrett—a young writer with a successful debut novel—seems intrigued by the subject.



An Unidentified Caller. Garrett is engaged to Austin's daughter Susan and the couple has plans to marry next month. While they are chilling at his apartment, the phone rings and Garrett seems annoyed by the call. The caller and the nature of the call are left unexplained.

The Publisher's Scheme. Austin Spencer wants to prove the fallacy of capital punishment and Garrett is eager to help him mold public opinion on this issue—envisaging turning the experience into a sensational book. Spencer's idea is manipulating circumstantial evidence in such a way that it would incriminate Garrett in a randomly chosen murder case and get him a death sentence. According to the plan, Spencer would keep records of their actions and ultimately step forward to prove Garrett's innocence—saving him and laying bare the defective nature of the capital punishment laws. Meanwhile, Garrett tells Susan that they need to postpone the wedding so that he can focus on writing; she is kept in the dark about the scheme.



A Convenient Homicide. The two men pick the case of the murder of a burlesque dancer named Patty Gray, whose corpse was found in a ravine just outside the city. Details about the crime scene are provided with a newspaper story. Visualization parallels similar images in *M* and *While the City Sleeps*. Police only know that the culprit was a man of average build who wore an unremarkable coat and drove a dark sedan. Garrett buys a tweed coat to fit the culprit's profile and to trick the investigators. As part of the hoax, Spencer documents the purchase with his instant camera. At the store, he poses for Spencer's Polaroid camera with his purchase—the scene anticipates Hitchcock's Vertigo.





Garrett then begins to frequent the Zombie Club where Patty Gray worked—with the intention of drawing the attention of her co-workers. The murder victim Patty Gray never appears alive; other cabaret dancers at the club, interact with Garrett. The "burlesque show" is a frequent trope in Lang's films—e.g. *The Woman in the Window*, *Dr. Mabuse the Gambler*.



Fabricating Evidence. Spencer and Garrett continue to leave a trail of false clues for the police. At the crime scene, they drop the inscribed lighter that Susan had gifted to Garrett and place stockings in his car as the purported murder weapon. They also rub the car seats with a particular brand of cosmetics used by the burlesque club's performers.

Arrest. Garrett begins to spend time with a dancer named Dolly Moore—whose mannerism and locution sharply contrasts with Susan Spencer. Moore becomes uneasy and alerts the police. They are tailed by officers and eventually he gets arrested. Not before long, he is associated with the Patty Gray murder.



Trial. During the trial, District Attorney Thompson swiftly brings charges and produces a strong case. He also baffles the two schemers by focusing not so much on the evidence they fabricated, but by bringing up other details that somehow actually link Garrett to the murder—notably his bank transactions, as he had withdrawn cash before the crime, only to deposit it back later. Consequently, the jury announces its guilty verdict. Susan Spencer is initially supportive of her fiancé, but ultimately she will betray him. They interact behind bars, another Lang trope (e.g. *House by the River, The Woman in the Window, You Only Live Once*).



An Effective Media Campaign. Before Austin Spencer can play his part in the scheme and make it public, he is killed in a car accident and all the records of the concoction are destroyed. Susan takes charge of the media empire and mobilizes it to influence the outcome of the trial. Meanwhile, investigators find out the victim's real name was Emma Blooker but fail to establish a link between her and Garrett. A television news crew records the trial and highlights are broadcast later in the day.





A Condemning Revelation. Garrett is poised to receive a pardon from the governor. Just before his release, he meets with Susan at the warden's office. There, he slips and reveals that he had in fact been married to Emma Blooker; a youthful marriage had ended with her going away. Garrett admits that he murdered Blooker—the unidentified caller at the beginning—when she blackmailed him. Susan is disturbed and informs the governor just before the pardon is signed. The pardon is negated—"there will be no pardon", the governor declares—and Garrett is taken back to his cell in the death row.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

TOM GARRETT Closed (Impassive, Ambivalent, Smirking)

Character Actor Dana Andrews (film noir classic *Laura*, 1944; *Best Years of Our Lives*, 1946) had portrayed a popular journalist and writer in *While the City Sleeps*; Andrews gives a similarly subtle performance for Tom Garrett.

Illustrative moments

Impassive. Garrett rarely shows any emotions during his interactions with the main characters.

Ambivalent. In his relation with Susan, Garrett is restrained while she is the sexually aggressive one. On the other hand, he seems to be relaxed and more confident in the presence of the burlesque dancers.

Smirking. During the trial, Garrett is seen smirking momentarily, which is a rare display of emotion. Scenes like these become more interesting after the plot twist is watched.

THEMES

Society – (News media, Photography, Mass Production, Class, Gender)
Justice – (Justice System, Capital Punishment)

SOCIETY AND CULTURE

News Media. Media is powerful and can have a significant impact on trials. This was a topic addressed in Lang's previous films, such as *Fury* (1936) and more recently in *While the City Sleeps*. Although Austin Spencer is an important newspaper publisher, television plays a key role as the emerging medium. Characters watch a nightly show that plays highlights of Garrett's trial and a television crew is seen at work in the courtroom.

Photography. A key part of Austin Spencer's scheme depends on his ability to record the steps they take to manufacture evidence. He takes photos of Garrett as he purchases a coat, poses at the ravine with the lighter, and plants incriminating evidence in his own car. He is able to do so discreetly, thanks to his Polaroid camera. On the other hand, there is a downside to instant photography—which contributes to a plot twist. When Spencer dies in the car crash, the entire photographic documentation gets destroyed, making it much harder to argue for Garrett's innocence.

Mass production. Shop displays had been featured in several Lang films (e.g. *M*, *Fury*, *The Woman in the Window*) and consumerism was satirized in *You and Me*. When certain industrial products appear in *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* (ready-made coat, late model black car, "Foster's No.9" body make-up used by dancers of the burlesque club), they signify anonymity. The plot rests on the idea that identities are interchangeable; Supposedly, Garrett would assume the identity of the culprit to prove that he could be anyone. This is possible thanks to the ubiquity of mass-produced items

Class. In Lang's *Scarlet Street*, frequent references to art came with specific dollar tags attached. In *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt*, a variety of products are mentioned with corresponding values in dollars. Examples are Susan Spencer's gift of inscribed lighter for Garrett ($275), ready-made coat ($40), weekly rent paid by a cabaret dancer who lodged with the homicide victim ($15), another dancer's dress (apparently worth considerably less than $100 that Garrett compensates her for—after intentionally spilling his drink on it), engagement ring that Garrett allegedly intended to buy (not specified, up to $3000). One implication of these references is the way they underscore the class difference between Susan Spencer and the cabaret dancers.

Gender. Austin Spencer had strategically reserved his media power for the final stage of their hoax; the main objective was to get a quick guilty verdict for Garrett. After he dies, Susan Spencer inherits his media companies and gets to control the newspaper. Garrett's situation looks hopeless and she tries to help him by launching a media campaign. In order to do this, she first has to make the reluctant newspaper editors comply. "I own the newspaper", Susan Spencer asserts in her meeting with them—but humbly adds—"not that I am qualified to run it". It is explained that she would remain the editor-in-chief only until the newspaper's management is taken over by a designated committee. Her position recalls that of Eleanor Stone in *The Return of Frank James* (1940), an educated heiress who was not expected to contribute to the newspaper, let alone manage it.

JUSTICE

Justice System. The falsely accused turns out to be the culprit in *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt*. Therefore, the original project of mocking the law is negated. Still, the disturbing question about the justice system remains—how likely is it for an innocent person to be convicted with circumstantial evidence?

Capital Punishment. A bleak perspective is reserved for capital punishment, particularly the opening scene which represents an execution mostly via the audience's reactions. Lang thought that executions made an official murderer out of the executioner.[2]

Discussion questions

Lotte Eisner reports that Lang identified not one, but four unsympathetic characters in the film. Besides the murderer Tom Garrett, these were: the blackmailer Patty Gray, Garrett's fiancée who revealed his secret, and her admirer, the assistant district attorney who encouraged her to do so.[3] Why would he consider these characters to be almost as unlikable as Garrett? Do you agree? Which one of them is "the most despicable character of the four"?

Douglas Pye argues that the film has a "suppressive narrative"[4] and the surprise ending invites the viewer to recollect the earlier incidents in order to reconcile them with the plot twist. What are some of the subtle clues Lang has planted about Garrett's guilt (or possibly that of others)?

Does the film make a case for or against capital punishment?

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