HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Burak Sevingen, MA

Fury 1936

Fritz Lang (1890-1976)

OVERVIEW

"The fury that has swept San Jose for 17 days…" read *San Francisco Chronicler* of November 27, 1933 referring to a lynching in a California town (O'Rourke). The news story—captioned "portals of doom cracked!"—earned its reporter the Pulitzer Prize. It also inspired Fritz Lang's first American film *Fury,* which was released three years later.

Since his arrival in the USA in 1934, Lang had endeavored to get himself immersed in the culture by reading and travelling. He resumed his penchant for collecting newspaper clippings about incidents that he found interesting (Bogdanovich, 16). His observations informed *Fury*, *You Only Live Once* (1937), and *You and Me* (1938)—all three starring Sylvia Sidney and addressing social issues.

Crime in the 1930s. "War on crime, strikes, taxes…" murmurs the main character of *Fury* as he browses the newspaper. A critic noted in 1936 that "Hollywood rarely bothers with themes bearing any relation to significant aspects of contemporary life. When it does, in most cases, its approach is timid, uncertain or misdirected. *Fury* is direct, forthright and vehement (Nugent). The film deals with injustice—and mob justice. An innocent man is mistaken for a kidnapper and is almost murdered by a lynch party. *Fury*'s plot can be divided into two acts with a second half about the victim's vicious struggle for retribution.

In the San Jose incident, two men were dragged from jail cells and murdered by a lynch mob following their confession of kidnapping a department store heir. Basic differences aside, the two cases had details in common—e.g. lynchers' use of a pole to ram the gate of the jailhouse, lawmen desperately hurling tear gas canisters at the crowd and the governor's refusal to intervene.

The plot has traces of other high-profile crimes of the decade, such as the Lindberg kidnapping. Aviator Charles Lindberg's toddler was abducted in 1932. The trial of the German immigrant who was arrested for the crime became "the hottest ticket in the world" (Berg, 341). Hauptman—whose features somewhat resembled Spencer Tracy's Joe Wilson—never confessed to the kidnapping and was executed in 1936.

Modern Media. San Jose kidnapping was broadcast by radio and Lindberg trials received massive news media coverage. Similarly, media plays an important role in *Fury.* Newsreel crews shoot the mob's attack on the jailhouse and the footage is later used by the prosecutor as state's evidence against the lynchers. The film screening decisively identifies the involvement of the accused and it is considered to be the "first use of newsreel footage in a courtroom" (AFI).

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde Connection. Spencer Tracy stars as Joe Wilson, a regular John Doe (Bogdanovich, 20). As a consequence of being wronged, the nice guy transitions into an avenger. Tracy's performance prefigures his portrayal of the doctor and his dark persona in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* five years later. The two films also share the same cinematographer (Joseph Ruttenberg) and composer (Franz Waxman). This was Waxman's first project in Hollywood—where his prolific output would include James Whale's The *Bride of Frankenstein* (1942) and several Alfred Hitchcock films. The protagonist's rage is in part fueled by the death of his beloved dog Rainbow during the lynch attempt. The canine had appeared in *The Wizard of Oz* as Toto.

Parallels. The Great Depression and New Deal programs form the backdrop of *Fury.* It offers "a radically different interpretation of New Deal America" (Smedley, 17) and "dissection of American dream" (3). Its focus on a wrongfully accused character places it in lineage with *I am a Fugitive from a Chain*

Gang (1932) and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962). Among other films that tackle lynching are *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1942) and *Mississippi Burning* (1988).

Lang mentions that he rejected an offer to direct *They Won't Forget* (1937)—about a teacher wrongfully accused of murdering his student—because he didn't "want to become an expert on lynching films" (Bogdanovich, 34). Following his "social trilogy" (Gunning, 445), he turned to Westerns, which earned him praise for his perceptiveness about American culture.

CHARACTERS

Joe Wilson. Joe is suspected to be one of the culprits of a kidnapping and a lynch mob almost kills him. Joe survives and seeks retribution.
Katherine Grant. Joe's fiancée works in another state and the two are about to be reunited when Joe is mistakenly detained.
District Attorney Adams. The DA is resilient in the face of pressure. During the trial, he skillfully gets the witnesses to lie under oath and then produces the newsreel footage that disproves their statements.
Sheriff Thaddus Hummel. The sheriff bases his suspicions about Joe on circumstantial evidence and keeps him jailed. Later, when he is faced with the lynch mob, the sheriff is unyielding and does his best to stop the attackers. During the trials, he avoids pointing fingers to specific individuals even though he had called them by name during the standoff.
Kirby Dawson. Dawson is among the eminent citizens who meet with the sheriff prior to the mob attack. While the others in the group are identified as businessmen, Dawson is evidently an ex-con involved in shady dealings. He subsequently gets to be the prime mover of the lynching.
"Bugs" Meyers. Walter Brennan plays the sheriff's deputy who detains Joe just because he fits a very broad suspect profile. "Bugs" evidently has questionable integrity and intelligence. He is also the originator of the town gossip about the alleged kidnapper in jail. Brennan would be cast as the patriotic Czech professor in Lang's anti-Nazi film *Hangmen Also Die!* (1943).
Charlie. Early on, Charlie seems inclined to become a criminal but gives up the idea and joins his brother Joe in an honest venture.
Tom. Joe is protective of his younger brother Tom. Both of Joe's brothers are instrumental in realizing his scheme to get convictions for the 22 men on trial.

SYNOPSIS

Factory worker Joe Wilson's fiancée Katherine Grant has found employment as a teacher at a Western city and they temporarily separate. The couple plans to get married as soon as they save enough money. Joe and his two brothers join forces to manage a gas station nearby a soon to be open horse racing track.

The two lovers are finally ready to reunite; Joe begins a road trip to meet her, he has to halt at a roadblock near the town of Strand. Law enforcers are on the lookout for criminals—three men and a woman—who abducted a young girl. Joe apparently fits the broad description and his fondness for salted peanuts happens to match the known trait of one of the man. He is placed in the county jail to wait for the district attorney. Townsfolk gossip and soon come to believe that Joe is one of the kidnappers; they move to lynch him. The mob marches to the jailhouse but is eventually blocked by the defiant Sheriff and his deputies. Newsreel reporters who have arrived to the scene with lighting speed position themselves to capture the standoff and anticipated lynching. Attackers soon overpower the lawmen but are unable to find the keys to the jail. They set the building ablaze and gather outside to watch the fire with ecstasy. Katherine arrives just in time to see the flames engulfing the jail and faints. A while later, the mob disperses and culprits are arrested; the town keeps quite about their own.

Joe has survived an explosion in the jailhouse and got away. Joe schemes to remain in hiding and stay officially dead so that the lynchers would receive capital punishment for murder. Katherine remains traumatized and unaware of Joe's survival. The trial is widely covered by the press; Strand residents who take to the bench as witnesses lie under oath to protect the accused—they are shamed by Prosecutor Adams, who screens footage of their actions during the tumultuous evening. Joe mails a letter to the

judge without revealing his identity; his ruse to convince him that Joe Wilson had died that evening is successful. Katherine finds out that he is alive and they have a quarrel. Joe has an apparition about the individuals he is about to get sentenced to execution for his own murder. Next day, near the end of the trial he shows up and the lynchers are exonerated. His monologue about society is followed by the couple's embrace.

SCENES

Sweethearts in Chicago. Factory worker Joe Wilson and his betrothed Katherine Grant are about to be temporarily separated. Katherine has found employment as a teacher at a Western city and Joe waves her goodbye at the train station. The couple plans to get married as soon as they save enough money.

Three Brothers. On his way home, Joe finds a puppy. He names her Rainbow and brings her to the apartment he shares with his brothers—Charlie is inclined to mingle with known criminals and the younger Tom is highly impressionable.

Months Pass. A year goes by and the brothers' fortune improves. Charlie dissociates from the racketeers, Joe quits the factory and the three of them join forces to manage a gas station nearby a soon to be open horse racing track.



Wrong Place, Wrong Time. The lovers are finally ready to reunite. Joe begins a road trip and Catherine prepares to meet him somewhere in between. Two days after Joe sets out, his car is halted by a sheriff's deputy on a byroad as he is driving past a small town called Strand. Walter Brennan plays the deputy, in a very different role compared to his Professor Novotny *in Hangmen Also Die!* Joe is surprised, both by the demeanor and the unkempt looks of the man with the shotgun, who claims to be an officer of the law. "What is this, a holdup?" he asks the Sheriff's Deputy who detains him. The deputy is not particularly bright and leaves it to the Sheriff to make the decision.

The Peabody Kidnapping. Law enforcers are on the lookout for criminals—three men and a woman—who abducted a young girl. Joe apparently fits the broad description and his fondness for salted peanuts happens to match the known trait of one of the man. He is placed in the county jail to wait for the district attorney.

Social Tension Mounts. Thanks to incessant gossip, townspeople soon come to believe that the man in the jail is one of the kidnappers. A group of citizens visit Sheriff Hummel, demanding to see the prisoner. When Hummel isn't persuaded, they then try to bully him without success. Meanwhile, Katherine learns that Joe has been placed in custody and hurries to Strand.

Standoff. A couple of shady individuals—an ex-con and a strikebreaker among them—easily agitate the already infuriated citizens to deliver their own justice. A lynch party quickly assembles with women and children joyfully joining its ranks. The mob marches to the jailhouse but is eventually blocked by the defiant Sheriff and his deputies.





No Help Forthcoming. The National Guard, which Hummel counted on for a rescue is ordered not to intervene. On the other hand, newsreel reporters who have arrived to the scene with lighting speed position themselves to capture the standoff and anticipated lynching.

Mob Attacks. Hummel calls the crowd to disperse but has to retreat inside under a hail of stones. His men respond with tear gas, which merely slows down the mob. Not before long, the gate gives way to a battering ram and a melee ensues inside the office. Attackers overpower the lawmen but are unable to find the keys to the jail. They set the building ablaze and gather outside to watch the fire with ecstasy. (Close-ups show various expressions—ecstatic, evil, idiotic…




The mob's use of a battering ram recalls the photo used in the news story of the real-life San Jose lynching where the crowd used a steel pole. In the San Jose incident of 1933, two men were dragged from jail cells and murdered by a lynch mob following their confession of kidnapping a department store heir.



Newsreel crews shoot the mob's attack on the jailhouse. The role of media recalls the real-life Lindberg trials of 1932-1933, which received massive news media coverage. Aviator Charles Lindberg's toddler was abducted in 1932. The trial of the German immigrant who was arrested for the crime became "the hottest ticket in the world" (Berg, 341). Hauptman—whose features somewhat resembled Spencer Tracy's Joe Wilson—never confessed to the kidnapping and was executed in 1936.



Katherine Arrives. Katherine arrives just in time to see the flames engulfing the jail and Joe appearing at a window. The sight of him entrapped and helpless makes her faint. Upon hearing that the arrival of a military unit is imminent, the lynchers flee—only after tossing a dynamite to blow up the building. The crowd is enjoying the moment.





Aftermath. A twist comes with the arrest of the actual culprits. The governor expresses his regret for his decision to allow the lynching and silence falls on Strand. The community adopts a "forgive and forget" stance. Solidarity and discretion are deemed crucial in respect of the forthcoming trial of leading mob members.

Retribution. Unbeknownst, to the lynchers, Joe has survived the explosion. The blast had destroyed the hinges of his cell, letting him escape by way of a rain pipe. He secretly rejoins his brothers and secures their cooperation to exact revenge. Joe schemes to remain in hiding and stay officially dead so that the lynchers would receive capital punishment for murder. Katherine remains traumatized and unaware of Joe's survival. The lynch attempt transforms Joe Wilson, his appearance also changes.



The Trial. An adept prosecutor named Adams bases his case on the guilt of 22 Strand citizens who played a major role in the attack. The trial is broadcast via radio and widely covered by the press. "Identity of 22 proved" is superimposed on court reporters calling their newspapers.







A tough judge keeps the unruly in check and maintains order in the courtroom. Strand residents who take to the bench as witnesses lie under oath to protect the accused. In a dramatic move, the DA proves their perjury by screening footage shot during the attack. The film shows the accused in clear close-up shots as they frenetically attack the jailhouse. The prosecutor's use of freeze-frame technique increases the impact of the film screening by capturing the most intense expressions. Two of the stills from the newsreel footage: Mrs. Humphries throwing the first incendiary device; Fred Garrett is having the time of his life as he is cutting the fire hose with an axe.

Defense's Tactic. As a last resort, the defender argues that the death of Joe Wilson should be proven without a doubt in order to proceed with the murder charge. Seeing that this tactic could get the accused off the hook, Joe makes an intervention. He mails a letter to the judge without revealing his identity. In it, he encloses the inscribed ring gifted to him by Katherine. As "a citizen of Strand", he explains that he had found the partially disfigured ring in ashes of the county jail. When it is her turn to testify, Katherine confirms the authenticity of the ring and it is consequently established that Joe must have been killed inside the building on that fateful day. Then again, certain details lead Katherine to suspect that Joe may be alive.



Alone. Joe is delighted by the success of his ruse. On the other hand, Charlie and Tom have grown weary of the plot and have pangs of conscience about the deaths sentences that are likely to be delivered. Back at home, they have an altercation with Joe. Just then, Katherine appears and urges Joe to quit the game of deception. He refuses and belligerently leaves the apartment. A tagline from the film's official trailer summarizes the couple's crisis: "It might happen to anyone!" is superimposed on the stars, Spencer Tracy and Silvia Sydney.

Joe walks on deserted streets and has drinks at vacant joints. Finally, he sees apparitions of the Strand 22 and is chased by them. When Joe returns home, he finds that Catherine and his brothers have left.



Joe's Comeback. Next day, the jury delivers the guilty verdict for most of the accused. Just then, Joe walks into the courtroom. With him showing up, the lynchers are exonerated. He makes a short but sharply critical speech about his dismay about American institutions. The last sequence shows him embracing and kissing Catherine. The film's official trailer uses this scene to the underscore presence of the actors Spencer Tracy and Sylvia Sidney, with "two great stars" superimposed on their embrace.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

JOE WILSON. Open, Emotional (Ordinary, Vicious, Disenchanted)

Joe is a pleasant and easy going man in the first half of the film; he transforms into a vindictive bloodhound in the second part.

Illustrative moments

Ordinary. Joe's keenness for peanuts highlights the relatability of this character. On the other hand, being a regular guy gets him in trouble as he fits the general description of the culprit.

Vicious. Joe is initially sweet and hopeful. The lynch attempt transforms him into a bitter avenger—anticipating Vern in Lang's Western *Rancho Notorious*. As he listens to the radio broadcast of

the trial, it looks like he is actually enjoying the unfolding of events. His expressions remind one of the members of the mob watching flames engulfing the jailhouse.

Disenchanted. In order to have the members of the mob convicted, Joe must officially remain dead. At one point, the idea unsettles him and fear of loneliness leads him to show up at the courthouse. Yet, the speech he makes there is quite reproachful. It doesn't look like he has become less pessimistic about humanity and his country.

THEMES

Society – (Small Towns, Mass Culture, Economic Hardship, Race, Human Nature, Journalism)
Justice – (Mobs, Law Enforcement and Injustice)

SOCIETY

Small Towns. Characters refer to Native Americans three times in Fury. "Don't let the Indians get you", Joe's brother jokes as he sets out on his road trip to the West. Later, someone assures Katherine that Joe would be alright as no one has been "tomahawked or scalped in the neighborhood for a while". Later at the trial, the sheriff expresses his conviction that the locals were not responsible for the crime. In response, the district attorney criticizes the projection of guilt on strangers as a tendency to "putting on foreigners …a roving band of Redskins, Indians I mean". Such references underscore that the only real threat is posed by the ordinary townspeople".

Mass Culture. During the standoff before the jailhouse, Sheriff Hummel calls out to the crowd to disperse. The first response he gets is mockery. A boy impersonates the titular character from *Popeye the Sailor* (1933) and his corncob pipe's 'toot toot'. Everyone is familiar with the reference and they are greatly amused by it.

Economic Hardship and the New Deal. 1930s New Deal Programs' positive impact on the economy is attested in *Fury.* The beginning of the film shows Joe facing difficulties. He is a factory worker and doesn't have enough money to get married. One of his brothers is on the verge of entering the world of crime and it looks like he may drag the younger one with him. Things considerably change in the following months. The brothers unite to open a gas station and Joe sends Katherine a photo showing the location their business, emphasizing that proximity to the construction of the horse racing track would be the driving force of their business. The racing track is an example of the large-scale projects that obviously touch lives positively.

Race. Lang said that he considered casting a Black man as the victim (Bogdanovich, 32). There are three instances when African-American extras appear: a young man gets away in terror at the sight of the mob leaving the bar, a boy is seen polishing shoes at the barbershop and in a backyard, a woman (Edna Mae Harris) sings "There is no more Trouble for me".

Human Nature. To the horror of his customers, the barber of Strand remarks that he can barely control his impulse to cut throats with his razor. "People get funny impulses… if you resist them, you are sane. If you don't, you are on your way to the nuthouse or the pen." *Fury* suggests that individuals are flawed and crowds are dangerous. The scene with the town's women gossiping incessantly about the alleged kidnapper is superseded by a shot of a flock of chicken. Later, Joe observes the movie theater audience watching the newsreels of the fire and cheering with delight.

Journalism. Fury's scriptwriter Bartlett **Cormack** had worked as a reporter, covering "hangings, race riots, street car strikes and other diversions" (*The New York Times*). One of his other screenplays, 1931's *Front Page*, is a screwball comedy about reporters. In *Fury,* newsreel cameramen rush to the scene well in time and take positions. They "must have found out before it happened" an observer remarks. Their professionalism comes off rather annoying, but in the end their contribution to justice is paramount. It is thanks to the excellently detailed newsreel footage that the guilt of the accused can be proven. At this

stage in Lang's career, news media figures are minor characters—towards its end, they would take center stage with *While the City Sleeps* and *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt.*

JUSTICE

Mobs Mob violence was already a familiar theme to viewers of Lang's German films—*Dr. Mabuse the Gambler, Metropolis* and *M* all featured violent crowds. In *Fury,* the residents of Strand reveal their dark side. The crowd in front of the jailhouse includes a man eating his hot dog, a woman with her toddler and older residents. They appear to be in a trance, with expressions on their faces ranging from idiotic amusement to demonic rage. *Fury "*inverts" (Tratner) *M*—instead of a social order threatened by a deviant individual", it features an "individual threatened by a deviant social order".

Law Enforcement and Injustice. The Sheriff's Deputy that detains Joe is possibly the least sympathetic and assuring of lawmen in Lang's films. "What is this, a holdup?" asks Joe when faced with the deputy pointing a shotgun at him. Joe is held in custody arbitrarily with no solid evidence.

Discussion questions

Does the film have a happy ending? What is the significance of Joe's final speech at the court and Katherine kissing him? How is this last scene related to the previous events?

Why does Spencer Tracy's character give up his pursuit of vengeance? What makes him show up at the courtroom?

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