HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Man Hunt 1941

Fritz Lang *(1890-1976)*

OVERVIEW

> With *Man Hunt*, Lang began a series of four anti-Nazi films each characterized by an intense personal involvement, a vivid awareness of the fascist mind, missing from other similar movies of the period.
>
> —*Fritz Lang in America*

You find yourself in Europe in 1939—it so happens that you are in a position to decide whether Adolf Hitler lives for another day. What would you do? This is the intriguing question that kick starts Fritz Lang's 1941 thriller *Man Hunt*. A maverick big-game hunter gets Hitler in the crosshairs of his riflescope. For a brief moment, he has an opportunity to assassinate Hitler before the outbreak of World War II and change the course of history. Hitler survives the encounter and the hunter becomes the prey—hounded by a cohort of Nazi spies in pre-war London.

Source Novel and "The Most Dangerous Game". The script was based on the novel *Rogue Male* (1939) by Geoffrey Household, who had chosen to keep the identity of the dictator ambiguous. Household's novel would be adapted once again in 1976 by Clive Donner as *Rogue Male* starring Peter O'Toole.

The theme of hunting humans as a deadly sport was famously introduced by Richard Donnell's story "The Most Dangerous Game" in 1924. Among its many adaptations was the 1932 film with the same name by directors Schoedsack and Pichel, *A Game of Death* (Robert Wise, 1945) and an episode of the radio show Suspense featuring Orson Welles. Since then, filmmakers have frequently explored variations of the theme in such diverse films as *Westworld* (1973), *Predator* (1986), *Battle Royale* (2000), *Zodiac* (2007), *The Frozen Ground* (2014), and most recently *The Hunt* (2020). A complementary theme in *Man Hunt*—a solitary warrior who retreats into the wild and goes native—has spawned many action heroes, most famously *First Blood*'s (1982) John Rambo.

Lang's Collaborators. *Man Hunt* is the first of Lang's anti-Nazi films and also the first of four films that Joan Bennett would make with Lang. She plays a seamstress who helps the protagonist and falls in love with him. By contrasting the Cockney Jerry with Thorndike's noble family, scriptwriter Dudley Nichols and Lang create both hilarious encounters as well as subtle but pointed observations about class and inequality.

Man Hunt's cinematographer Arthur Miller—*How Green was my Valley* (1941), *Lifeboat* (1944), *The Prowler* (1951)—creates London in 20th Century Fox Studio's sets as a dark and dangerous city packed with enemy agents. The damp streets with light poles and dark alleys prefigure the film noir aesthetics of Lang's *Scarlet Street* (1945). Art Director Richard Day—*Queen Kelly* (1932), *Dodsworth* (1936), *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951)—had worked with Lang the same year for the Western *Western Union*. Day "produced lush sets of the type that would earn the art director seven Academy Awards in his lifetime and comparisons to Edward Hopper" (McGilligan). His detail-oriented sets highlight the contrast between the young seamstress' humble lodging with the opulent residence of Lord Risborough. *Man Hunt*'s costumes were designed by Travis Banton who would collaborate with Lang on several films in the following years.

International Political Context and Movies. When *Man Hunt* was produced, USA had not yet entered into World War II. The film was released in July 1941, six months before the Pearl Harbor attack. Its story takes place in the August of 1939, a month before Great Britain entered the war. Situating the

action in pre-war London invites the American viewers to draw conclusions from the British experience. The spotlight is cast on Great Britain's diplomatic policy of appeasement—among the characters is a gullible and vain British aristocrat who is easily exploited by arrogant Nazi officials. *Man Hunt*'s ending highlights that the only option is war and this places the film within a group of pro-intervention Hollywood films from the years 1939-1941: *Confessions of a Nazi Spy, Night Train to Munich, Foreign Correspondent*, *Mortal Storm* and *Sergeant York*.

Anti-Nazi or Subversive? Not all films of the period shared *Man Hunt*'s anti-Nazi perspective. Actually, some considered Lang's film to be too vehemently anti-German. So much so that he was faced with accusations of being a communist sympathizer by a Grand Jury—the Dies Committee, named after its Chairman Martin Dies—established to investigate subversive activities.

Lang had to defend himself by publishing a statement (McGilligan, 272). This however, would not be the last time he would face such charges. Dies Committee would foreshadow Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee of 1947. By then, Lang would have completed his quartet of anti-Nazi films that began with *Man Hunt*, continued in 1943-1944 with *Ministry of Fear* and *Hangmen Also Die!* and ended with *Cloak and Dagger*, which came out a year after the end of the war. *Hangmen Also Die!* and *Cloak and Dagger* would draw fire and have several of their key contributors blacklisted. Lang himself would consider himself to have been "grey listed" (Gunning, 390) and was unable to find work for some time.

Back in 1941, *Man Hunt* was the director's first attempt to make a politically unambiguous statement about his former home. The scrutiny for his first WW2 film hinted at the difficulty of this task.

CHARACTERS

Captain Thorndike. British hunter and adventurer is hounded by the Nazis after he almost shoots down Adolf Hitler with his telescopic rifle.

Jerry. Thorndike comes across Jerry who helps him as he tries to run away from his Nazi pursuers. Working class Londoner is a seamstress—although it is implied that she is a prostitute.

Quive-Smith. The Gestapo official at Hitler's unidentified Bavarian residence (presumably Berghof). His real name is not provided and he introduces himself as Quive-Smith in London. He tries to get Thorndike to sign a confession about his intention to assassinate Hitler. When he fails, he attempts to murder him but Thorndike manages to escape. Quive-Smith leads a team of henchmen to London in pursuit.

Mr. Jones. One of Quive-Smith's henchmen who pursue Thorndike. Mr. Jones is played by John Carradine who would have parts in two of Lang's Westerns—*The Return of Frank James* and *Western Union.*

Vaner. The cabin boy of the ship that Thorndike seeks refuge in. Vaner helps Thorndike hide in the ship and makes sure that he lands safely in the London docks.

Doctor. The Nazi doctor at Hitler's residence played by Ludwig Stössel. Quive-Smith's associate appears in the first part of the film as a sinister and sadistic figure. He is involved in the torture of Thorndike and later takes it upon himself to push him over the cliff. The peculiar character anticipates the numerous Nazi scientists and Doctor Mengele types that will make the villains in the coming decades in films such as *Marathon Man* (1976) and *Boys from Brazil* (1978).

Lord Risborough. Thorndike's brother is an aloof and carefree aristocrat who was part of a diplomatic mission to appease Hitler. He represents the British elites who choose to avoid antagonizing Hitler at all costs.

SYNOPSIS

Sportsman and hunter Captain Thorndike quietly approaches Hitler's lair and targets him with his riflescope. He appears hesitant; subsequently, guards are alerted and he is taken to the compound for interrogation. Here, he is heavily tortured by the order of SS Major Quive-Smith, who tries to coerce Thorndike to sign a confession about his intention to assassinate Hitler. Thorndike proves resilient and is pushed-off a cliff to feign a deadly accident.

Unbeknownst to the Nazis, Thorndike survives the fall and manages to walk to a port; eventually making it to London as a stowaway. A Nazi spy called Mr. Johns follows him there and utilizes a network of spies to hound him in pre-war London. Thorndike seeks refuge in a building and requests the help of a seamstress named Jerry. Together, they visit his brother, Lord Risborough, a wealthy diplomat, who had been part of Great Britain's efforts to appease Nazi Germany. Timid and reluctant, he doesn't offer much help. Nazi goons tighten the net around Thorndike and eventually they catch up with him at a subway station, where Mr. Johns gets killed. Now, Thorndike is wanted for murder. Thorndike decides to lay low and continue hiding in the countryside. He instructs Jerry to wait for three weeks before sending him a letter—to be picked up at the local post office. Following his departure, Jerry is captured by the Nazis.

Thorndike hides in a small cave in Lyme Regis and after three weeks picks up his letter from the local post office. He is recognized and soon Quive-Smith corners him inside the cave. He pressures Thorndike to sign a confession about his attempt to assassinate Hitler. Thorndike crafts a primitive weapon using an arrow-shaped brooch he had gifted Jerry. He shoots the Nazi with the makeshift bow and arrow. He is also wounded and has to stay at a hospital, having nightmares as the world plunges into war. Following his recuperation, Thorndike joins the Air Force and parachutes into Germany with his sniper rifle.

SCENES



Berghof, 29 July 1939. A hunter moves quietly in the Bavarian forest and carefully positions himself for a kill. He is at a good distance from the residence of Adolf Hitler, who happens to be on the terrace. The man—who will soon be introduced as the famous big-game hunter Alan Thorndike—aims his telescopic rifle and gets Hitler in the crosshairs of his scope. He slowly pulls the trigger, only to sound a sharp metallic click in the silence of the woods.



Sportsman or Assassin? Evidently the dry-firing was intentional and Thorndike is satisfied with his exploit. He makes a gesture of saluting his clueless prey and prepares to leave. Just then, he somehow has a moment of deliberation—after which he resumes his position. This time he loads a round into the chamber and aims one more time. As he is about to pull the trigger, a nearby SS sentry is alerted by the sound of cracking wood and jumps on Thorndike. After a short struggle, the hunter is subdued and taken to the base for interrogation.

Captain Thorndike comes close to killing Adolf Hitler. He initially explains that it was all for his self-amusement—a "sporting stalk". At the end, he admits that his intention had been murdering Hitler all along—he just wasn't motivated and determined enough.



A High-profile Captive. Thorndike is a hunter with an international reputation and the Gestapo official at the base (later identified as Major Quive-Smith) is familiar with his captive's adventures. Thorndike tries to explain his presence as the sporting stalk of a hunting enthusiast. The major is hardly convinced that someone with a loaded sniper rifle would infiltrate the Führer's well-guarded compound only for self-gratification.

Major's Ploy. It turns out that Thorndike's brother Lord Risborough had recently visited the compound as part of England's diplomatic appeasement efforts. The German ambassador in London is informed about the intruder and he contacts the aristocrat brother who has no idea about Thorndike's whereabouts. Consequently, the ambassador rules out the possibility that the detainee could be the famous man of adventure. Regardless of his superiors' lack of interest in this matter, Quive-Smith hatches plans of his own. He tries to persuade Thorndike to sign a confession about his intention to assassinate Hitler. When he is rejected, he resorts to torture.

George Sanders' Gestapo official watches—from a distance—his underlings torturing Thorndike. Violence takes place off-screen—hinted by the shadow of tied-up Thorndike falling near Major Quive-Smith's feet; subsequently, the exhausted prisoner is dragged by SS men. The impression his shoes leave on the carpet stand for the scars on Thorndike's face inflicted by the torturers)

Quive-Smith's associate the "Doctor" is a sadistic torturer and cold-blooded murderer—he anticipates Nazi scientists of later films.

The Nazi doctor is played by Ludwig Stössel. The peculiar character anticipates the numerous Nazi scientists and Doctor Mengele types that will make the villains in the coming decades in films such as *Marathon Man* (1976) and *Boys from Brazil* (1978).

When torture also fails, Thorndike is pushed-off a cliff to feign a deadly accident.



Evading the Nazis. Unbeknownst to the Nazis, tree branches slow down Thorndike's fall and he lands down on a swamp with minor injuries. Only by next morning does Quive-Smith realize that his victim is alive and leads soldiers with hounds to hunt him down. By that time, Thorndike has walked enough to reach nearby port. He manages to swim to a docked Danish ship and hides in it—thanks to the help of a friendly British cabin boy. Nazis search the ship but are unable to find him. An associate of Quive-Smith referred to as Mr. Johns also boards the ship. He assumes Thorndike's identity and uses his passport. Shortly after, the ship leaves for London with Thorndike—and his impostor at his tail.

Fritz Lang created the London setting in the 20t Century Fox Studio sets—by a matte background painting; by hanging light bulbs to create the impression of a London bridge and its lampposts (Bogdanovich, 59).



Events in *Man Hunt* take place in the August of 1939, a month before Great Britain entered the war. Situating the action in pre-war London invites the American viewers to draw conclusions from the British experience. The spotlight is cast on Great Britain's diplomatic policy of appeasement—among the characters is a gullible and vain British aristocrat who is easily exploited by arrogant Nazi officials.

Nazi Henchman Mr. Johns quickly makes himself at home in London—which will prove to be a hostile environment for Thorndike.

Back at Home, Meeting Jerry. Thorndike happily disembarks at the docks. He soon finds out that Mr. Johns has already organized a network of German spies to hound him.

Nazi goons chase Thorndike right from the moment he sets foot on London docks. Fritz Lang and cinematographer Arthur Miller create street scenes that—with damp cobblestone, fog and lampposts—anticipate film noir aesthetics—e.g. Lang's *Scarlet Street*.

Man Hunt's cinematographer Arthur Miller contributed to *How Green was my Valley* (1941), *Lifeboat* (1944); particularly relevant here is his work for the late film noir *The Prowler* (1951)
Mr. Johns ominously leads the Nazi villains, who are hardly distinguishable from regular Londoners.

Thorndike seeks refuge in a building and meets a young woman named Jerry. He asks her for some cash to be able to make it to his brother's house. The young seamstress is initially unwilling to help the stranger. Subsequently, she not only lends him the money but accompanies him on his taxi ride.



Richard Day's design of Jerry's modest apartment is just as detailed as that of the aristocrats; a sewing machine placed in the background solves a potential problem by circumventing the Hays Code—it encourages viewers to think that Jerry is a seamstress and not a prostitute.



Thorndike and Jerry's moments of happiness at her home recalls Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*' (1936) scene with the Tramp and Ellen at the run-down shack.

Man Hunt's costumes were designed by Travis Banton who would collaborate with Lang on several films in the following years.

Aristocrat Brother. Lord Risborough isn't delighted to be involved with a potential diplomatic scandal—he was a part of the diplomatic mission to appease Hitler. Risborough warns Thorndike that he would most likely be extradited to Germany as soon as he is caught. He reckons that the Nazis would stage a kangaroo court to get him to confess trying to assassinate Hitler—which would serve as a pretext for declaring war on the Great Britain. Thorndike assures his brother that he will evade capture and prevent a diplomatic scandal.



Meanwhile, Lady Risborough wife is shocked by the candid and lively Jerry. By contrasting the Cockney Jerry with Thorndike's noble family, scriptwriter Dudley Nichols and Lang create both hilarious encounters as well as subtle but pointed observations about class and inequality.



Art Director Richard Day created a lavish set as the home of the aristocrats.

Art Director Richard Day—*Queen Kelly* (1932), *Dodsworth* (1936), *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951)—had worked with Lang the same year for the Western *Western Union*. Day "produced lush sets of the type that would earn the art director seven Academy Awards in his lifetime and comparisons to Edward Hopper" (McGilligan). His detail-oriented sets highlight the contrast between the young seamstress' humble lodging with the opulent residence of Lord Risborough.





Romance and Danger. By now, Thorndike and Jerry are enchanted with each other and he gifts her an arrow brooch for her beret. In the meantime, a ragtag group of Nazi goons tighten the net around Thorndike. Eventually they catch up with him at a subway station and Mr. Johns chases him in the tunnel. Following a scuffle, the Nazi gets killed when he falls down on a high-powered track. Thorndike safely makes it to Jerry's apartment.



Fritz Lang created the London setting in the 20t Century Fox Studio sets—by a matte background painting; by hanging light bulbs to create the impression of a London bridge and its lampposts (McGilligan).

In London, Thorndike encounters few people except for the Nazi villains chasing him. Even then, it is hard for him to discern the Nazi goons—couple of well-dressed men, a dock worker, a pub regular and a uniformed policeman. Since only Major Quive-Smith and Mr. Johns came from Germany, the presence of the others in London indicates that the threat is coming from enemies within.





Thorndike gifts Jerry a brooch for her hat and the seller is one the very few individuals that he interacts with in London except for the villains. The shopkeeper uses plenty of German words and doesn't sound too honest when he answers Jerry's question—"silver? better, it's chromium."





Parting Ways with Jerry. With the death at the subway making to the headlines, things get even more difficult for Thorndike—now that he is also wanted by the police for murdering Mr. Jones. His facial scars—memento of the torture sessions at the Berghof—make him easily identifiable as the culprit. Thorndike decides to lay low and continue hiding in the countryside in Lyme Regis. He instructs Jerry to wait for three weeks before sending him a letter—to be picked up at the local post office. They bid goodbye at the bridge. When Jerry returns home, she finds the Nazi agents waiting for her.



Fugitive. Thorndike hides in a small cave in Lyme Regis and after three weeks shows up at the local post office. Even though he has grown a beard to cover his identifying scars, the clerk is alarmed at the sight of him. Sensing danger, Thorndike grabs the letter quickly and returns to his cave—with Quive-Smith at his tail. The Gestapo agent blocks the only exit of the cave and pressures Thorndike to sign a confession about his attempt to assassinate Hitler.

Trapped. Standing in front of the cave and covering the only exit with his pistol, Quive-Smith brags about murdering Jerry and slips her beret from a crack. Thorndike is enraged and sets himself to craft a primitive weapon. Jerry's death also makes him realize that he had indeed— subconsciously— wanted to kill Hitler. He forges a makeshift bow and arrow from available materials. When he has a good sight of Quive-Smith, he shoots him with the arrow. Before the Gestapo man dies, he manages to shoot back with his gun and wound Thorndike.

Many Fritz Lang films feature amulets and charms (e.g. *Spies, Western Union, Rancho Notorious*) the arrow brooch plays a prominent part in *Man Hunt*—Thorndike uses it to forge a primitive weapon).

Thorndike in World War II. Thorndike spends an indeterminate amount of time in the hospital, traumatized and undergoing surgeries. Meanwhile, the Second World War breaks out and Germany invades Poland.



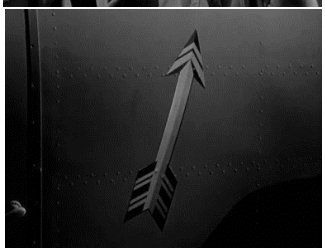


Newsreel footage of the first months of WW2 is intercut with Thorndike waking up from nightmares.

Following his recuperation, Thorndike joins Royal Air Force's Bomber Command. On his first mission over Germany, he parachutes from the airplane. The film ends with a narrator's voiceover:

> And from now on, somewhere within Germany is a man with a precision rifle and the high degree of intelligence and training that is required to use it. It may be days, months, or even years... but this time he clearly knows his purpose... and unflinching, faces his destiny.





At the end, an "unflinching" Thorndike airdrops over Germany from a bomber that features an arrow as its nose art.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Alan Thorndike – Conscientious (Unresolved, Unflinching)
Jerry – Emotional (Impulsive and Childish, Virtuous)

ALAN THORNDIKE

Upper class British adventurer is transformed as a result of being hounded by the Nazis and by his relationship with Jerry.

Unresolved. Thorndike almost kills Adolf Hitler at the beginning—he fails to do so mainly because he lacked resolution.

Unflinching. This is how the narrator describes him at the very end of the film, as Thorndike is parachuting into Germany. The cause of his drastic transformation is the murder of Jerry.

JERRY

Jerry is upright and faithful. Twice, she refuses Thorndike's attempts to pay her. At the end, we learn that Jerry had chosen to die rather than give away Thorndike's location to the Nazis.

Impulsive and Childish. Jerry easily gets upset and begins to cry, but then just as quickly she gets happy. She is delighted by the cheap brooch Thorndike gifts her.

Virtuous. The street singers Thorndike encounters chant the chorus part of "She was poor but she was Honest". The song—the only one in the film—hints at Jerry just before Thorndike's fateful encounter with her. Rest of the song tells about a young woman who came to London and was exploited by men—eventually committing suicide. Lyrics loosely parallel Jerry's character—asking for a cheap shoelace (instead of brooch), jumping from a bridge (rather than a window).

THEMES

Society – (International Politics, War, Working with Codes, Representation of Violence, Class, The Enemy Within)

SOCIETY

International Politics. *Man Hunt* is a fugitive's story in which international politics is more than a backdrop. The approaching war—which starts at the end of the film—shapes Thorndike's predicament. During Thorndike's captivity, Quive-Smith brings up the subject of appeasement in order to show his disdain for it. At this stage, Thorndike seems to have a neutral stance. He may view the Nazis as adversaries but doesn't feel personally threatened and lacks the firmness to take action. On the other hand, his brother Lord Risborough is one of the leading proponents of the appeasement policy. The idle

aristocrat is shy of any action that would antagonize the Nazis—he refers to the Reichstag fire—as it would provide them a pretext for declaring war. Thorndike's delicate situation appears to him as another such issue and he is barely helpful to his brother.

War. Point blank, *Man Hunt* poses the question, 'would it be morally justified to kill Adolf Hitler in cold blood?' The ending provides an affirmative answer. Events prove that with the looming war, the man of adventure cannot maintain his aloof existence and go on with his life as he had been accustomed to do. His experience makes Thorndike resolute and committed to fighting the Nazis. Even though he may not be personally victimized by Hitler, he prepares to assassinate him for his "crimes against humanity". Thorndike tells Quive-Smith that assassinating Hitler was indeed what he wanted to accomplish all along, but he was just not determined enough.

Working with Codes. Fritz Lang recounts how they were able to conciliate the Jerry character with the restrictions and codes of the Hays Office (Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America). This was necessary because some scenes in the film suggest that Jerry is a prostitute (e.g. Thorndike paying her twice, Jerry playing a streetwalker at the bridge to distract a policeman). The problem was solved by placing a sewing machine in Jerry's apartment, indicating that she was a seamstress (Bogdanovich, 57).

Class. In an early scene, a troupe of street singers—the pearly kings—chant "**She was poor but she was Honest**". We get to hear the chorus bit in full:

> It's the same the whole world over
> It's the poor what gets the blame
> It's the rich what gets the pleasure
> Ain't it all a bloomin' shame?

Class is an important theme in the story—an example is the notion of "being a gentleman" that is brought up couple of times. Lord Risborough's butler tells Jerry that he doesn't consider himself to be "a gentleman at all". In contrast, Jerry affirms that Thorndike is "a true gentleman". The Lord and Thorndike qualify as gentlemen but there is a distinction. Unlike the self-centered aristocrat brother, Thorndike consistently makes efforts to connect with working class Londoners. He looks rather out of touch with the ways of the commoners (e.g. his awkwardness when eating fish and chips) but he is a good communicator.

Representation of Violence. Except for the metro scene, violence rarely occurs in *Man Hunt*. Gestapo's torture of Thorndike is not shown directly. However, when his exhausted body is being dragged, his shoes leave an imprint on the carpet. We soon find out that these parallel lines are shorthand for the scars inflicted by the torturers on his face. Lang would come up with similarly subtle methods of representing violence in *Hangmen Also Die!*

The Enemy Within. Even with his influential connections and relatives, Thorndike seems to be genuinely convinced that if he were captured, he would be extradited to Germany as a criminal who attempted to murder Hitler. This may sound like a hole in the plot—after all why doesn't he seek the support of police instead of contemplating escaping to Africa?

When Thorndike disembarks from the ship at the London docks, he thinks he has left the worst behind. When Vaner the cabin boy cautions him to look out for his pursuers, "stop worrying my boy" he replies, "this is England—I am home again". Yet, as soon as he stops foot on land, a gang of German spies—all looking like various local types—give him a chase. In London, Thorndike finds himself in a dark and hostile environment that anticipates Lang's film noirs. Quive-Smith's chief henchman Mr. Johns resembles an upper class Briton, while various minions seem to disguise themselves as Cockneys. Except for Quive-Smith—whose distinctive monocle marks him as German—none of the villains stand out from the crowd. Even a uniformed policeman that appears in the bridge scene turns out to be a member of the spy ring. The few regular characters that appear do not seem to be affable locals either. When Thorndike and Jerry go to a tidbit shop to buy a brooch for her, the shop keeper turns out to be German. The crafty man sells them a cheap piece of chromium, claiming it is "even better" than silver.

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