HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Burak Sevingen, MA

Liliom 1934

Fritz Lang (1890-1976)

OVERVIEW

> Today, I almost like *Liliom* best of all.
> —Fritz Lang in 1974 (McGilligan,201)

In his career, Fritz Lang directed films in three languages in Germany, France, and the USA. His only French language film *Liliom* was the product of a brief period he spent in Paris after he had left Germany in 1933. Lang's self-exile was his response to the rise of Nazism; he would eventually settle down in the USA, where he would direct twenty-one films in two decades.

Self-Exile. Adolf Hitler's NSDAP grew to become the largest party in the German parliament in 1932 and Hitler was sworn in as chancellor in 1933. In March, the Enabling Act gave him dictatorial powers and marked the end of the Weimar Republic. The same month, Joseph Goebbels' Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda was founded—and banned Lang's *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*. Lang's dramatic account of the circumstances of his hasty departure from Germany has been questioned (Werner). In any case, Lang was in Paris in the summer of 1933, where teamed up once again with Erich Pommer. Pommer was the producer of *Dr. Mabuse the Gambler, Die Nibelungen*, and *Metropolis*—he was fired from UFA in 1933 because of being a Jew. In France, Pommer was appointed as the head of the European branch of Fox Studios—Fox Europa. *Liliom* would be one of the first films of the new company.

The Cast. At Fox Europa, Pommer assembled a group of individuals who had previously worked with him—notably for Josef von Sternberg's *The Blue Angel* (1930). Pommer's team included the cinematographer Rudolph Maté, the composer Franz Waxman, and scriptwriter Robert Liebmann (murdered in Auschwitz in 1942). The main character, Liliom Zadowski was to be played by French actor Charles Boyer. For a secondary but key role—the knife grinder—the avant-garde writer, poet, visual artist, actor, stage director, and theorist of the "Theater of Cruelty", Antonin Artaud was cast.

The Play. The play *Liliom* was written by the Hungarian author, poet, and playwright Ferenc Molnár in 1909. It was internationally successful and was staged in Broadway with a production that starred Joseph Schindkraut. Subsequent stage productions' casts included Antonin Artaud, Ingrid Bergman, Charles Laughton, and Elia Kazan. In the 1940s, the actor Burgess Meredith would play the titular character. Lang reportedly saw the play in 1920s Berlin (McGilligan).

Adaptations. Another *Liliom* starring Charles Farrell was directed by Frank Borzage in 1930, four years before Lang. *Liliom* was also adapted for radio by Orson Welles 1939. In 1945, the Broadway musical *Carousel*—loosely based on *Liliom*—was staged by Rodgers and Hammerstein (which in turn was adapted to a film of the same name by director Henry King in 1956).

Carnival and Carousel. Amusement parks, with their swing rides, Ferris wheels, and ghost trains have been popular film settings. The carousel has particularly enjoyed much attention, featured in a variety of film genres, ranging from musicals to horror. Films with memorable scenes that take place on a carousel are *Merry-Go-Round* (1923, Erich von Stroheim and Rupert Julian); *Sally of the Sawdust* (1925, D.W. Griffith); *The Barker* (1928, George Fitzmaurice); *Strangers on a Train* (1951, Alfred Hitchcock); *Night Tide* (1961, Curtis Harrington); *Carnival of Souls* (1962, Herk Harvey); *Charade* (1963 Stanley Donen); *Mary Poppins* (1964, Robert Stevenson); *Sudden Impact* (1983, Clint Eastwood).

Reception. Upon its release in 1934, *Liliom* was disliked by the French clergy as well as the playwright Ferenc Molnár (McGilligan, 169). In retrospect, Lang thought that the audience didn't like the comedic touches, particularly the hilarious depiction of Heaven (Bogdanovich). The critic (and friend of Lang) Lotte Eisner thought that "perhaps the French were too Cartesian and rationalist in those days" (Eisner, 158). Writing in the 1970s, Eisner considered that the qualities that made *Liliom* unpopular at the time of its original release would resonate much better with contemporary audiences—"for today's generation, with its healthy mistrust of establishments, the episodes in the earthly and heavenly police stations assumed a new relevance" (Eisner). With its "bittersweet nostalgia" and "a love of the realm of make believe" (Gunning, 207), *Liliom* is a whimsically unique film in Lang's filmography and deserves more attention.

CHARACTERS

Liliom Zadowski. Carnival barker is affable and popular; yet he has his flaws—has a quick temper, and is somewhat lazy. As likeable as he may be, Liliom is Liliom—the incorrigible rascal hardly learns from his mistakes.
Julie. Julie falls in love with Liliom and the two live together at her aunt's home. She is compassionate, forgiving and dedicated to Liliom, even after he becomes quite intolerable. The actress Madeleine Ozeray also plays their teenager daughter.
Mme Menoux. Julie's aunt runs a photography studio from her home.
The Knife Grinder/Heavenly Policeman. The knife grinder subtly acts as Liliom's guardian angel; moments before the criminal act he offers Liliom an opportunity to consider walking out of it. Following Liliom's death, the character appears as the heavenly policeman sent to fetch him. The part is played by the avant-garde writer, poet, visual artist, actor, stage director, and theorist of the "Theater of Cruelty" Antonin Artaud.
The Commissioner. The investigator at the police station summons Liliom for a trivial matter and keeps him waiting for several hours; he represents bureaucratic overkill. A similar character appears later in Heaven, at the "Commissariat". This time he is winged, but no less fond of bureaucratic details and paperwork.
Alfred. Liliom's good for nothing friend invites him to join the ill-fated robbery of the cashier.
Madame Moscat. Proprietrix of the carousel and Liliom's employer is jealously attached to him.

SCENES




The Carnival. It is hard to tell which one is the carnival's main attraction, the carousel or its charming attendant, Liliom Zadowki. The popular barker entertains the carnival crowd and makes sure that the carousel is packed. The proprietrix of the carousel, Madame Moscat is delighted by the influx and is riveted by her employee. Lilliom is bold and dashing—agile and dexterous too; he gets into a knife fight and easily overwhelms the menacing assailant.

Julie. Enter Julie and her friend Marie. The young women are enticed by Liliom—who happily helps them mount the carousel animals. The friends enjoy the ride and Liliom's intense attention. Consequently, Madame Moscat gets jealous and tells Liliom to get rid of the girls. The proud barker tries to appease his boss, but seeing that all she wants is to humiliate his new friends, he defies Madame Moscat—consequently gets fired.



Love. Julie and Marie are employed as maids and need to call it a night to keep their jobs. When Julie makes it clear that she doesn't care, Marie leaves her alone with Liliom. The two are infatuated with each other and aren't even bothered by brief harassment from patrolling policemen. They begin to live together in a trailer at Julie's aunt's place.

Domestic Problems. Having lost his job at the carousel, Liliom remains unemployed; Julie assists her aunt Madame Menoux at her home-based photography studio. Liliom is getting restless, irritable, and has violent anger outbursts. He spends time gambling and drinking, accompanied by Alfred, a shady individual and a corrupting influence on Liliom. Madame Menoux advices her niece that Liliom's ways are no good; she urges Julie to consider dating the carpenter, who happens to be one of her regular patrons. Julie isn't interested in the comforts of middle class life and remains adamant in her dedication to Liliom.





News and a Plan. Madame Moscat is keen to have her former employee back at the carousel. Although he is not thrilled by Moscat's advances, Liliom apparently misses his beloved carousel and the fairground, where he seems to consider going back to. Just then, Julie lets Liliom know that she is expecting a baby. He is exhilarated and things take a positive turn—until Liliom begins to ponder how he would provide for his future daughter.

Then, Alfred approaches him with a plan to make money—urging Liliom to join him to rob a certain cashier. Hesitant at first, Liliom finally decides to join Alfred and pilfers a knife from Aunt Menoux's kitchen for the planned ambush at the park.

Botched Robbery. Alfred and Liliom take positions under a tunnel to intercept the payroll clerk. Unexpectedly, an acquaintance, the knife grinder—played by Antonin Artaud—materializes. The encounter somehow confuses Liliom, but fails to impact his resolve to carry out the robbery; as soon as the knife grinder walks away, the two robbers resume their focus. The clerk finally appears, seemingly an easy prey; as soon as the robbers make their move, he produces a revolver and quickly subdues them. With policemen rushing to the scene, Alfred runs away. Seeing that he would be caught, Liliom fatally wounds himself with his own knife.



The Music Dies. The moment Liliom stabs himself, Julie feels the pain in her chest. He is soon brought home on a stretcher and is comforted in his final moments by his inamorata. The news spreads; carnival's automata come to a halt and the music dies. Liliom's death is mourned by friends.

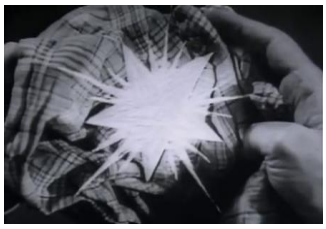
Liliom in Heaven. A couple of angels who identify themselves as heavenly police—Antonin Artaud once again—accompany Liliom as he ascends to Heaven. Passing by stars, Liliom is finally brought to a modern office called "Commissariat".Here he is received by an angel typist. And subsequently, Liliom is interviewed by an officer, who tells him that his misdemeanors on earth would determine if he would proceed to the Heaven. Meddling and intrusive bureaucracy in the astral realm recalls an earlier scene back at earth, where Liliom was frustrated by petty officials' handling of his business.





The Commissariat has a film archive of episodes of individual's lives and a recording is screened—the scene shows the coffee incident that took place at home—and Liliom witnesses his own violent temper. The officer tells him that he would be spending sixteen years in the purgatory—at the end of which he

would be granted a chance to visit the earth for a day. His actions on that day would determine his next destination.



Back at Earth. Sixteen years pass and Liliom is taken by the heavenly policemen to earth. He approaches his teen daughter and begins conversing without revealing his identity. She doesn't like Liliom's way of referring to her father's violent ways and walks away. Liliom presents her a gift—a star he stole on his way to the earth—which she throws to the gutter. Liliom is enraged and slaps her wrist. The act of violence ends his stay on earth and Liliom vanishes from his daughter's sight.

The Incorrigible Rascal. In the astral realm, Liliom's last act seems to seal his fate. The devil places weights on a balance scale, preparing to take him to Hell. However, something that occurs down below makes the heavenly administrators pause and pay attention. Liliom's daughter tells her mother that the slap did not hurt her at all and Julie confirms that it is indeed possible for a strike to feel like a kiss. With this, Liliom smiles contently while the balance of the scale shifts in favor of Heaven as his final destination.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Liliom Zadowski (*Incorrigible*) Carnival barker is affable and popular; yet he has his flaws—has a quick temper, and is somewhat lazy. As likeable as he may be, Liliom is Liliom—the incorrigible rascal hardly learns from his mistakes. Those brief 'sequences' that he is shown at the administrative office of the purgatory are mistakes he regrets, they are unfortunate acts that were consequences of his temper. Liliom tries to prove that his love is superior to his flaws and is quite successful.

THEMES

Society – (Technology, Bureaucracy, Social Class and Discrimination, Domestic Violence)

SOCIETY

Technology. The modern Paris depicted in *Liliom* has a touch of archaic technologies (while Liliom and Julie sit at a park bench, a lamplighter approaches to take care of the street lamp) and traditional professions (the knife grinder played by Artaud). These coexist with the latest technological advances, which promise joy and excitement.

The carefree atmosphere of the carousel owes to the latest technologies of image and sound. Julie's aunt Madame Menoux operates a photography studio. She obviously loves her job and all the details associated with the early photography technology—her wooden folding camera seems to belong to the time Ferenc Molnár wrote his play in 1909. Other exciting technologies are the music played by a turntable and the wind-up automata of the carnival. These big and charming mechanical toys enhance the whimsical space of the carnival. With Liliom's death, music stops and the automata come to a halt—consequently a depressed mood sets in.

Technologies of photography and sound are featured, but the star of *Liliom*'s technologies is cinema. At the astral realm, Liliom is presented with an archival film of himself. The point is to ascertain, once and for all, his temper issues and inclination to violence. "Film No. 234" is a film within a film, it is a scene from earlier in *Liliom*. Liliom is so surprised that he tries to touch the screen; he is not eager to accept his mistakes so tries to provide a rationale for the incident. To remove any doubts, the film is played in slow-motion and freeze frame is used at key moments. After the official remarks that they can even provide a person's train of thought as voice-over to the film, Liliom is resigned and he is escorted to the purgatory for his sixteen year sentence.

Bureaucracy. Meddling and adept bureaucrats are mocked in *Liliom*. The titular character has a criminal history of minor offenses and misdemeanors, which brings him into contact with bureaucracy.

Early in the film, he is summoned to the police station for a trivial matter—a certain stamp in one of his files that has to be applied in his presence. A hilarious—nearly three minutes long—scene ensues where the constable searches for a certain stamp; he finally finds it and is content after he painstakingly applies it. This requirement is mandated by "the Decree of 1874", curtly explains the self-important official; when the baffled and annoyed Liliom tries to protest, he gets scolded, since "the administration is never at fault. Later in the film, at the heavenly police station, a similar setting awaits Liliom and the official of the heavenly Commissariat (same actor from the police station earlier) refers to the decree of 1721 BC.

Social Class and Discrimination. Liliom and his friends live at the outskirts of Paris and the carnival community is composed of working class people. Several moments highlight class tensions and inequality: Patrolling police officers harass and try to humiliate Liliom as he sits with Julie on a park bench—they ask him to show his hands to confirm that he is a manual laborer; Julie's aunt wishes that her nephew would leave Liliom in favor of the carpenter, who represents the middle class.

Domestic Violence. Liliom is quarrelsome, edgy, and potentially violent. Lang chooses to depict his main character's violence mildly—slapping his daughter's hand, tossing the coffee urn to the floor. In the end, the 'investigation' at the astral realm about his guilt has nothing to do with the robbery he attempted to commit or his previous petty crimes. He has to account for his domestic wrongdoings.

Discussion questions

How would you compare the two *Liliom* films directed by Frank Borzage (1930) and Fritz Lang (1934)?
Is Liliom a sympathetic character?
How does *Liliom* represent domestic violence?
What is the significance of the part played by Antonin Artaud?

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