HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Burak Sevingen, MA

Moonfleet 1955

Fritz Lang (1890-1976)

OVERVIEW

Moonfleet (1955) is a gothic period drama; a story about a boy's bonding with an adventurer in 18th Century England. Shot in Eastmancolor, *Moonfleet* is Lang's most expensive film in Hollywood (McGilligan, 373) and his only one in the Cinemascope wide screen format. Although the director had famously mocked Cinemascope technology—apt for "funerals and snakes", *Moonfleet* spectacularly displays his eagerness to explore its aesthetic potential.

Source and Inspirations. Set in Dorset, *Moonfleet* was shot in the MGM studio, with the exception of coastal scenes filmed in Oceanside, California (Bogdanovich, 99). The story is based on the popular 1898 novel with the same name by John Meade Falkner. The novel has been adapted twice into television series in 1984 and 2013; also inspired a song album, *Moonfleet and Other Stories* by Chris de Burgh. Fritz Lang considered *Moonfleet* to be a romantic Dickensian story (98). The hunt for the notorious Redbeard's diamond and the boy's quest recall Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped.* For visual inspiration, Lang pointed out to the paintings of William Hogarth. In the previous decade, *Bedlam* (1946, produced by Val Lewton and directed by Mark Robson) had made explicit reference to Hogarth's A Rake's Progress. In *Moonfleet*, the influence of ***Tavern Scene*** from this particular series of paintings, as well as that of ***An Election Entertainment*** (from the Humours of an Election series) can be seen in the dinner party scene at the Mohune Manor which revolves around the Romani woman's dance.

Connections. *Moonfleet*'s brigands of Dorset nod to Alfred Hitchcock's *Jamaica Inn* (1939)—with its wreckers in 1800s Cornwall. As much as it is a swashbuckling yarn, *Moonfleet* is in essence a child's story. Exploits of pirates have been and continue to be a beloved subject for young viewers; hence the blend of genres does not come unnatural. Other film classics that centered on young protagonists (which not uncommonly featured buccaneers) were *The Prince and the Pauper* (1937), *Kidnapped* (1938), *Treasure Island* (1934, 1959, 1986, 2007), *The Boy and the Pirates* (1960), and *High Wind in Jamaica* (1965). Rowdy corsairs were a popular subject of the 1950s and the decade saw the release of several notable swashbuckler films such as *Anne of the Indies* (1951), *Against All Flags* (1952), *Crimson Pirate* (1952), and *Master of Ballantrae* (1953). *Moonfleet*'s leading man Stewart Granger had played the French nobleman and dashing fencer in 1952's *Scaramouche*; its child-actor Jon Whiteley (who grew up to become a renowned scholar of art history) was the star of *The Little Kidnappers* (1953).

Themes. *Moonfleet* marks a particular moment in Fritz Lang's career, following his two films noir (*The Big Heat* [1953] and *Human Desire* [1954]) and preceding his final Hollywood films in 1956 (*Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* and *While the City Sleeps*, which delivered a dark vision of modern institutions, namely justice and media). *Moonfleet* is visually pleasing and thematically rich: among its themes are the friendship and uneasy bond between the father and son; reckless pirates who challenge authority and are destined to fail against forces of the modern state; merciless punishment that awaits them (sight of randomly placed gallows in the countryside, with executed criminals let hanging as deterrence); elites who happen to be more sophisticated criminals compared to the common crooks; a child's view of the world, and a surprising degree of violence he witnesses.

Assesment. According to critic and Lang's friend Lotte Eisner, the visual universe of *Moonfleet* has an affinity to that of Lang's other dreamy fantasies *Destiny* (1921) and *Liliom* (1934). She also points out to Luc Moullet's assessment of the film as one of Lang's "masterworks" (Eisner, 345). Such consideration has proved to be widespread and typical among the French New Wave critics and filmmakers (Brody).

Himself fond of *Moonfleet*, Francois Truffaut explains that cinephiles, who are "conformist" in essence, cherish its longing for "reassurance" and family—served with a dash of exoticism.

Adrian Danks suggests a less sentimental approach, one that aims to understand the singularity of the film—and by way of rebound, Lang's cinematic vision:

> *Moonfleet* is also something of a holiday from the relentless modernity of much of Lang's previous and subsequent work. It ultimately should be placed alongside such a highly enjoyable Western as *Western Union* (1941), one-shot experiments like the vastly underrated *You and Me*, and the Indian films, works which help provide a more complex and varied picture of Lang's cinema after his initial flush of success in Germany (Danks).

CHARACTERS

John Whiteley. Following his late mother's instructions to find Jeremy Fox—whom she referred to as "his friend" in her letter—the Young Mohune travels to Dorsetshire.
Jeremy Fox. A refined gentleman in appearance, Fox (Stewart Granger) is a buccaneer and the leader of a band of rogue smugglers.
Lord Ashwood. The wealthy aristocrat is a financier of smuggling and piracy. He and Fox partner for pirate expeditions. Played by George Sanders from Fritz Lang's *Man Hunt*.
Mrs. Minton. Fox's inamorata is jealous and vindictive—eventually she snitches the smugglers to the magistrate.
Hull. A member of the gang and the proprietor of the inn where the smugglers' operations are based. Actor Dan Seymour appeared in five Fritz Lang films, such as *Cloak and Dagger* and *The Big Heat*—in small but always memorable roles.
Damen. Another smuggler, played by Jack Elam from Lang's *Rancho Notorious* and *American Guerrilla in the Philippines*.
Gypsy. Romani woman who dances at Fox's dinner party is played by ballet-trained French actress Lilane Montevecchi.

SYNOPSIS

Young John Mohune travels to the small coastal village of Moonfleet—rumored to be plagued by the ghost of Redbeard. Mohune's late mother had instructed him to contact a man named Jeremy Fox— who would be his friend and protector. Fox had been John's mother's suitor—and presumably her sweetheart John finds himself in the eerie graveyard and passes out after tripping over a tomb. He is taken to the tavern, where he wakes up to find himself scrutinized by a ragtag group of shady characters. Then, Jeremy Fox appears and orders the others to behave, before arranging for the kid to be sent to a boarding school. John Mohune doesn't like the idea, and instead, goes to his ancestral home, the Mohune House. He has yet to learn that Fox is his father.

Among Fox's acquaintances is the local aristocrat named Lord Ashwood, who—under the guise of privateering—is busy with organizing pirate fleets, while Fox is having an affair with Lady Ashwood, which is apparently an open secret as far as the Lord is concerned. Fox's smuggling operation is snitched and he barely escapes an ambush by the magistrate's troops.

Young Mohune accidentally finds a locket that belonged to his infamous ancestor. The locket contains a piece of paper with a few psalms which make no sense to the boy. Fox and the boy manage to decipher the verses hidden inside the locket—which reveals that the secret location of Redbeard's diamond is a well within the Holbrooke Castle. They daringly infiltrate the garrison and retrieve the diamond from the well. They take shelter at a secluded beach cabin, with a sailboat ready for their planned escape to the colonies. Fox's attempt to deal with Ashbrook leads to an altercation. He shoots the nobleman before he is stabbed by his rapier. He returns to the beach cabin and instructs John Mohune to keep the diamond and go to the village. Fox sails away, fatally wounded.

SCENES



Dorsethire, 1757. Young John Mohune travels to the small coastal village of Moonfleet; he is guided by his late mother's letter instructing him to contact a man named Jeremy Fox— who would be his friend and protector. Soon after he arrives in the village, John finds himself in the eerie graveyard of the church and passes out after tripping over a tomb. He is taken to the tavern, where he wakes up to find himself scrutinized by a ragtag group of shady characters.



The Brigand Chief. Jeremy Fox soon shows up; this suave man is revealed to be the chief of the rowdy bootleggers. Although Fox treats the kid amiably, he arranges for him to be dragged to a boarding school and leaves. John is able to escape and eventually arrives at his ancestral home, the Mohune House.



The Mohune House. Fox had been John's mother's suitor—and presumably her sweetheart; Olivia Mohune's parents had set the dogs on him and subsequently got him banished to the colonies. In contrast to the decline of the family, Fox had prospered and returned to own the house that he was booted out from. John Mohune gets a warmer reception this time and takes up residence at the house. He has yet to learn that Fox is his father.



The Aristocrat. Fox's social acquaintances turn out to be markedly different in appearance from his criminal cohorts. A regular of Jeremy Fox's circle is a local aristocrat named Lord Ashwood, who—under the guise of privateering—is busy with organizing pirate fleets. Fox and Ashwood discuss terms about partnering as financiers of piracy, but can't come to an agreement as Fox is unable to contribute the necessary capital. Further complicating the matters is his affair with Lady Ashwood, which is apparently an open secret as far as the Lord is concerned.



Lang references Hogarth's A Rake's Progress painting series in a spectacular scene that makes full use of the wide screen format; the scene takes place at Mohune Manor, where the Romani dancer—ballet-trained French actress Lilane Montevecchi—performs during Fox's dinner party.



The Mystery of Redbeard. The village is said to be plagued by the ghost of Redbeard, the once powerful patriarch of the Mohune clan and commander of the Holbrooke Castle. Villagers are unnerved by suspicious goings-on around the village that are attributed to him. There are rumors about his past and talk of his missing treasure, a priceless diamond.

The Boy's Discovery. Young Mohune somehow finds himself in the catacomb of the church and accidentally finds a locket that belonged to his infamous ancestor. The locket contains a piece of paper with a few psalms which make no sense to the boy. He also makes the dangerous discovery that the basement is where the smugglers keep their cache of contraband goods.



Discord. Not before long, John Mohune is nabbed by the smugglers, who are irked by his knowledge of their clandestine operations. The men have been growing restless with their leader for some time and this incident sparks a mutiny. One of them challenges Fox to a duel, but is defeated and the status quo is restored for the time being.

"For funerals and snakes"—Lang mocked the wide screen format, but made excellent use of it in *Moonfleet*.



Ambush. Fox's inamorata Mrs. Minton gets increasingly jealous about his (mostly open) affairs with other women. She finally betrays him by snitching to Magistrate Maskew. Later that night, when the smugglers gather at the cove to collect their hoard, they are ambushed by the magistrate's troops. Several of them are shot; Fox is able to get away with a light wound.

Quest. As Fox and the boy rest and recuperate, they manage to decipher the verses hidden inside the locket—which reveals that the secret location of Redbeard's diamond is a well within the Holbrooke Castle. Fox disguises himself as a major and they daringly infiltrate the garrison. Young Mohune retrieves the diamond from the well and the two manage to flee the chasing soldiers. They take shelter at a secluded beach cabin, with a sailboat ready for their planned escape to the colonies.

Fox's Choice. Fox heads out for his rendezvous with Lord Ashbrook, leaving behind a note to let the sleeping kid know that he would not be coming back. Subsequently, he hops in Ashbrook's horse carriage and impresses his would-be partner with the diamond. However, Fox suddenly has a change of heart about deserting the boy and decides to return. Ashbrook is incensed and a brawl ensues—Fox shoots the nobleman before he is stabbed by his rapier.

Farewell. Although severely wounded, Fox returns to the beach cabin and instructs John Mohune to keep the diamond and go to the village. After assuring the boy that he would return, he sails away. The final scene shows John Mohune, in good spirits and accompanied by the magistrate. He remarks that Fox would return one day, because he is his "friend".

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Jeremy Fox – Unconscientious (Rake, Dying)

JEREMY FOX

As outlined in the "Overview" section, *Moonfleet*'s strength lies not in its themes and characters. Intentionally or otherwise, characters are not rigorously developed. Amidst comic book-like figures (or those that resemble Hogarth paintings, since that was Lang's chief inspiration), Jeremy Fox appears as a somewhat developed character. Fox's character has a dual nature: on the one hand, he is suave and charming; on the other hand, he is a womanizer and a reckless criminal. He manages to keep these two facets of his life spatially separated: the inn and the basement of the church are for his business with the bootleggers, while the old Mohune House is where he entertains the aristocrats and rest of his social circle. We see this world more or less from the eyes of John Mohune, hence the dreamy and rather surreal nature of the depiction—the Mohune Manor looks like an abandoned house until one enters it; there are secret passageways in the garden that enables a little girl to appear and befriend John. If the old house is at least in part a bit of a figment of John's imagination, perhaps the dashing swashbuckler Jeremy Fox is a father figure idealized by him.

Illustrative moments

Rake. The primary inspiration of *Moonfleet* for Fritz Lang was Hogarth's art, specifically two of his works, of *Tavern Scene* from this particular series of paintings, as well as that of *An Election Entertainment* (from the Humours of an Election series). The film evokes characters and mannerisms evoked particularly by the Tavern Scene. Fox is a womanizer and a prodigal man, yet the analogy has its limits—Fox is a self-made man, he made his fortune in the colonies after getting kicked out by Olivia Mohune's parents.

Dying. The scene that caused tension between Fritz Lang and the film's producer—the ending shows Fox sailing away in the small boat. It is followed by a shot of young Mohune with his new guardian, the

magistrate. The boy reiterates a message of hope—his naïve belief that Fox would come back. The heavily-wounded and exhausted Fox had persuaded him that he would return, before he sailed away with the boat. In his last moment, Fox, who had been violent and opportunistic, emerges as a considerate and compassionate character.

THEMES

Society – (Piracy as Social Banditry, Pirates' Sunset)
Justice – (Justice)

Piracy as Social Banditry. "All that is told of the sea has a fabulous sound to an inhabitant of the land, and all its products have a certain fabulous quality, as if they belonged to another planet" (Thoreau) wrote Henry David Thoreau. As creatures of the sea, pirates have been, and continue to be fascinating subjects in popular culture. Were they simply murderous seaborne thieves or social bandits (in the spirit of social historian Eric Hobsbawn's concept) and radical rebels of their times? There might not be a clear-cut and easily generalizable answer to this question. At least a part of this never-ending interest in pirates in popular imagination is related to their relationships with authority. Certainly, they were much less romantic and noble then their portrayals in fiction, but these rebellious spirits nonetheless posed a serious challenge for the order—which itself had a tendency to be oppressive.

Pirates' Sunset. The Golden Age of Piracy is considered to be the second half of 1600s. In this period, buccaneers profited from the competition between states, which encouraged privateers to wreak havoc on their enemies. Letters of marque issued by governors would semi-legitimize swashbuckling, as long as it harassed enemies and delivered a chunky percentage from the plunder to the state's treasury. When the colonist nations had no need for these unpredictable contractors, they turned against them. In 1700s, piracy was in decline, notorious captains like Bartholomew Roberts were killed, and for the remaining buccaneers, the following years proved to be an uphill battle. *Moonfleet* takes place in 1757, which was definitely the twilight of the swashbucklers. The bootleggers under Jeremy Fox are confined to the small village and depend upon smuggled and looted cargo. The infamous Red Beard, the patriarch of the Mohune clan, is long gone—he was evidently a figure of the Golden Age and villagers still fear him and believe they are plagued by his ghost. In fact, the only ghostly quality of the bootleggers is their clandestine existence. With profitable expeditions becoming scarce, they turn against their leader and try to topple him. Interestingly, the aristocrat—Lord Ashwood—is the driving force of a privateering expedition at a time when piracy was in retreat. Fox has to partner with Ashwood by raising a large sum of capital as his share—that is, if he wants to have a claim to being a pirate. The hopeless situation parallels the theme of the frontier in the Western genre and how, at one point in revisionist Westerns, it came to represent limits rather than opportunities. Do you think Jeremy Fox is comparable to heroes of Westerns?

JUSTICE

Justice. Reckless pirates challenge authority and are destined to fail against the resources and forces of the modern state. Then, merciless punishment awaits them. When *Moonfleet* is viewed as a child's story, the sight of randomly placed gallows in the countryside become an even more disturbing sight. The gallows display executed criminals who are let hanging as deterrence. Then again, there are the elites personified by Lord Ashwood, who happen to be more sophisticated criminals compared to the common crooks.

Discussion Questions

Lang had planned a different ending for *Moonfleet*—with Jeremy Fox sailing away. Why would he have preferred such an ending? What would be the implications of the two alternatives?

With reference to the wide screen format, Lang reiterates this format's lack of appeal to him (Bogdanovich, 97). What are some of the instances in *Moonfleet* that offer interesting aesthetic explorations of this particular form? With respect to the narrative and the viewing experience, what would be the consequence of truncated edges?

Do you think Jeremy Fox is comparable to heroes of Westerns? Which ones? How?

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