HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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While the City Sleeps 1956

Fritz Lang **(1890-1976)**

OVERVIEW

"A film I personally like very much," (Higham, 138) Fritz Lang once said of *While the City Sleeps*. He considered it an "honest picture" (Bogdanovich, 105) and one that was "at least an equally good picture" as his favorite films *M* and *Fury* (104). In 1931's *M*, a serial-killer terrorized Berlin, taunting the press with messages and inciting a city-wide mobilization. Twenty-five years later, Fritz Lang's penultimate film in the USA casts the spotlight on a media corporation, as journalists scramble to cover a series of murders in Los Angeles.

Background. Based on Charles Einstein's 1953 novel *Bloody Spur*, *While the City Sleeps* (working title: *The News is Made at Night*) had its screenplay written by Casey Robinson (*Captain Blood*, 1935; *Now, Voyager*, 1942). The story was inspired by the real life murderer William Heirens, whose 1946 murders had a notable similarity to those in *While the City Sleeps*—with the use of lipstick to leave messages at crime scenes. Lang contributed to the research for the screenplay thanks to his old penchant for collecting newspaper clippings (102). The impressive ensemble cast included Vincent Price, Dana Andrews and Ida Lupino. The film was shot in five weeks in July and August of 1955—it was released almost a year later in May 1956 (139).

Human Relations and Power. In 1951, Joseph Losey had directed a remake of Lang's *M*, which was also set in Los Angeles. While Lang's original and Losey's remake focus on the hunt for the serial-killer, the 1956 film is primarily preoccupied with journalists' reaction to the crime and the fierce competition within the news organization. Hence, its fundamental concern is "corruption of human relations by power" (Wood, 9).

Corporations. In *While the City Sleeps*, the vain heir of the media empire takes the helm following his father's death and unleashes competition among his executives. Another 1950s film that features corporate power struggle as its main theme was 1954s popular *Executive Suit*. Patriarchal succession constitutes the backbone of *Home from the Hill* (1960, Vincente Minnelli) and *Written on the Wind* (1956, Douglas Sirk) (Walker, 69).

Journalism. Together with *The Blue Gardenia* (1953) and *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* (1959), *While the City Sleeps* is one of three Fritz Lang films that revolve around newspapers and journalism. *While the City Sleeps*' Walter Kyne Senior recalls media moguls such as W.R. Hearst—not unlike Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941) and its Charles Foster Kane character.

Themes. Among the film's main themes are modern media, particularly as it was shaped by television; forensics and other crime investigation techniques; psychopathology, which would become an increasingly popular subject in cinema in the following decades; the growing influence of popular culture, specifically comic books.

Assesment. Everyone watches one another in *While the City Sleeps*. Accordingly, director of photography Ernest Laszlo (*Judgment at Nurnberg,* 1961; *Logan's Run*, 1974) and art director Carroll Clark (*King Kong*, 1933; *Mary Poppins,* 1964) have created brightly lit scenes that may come surprising to viewers accustomed to light/shadow contrasts of Lang. Similarly, the secondary treatment that the crime receives makes it difficult to categorize it as a film noir. According to Lotte Eisner, it is one of "Lang's most American films after *The Big Heat*" (Eisner, 352). Critic Jonathan Rosenbaum has placed *While the City Sleeps* in his list of top 100 American films (Rosenbaum).

Legacy. With its interest in human relations rather than the crime itself, *While the City Sleeps* anticipates contemporary films such as *Zodiac* (2007, David Fincher). The theme of voyeurism predates two 1960 films, *Peeping Tom* by Michael Powell and *Psycho* by Alfred Hitchcock. The portrayal of the serial-killer has influenced the Italian giallo thrillers of 1970s, which often featured similarly leather gloved murderers. A subgenre not unrelated to the giallo and one whose heyday was in the 1980s is that of the slasher films, which have also borrowed (notably 1980's *Maniac*) from Lang's 1956 film.

CHARACTERS

Ed Mobley. Hard drinking writer is a Pulitzer Prize winner and works as an anchorman for the Kyne News Network.

Robert Manners. "The Lipstick Killer" is a young man who works as a pharmacy deliveryman and lives with his stepmother.

Walter Kyne, Jr. The vain heir of the Kyne Corporation (played by Vincent Price) is clueless about his father's profession—and his wife's affair.

Jon Day Griffith. The managing editor of the *Sentinel* is one of the three contenders for the executive director position created by Walter Kyne Jr. Mobley thinks Griffith is "still at heart a reporter".

Mark Loving. The head of the news wire service is the second contender—"a conniver", is Kyne's view of him. Actor George Sanders had played the antagonist in Lang's *Man Hunt* (1941).

Harry Kritzer. The head of the photography division, Kritzer competes with Griffith and Loving for the position. To beat his rivals, he relies on his affair with Kyne's wife.

Dorothy Kyne. Kyne's wife has an affair with Harry Kritzer whom she helps to get the coveted position by influencing her husband. Her motivation has less to do with romance than power—she plans to get hold of the ropes of the media empire once Kritzer gets to be the executive director. Actress Rhonda Fleming's Dorothy Kyne is likened to "Lady Macbeth" by her lover.

Nancy Liggett. Ed Mobley's fiancée works as Mark Loving's secretary.

Mildred Donner. Gossip columnist is an experienced journalist. She flirts with Ed Mobley—with the encouragement of her boyfriend, the newswire chief Mark Loving.

SYNOPSIS

A murderer targets young women, police dub him the Lipstick Killer. Newspaper magnate Walter Kyne Jr. has his top three executives—in charge of the newspaper (Griffith), newswire (Loving), photo service (Kritzer)—race to exploit the story. The murderer strikes once again and celebrity anchorman Ed Mobley taunts him with a personal message during his TV show. He calls the serial killer "a mama's boy" and a comic-book fan. The killer—Robert Manners—listens to the broadcast and is frustrated with his—apparently mostly accurate—portrayal. Mobley also comes up with a ruse to lure Manners to his private life and uses his fiancée (and Kyle Corp. secretary) Nancy Liggett as a bait.

Liggett turns out to be neighbors with the Kyne Photo Service chief Kritzer—who is having an affair with the wife of Kyle Jr. Kritzer is relying on his girlfriend to win the race. On the other hand, Mark Loving encourages his girlfriend, the gossip columnist Mildred Donner, to have a dalliance with Mobley—expecting this move to place him in an advantageous position in the race. The third candidate, Griffith is a friend of Mobley's.

Then, the killer locates Liggett; his home invasion attempt fails and he enters Krinzer's neighboring apartment and attacks his mistress Dorothy Kyne. Eventually he flees and is cornered at a metro station. Mobley lets his friend Griffith to be the first one to learn about the arrest—consequently, the editor gets

the coveted executive position. Mobley replaces him as the editor of the *Sentinel* and Kritzer is dispatched on a long overseas assignment.

SCENES



Home Invasion. The deliveryman of a drugstore snibs the lock of a customer's apartment door and leaves—only to return shortly, enter the apartment unhindered and murder the young woman. Crime scene detectives find the words "Ask mother" scribbled with a lipstick on the victim's mirror. The culprit is dubbed the Lipstick Killer. For a while, the janitor is considered a suspect and defends his innocence—with broken English, indicating his status as an immigrant.

Kyne Corp. Moments before his death, the ailing news magnate Walter Kyne directs his top three executives helming the newspaper (Griffith), newswire (Loving) and photo service (Kritzer) to fully exploit the sensational crime story. Following his sudden death, his son Walter Kyne Jr. comes up with an ingenious idea—whoever discovers the identity of the killer would be appointed to the newly created executive director position in charge of the entire organization. Griffith and Loving fiercely compete for the post—the third contender in the race, Kritzer, has an illicit affair with Dorothy Kyne and relies entirely on her word-of-mouth influence on Kyne Junior.



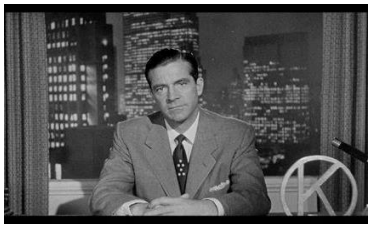


Kyne Enterprises resembles William Randolph Hearst's media empire. Kyne's success in journalism is thanks to his keen eye for exploiting sensational content.





The newspaper has an open plan office: One of the three senior executives, Mark Loving works with Secretary Nancy Liggett in his office, separated from the rest by glass to provide limited privacy. After his father's death, Walter Kyne Jr. meets with the three executives and unleashes a race among them; he admits to Ed Mobley that he was jealous of him due to his father regarding him as a surrogate son.





The Anchorman. Ed Mobley is a Pulitzer Prize winning writer and the anchorman of the television channel's news show. Although he had been the favorite of the late Walter Kyne, Mobley shows no interest in the new position; nonetheless, he weighs in on the side of his friend, the editor Griffith. Kyne News Network commentator and author Ed Mobley is a celebrity—he represents the new medium, television. Walter Kyne Jr. admits to Ed Mobley that he was jealous of him due to his father regarding him as a surrogate son.





The Investigation. There emerges a weak lead pointing to the elderly janitor of the victim's building; it leads newswire director Mark Loving to act in haste and he almost

distributes the unsubstantiated information. Jon Griffith is delighted by his rival's embarrassing blunder. "Fill in this face" is the title of the story about the killer. Since the police are only certain about his hair color, he could be anyone—hence the blank face. Manners enjoys the publicity that the crimes receive and draws an exaggerated self-portrait on the empty space.

Then, the Lipstick Killer strikes again—and leaves behind a comic book at the crime scene.



Television Address. Mobley speculates that the culprit would most likely be a young man; he comes up with an idea to taunt him with a personal message during his TV show. Using findings of forensics and crude profiling, he mentions a few basic facts about the serial-killer—describing him as a misogynist, "a mama's boy", and a comic-book fan. The killer—Robert Manners—listens to the broadcast and is frustrated with his—apparently mostly accurate—portrayal. Manners' tense dialogue with his stepmother makes it clear that his murderous rage stems in part from his troubled childhood.



Mobley's television address startles Manners and he drops a copy of *Strangler* to the floor. He leaves a copy of another issue at a crime scene. Comic books were targeted for their negative influence on youth. Psychiatrist Wertham had testified before the Congress for the hearing on this subject.



Mobley's Ruse. Mobley takes his personal investigation one step further by drawing the killer's attention to his own personal life; he makes his engagement to Nancy Liggett public. Mobley's ruse is to capture Manners by luring him to his fiancée, who accepts to act as bait. A police bodyguard is assigned to Liggett. Ed Mobley's sleaziness is such that he sometimes reminds one of Manners.



Marymount Apartments. Liggett turns out to be neighbors with the Kyne Photo Service chief Kritzer. What she—or anyone else—doesn't know yet is that Kritzer uses the studio for his secretive rendezvous with Walter Kyne Jr.'s wife. Dorothy Kyne and her lover Harry "Honest" Kritzer—she expects that the promotion of the photo service chief as the executive director would give her access to power.



Office Intrigues. Ed Mobley, Nancy Liggett, Editor Jon Griffith, and gossip columnist Mildred Donner converse at the bar Dell. Mark Loving encourages his girlfriend, the gossip columnist Mildred Donner, to have a dalliance with Mobley—expecting this move to place him in an advantageous position in the race. A heavily inebriated Mobley returns home after dropping off Donner to her home. The brief flirtation gets to be the talk of the office next day and infuriates Mobley's fiancée.



Prowling Killer. The killer coincidentally locates the apartment of Liggett and waits until her security detail is away. Eventually, he shows up at her door and tries to get her to open it. Thinking it is Mobley and still angry at him, she refuses to open it. Just as she unknowingly thwarts the attack, Manners notices Dorothy Kyne across the hall, preparing to enter Krinzer's apartment. He assaults her; Kyne fights him off and seeks refuge in Liggett's apartment. Manners dashes out in panic and is chased by the police

until he is cornered at a metro station. Mobley lets his friend Griffith to be the first one to learn about the arrest—giving the editor's newspaper headway over Mark Loving's wire service.

Corporate Structuring and Restructuring. Following the tussle at Marymount Apartments, Kritzer and Dorothy Kyne's affair is exposed. Kritzer sternly blackmails his boss and ends up getting the coveted position. Mobley lets Kyne know his low opinion about him and resigns. On the first day of their honeymoon in Miami, Mobley and Liggett learn that Kyne has had second thoughts and made new appointments—Griffith becomes the executive director, Mobley replaces him as the editor of the *Sentinel* and Kritzer is dispatched on a long overseas assignment. The couple kisses and ignores Kyne's phone call.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Ed Mobley -- **Closed** (Unambitious, Surrogate Son, Doppelgangerish)

ED MOBLEY

Actor Dana Andrews (the film noir classic *Laura*, 1944; *Best Years of Our Lives*, 1946) portrays Mobley as an inebriated/insomniac character.

Illustrative moments

Unambitious. Mobley shows no interest in the race for the coveted director position and maintains that he has no appetite for power.

Surrogate son. Mobley was obviously regarded as heir apparent by Kyne Senior, which earned him Walter Kyne Jr.'s enmity.

Doppelgangerish. Mobley's sleaziness and actions subtly resemble those of the Lipstick Killer. A striking parallel is the scene when he disables Liggett's door lock just like Robert Manners does before his home invasions (by placing the open door on the latch). It is as if Mobley's "sexual desire is linked to Manners' murderous desire" (Walker, 62). Michael Walker points out to another 1956 film, the science fiction *Forbidden Planet* which featured a similar relationship between a scientist and a monster (56).

THEMES

Society – (Media, Technology, Surveillance)
Justice – (Criminology, True-Crime, Psychopathology, Comic Books)
Politics – (Power)

SOCIETY

Media. Kyne Senior dubs the murderer the Lipstick killer and tells his underlings that he wants every woman to be "scared silly" when they put on makeup. His success in journalism evidently stems from his ability to exploit sensational news. Unlike Orson Wells' *Citizen Kane*, Lang is more concerned with "continuity, not the man" (Walker, 69). Therefore, when Kyne Junior takes over, the news group continues along the lines established by the founder.

Technology. As he is getting treated by a nurse in the office, Kyne Senior keeps track of the news via a news ticker. Teleprinters play an important role in the race between the division heads; cameras are used by police as well as reporters. Of course, the featured technology is television: Mobley uses it to directly address and unsettle the culprit—who has a set in his bedroom, which is presumably not the only one in his mother's home. The scene recalls *M*, with Peter Lorre staring at the mirror; only here, it feels like the TV almost looks back (Gunning, 443).

Surveillance. In the open-plan office of the Kyne Corporation, all journalists constantly watch one another. Only the department heads get to work in glass enclosed rooms which barely provide some privacy. Surveillance is a recurrent theme: A wary Harry Kritzer observes that walls of Kyne's home "look like sliding panels" and suspects that his inamorata's husband might have "planted microphones behind the pictures".

JUSTICE

Criminology. Police detectives are seen combing the crime scene and one outcome of the forensics work is establishing the hair color of the culprit. Investigators also use profiling techniques to describe the culprit as a young and strong male, a comic book fan, and someone who has a troubled relationship with his mother.

True-Crime. "For heaven's sake, catch me before I kill more, I cannot control myself" was the note found by detectives at the crime scenes of the real Lipstick Killer William Heirens. The public is fascinated by gruesome crimes; the criminal himself evidently enjoys popular crime fiction.

Psychopathalogy. Robert Manners also uses lipstick but his message—"ask mother"—is different from that of his real-life counterpart Heirens. It is explained that Manners hates women because he was raised as a girl by his stepmother. Manners' mother fixation predates by four years both *Psycho* and *Peeping Tom*.

Comic Books. A character in Lang's *Woman in the Moon* was a boy who loved popular science fiction magazines. The director himself was known to be an avid collector of such literature (Gold). However, *While the City Sleeps* presents such a negative view of comic books that they emerge as a factor in the culprit's psychopathology. This was not the first instance of linking comic books and juvenile delinquency (Gunning, 443)—psychiatrist Fredric Wertram's book *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) had attacked comic books for their influence on youth and he had **testified** before the Congress on this issue.

POLITICS

Power. Kyne administrators crave for power. Even Mobley, who professes to be unambitious, is already enviably powerful—he was regarded as heir apparent by Kyne Senior and is very well connected with key law enforcement officers. Executives aren't the only ones striving for power: Dorothy Kyne expects to increase her influence in the corporation when her lover is appointed to the top post. The gossip columnist Mildred Donner ends up getting promoted to chief advisor to Kyne by leveraging her knowledge of his wife's affair.

Discussion questions

In his 1992 article, Michael Walker has argued that *While the City Sleeps* is ideologically conservative because of several factors, one of which is its female characters (demure Nancy Liggett versus independent Mildred Donner) (Gunning, 61). How does the film represent women? Do you agree that it is ideologically conservative?

Commenting on ambiguity in *While the City Sleeps*, Raymond Bellour writes that "Lang keeps the eye in perpetual hesitation" and "the film always seems to be constructing itself" (Bellour, 36). What scenes could be examples of such ambiguity?

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