HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Burak Sevingen, MA

M 1931
Fritz Lang (1890-1976)

OVERVIEW

Lang's First Sound Film. Singing 'Falling in Love Again', Marlene Dietrich charmed movie audiences in 1930 with *the Blue Angel*. The first German 'talkie' directed by von Sternberg admirably showcased the potential of sound films. The new technique had made its global debut with *the Jazz Singer* in 1927—when Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* had come out. As a consequence of *Metropolis*' economic failure, Lang's next two films were produced by his own company. He directed *Spies* a year later and his last silent film, *Woman in the Moon* premiered in 1929. By then, cinemagoers were already becoming familiar with sound in theaters thanks to newsreels and animations. The first sound-on-film newsreel had documented Lindberg's taking off on his solo flight across the Atlantic in 1927 and Disney's 1928 cartoon *Steamboat Willie* had pioneered synchronized sound. It also introduced the Mickey Mouse character—whose cutout figures embellish a pastry kiosk in *M*, Lang's first sound film which finally came out in 1931.

The sound technology opened up fresh possibilities and challenges just as Lang had perfected his mastery of the silent film. In contrast to the *Blue Angel*'s rich music and dialogue, Lang chose a different approach with *M*. It involved a minimalist and precise use of sound—a few sequences completely muted, impactful use of off screen sound effects, voice overlaps between consecutive scenes and no music except for a whistled tune (by the director himself) and another one briefly cranked by an organ grinder.

Modern City and Consumerism. *M* is about the hunt for a serial killer who targets Berlin's children. The community reacts to the ghastly crimes while the police and the underworld conduct their own investigations in a tense city. Modern city is more than a setting—in the same vein as two films of the same year, Chaplin's *City Lights* and Lamprecht's *Emil and the Detectives* about a group of kids tailing and catching a thief in Berlin. Despite the lurking danger, *M* depicts urban space as a source of enchantment. The streets promise stimulating encounters and experiences. Posters on advertising columns promote boxing matches, circuses, concerts and vacation spots. Consumerism is a part of daily life: Shop windows display marvels of industrialization. They feature eye catching goods and signs from various sectors of manufacturing: Matador toy model construction sets, Blendol liquid detergent, Wrigley's P.K. chewing gum, Sarotti chocolate, UHU adhesives, Henckels cutlery, etc. News themselves are consumed eagerly even when they are terrifying—attested by the circulation of papers with the serial killer's exploits.

Architecture and Technology. We get glimpses of urban spaces like the tenement block with the apartment of the mother anxiously waiting for her daughter and the garden colony that becomes a crime scene with her murder. Modern architecture takes center stage as the gangsters' finally corner the serial killer in an office complex, a plain and functional five storey building from concrete and glass. The building is protected by a state-of-the-art security system which is presented elaborately. The silent alarm's multiple clock stations need to be routinely "switched on the exact minute" by guards patrolling the premises. Otherwise, the gear mechanism would wind up, turn a wheel with its teeth and pulse an emergency code to the police station—machinery less remarkable compared the steel cogwheels featured at *Metropolis'* opening, but more automated.

James Whale's *Frankenstein* was the top grossing film of 1931 and *M* has a reminder to the flip side of technological progress. The film was shot on set in an old Zeppelin hangar in the town of Staaken—the home of Zeppelin-Staaken which was the manufacturer of the largest biplane of the First World War (Mark Felton Productions). Following the war, the location was turned into a film studio as a result of restrictions placed on Germany's military capacity. In any case, the giant bomber was already obsolete

with technology advancing at a rapid pace and the rigid airships that once berthed in the hangar would become so in a few years with the Hindenburg disaster in 1937.

The Great Depression. On a city wall, a poster of Pabst's *Westfront 1918* briefly appears. The war drama was released the previous year by *M*'s producer Nero. In the socio-economic climate of Germany, World War I reparation payments continued to be a burden. A global consequence of the Great Depression was a drastic decrease in international trade which crippled the economy and fueled unemployment. Beggars play a key role in M due to their ability to monitor the entire city not only because they are well organized but also there are so many of them.

Modern Police. Beggars are mobilized by the underworld to catch the murderer—parallel to the efforts of the law enforcement. Police are professional, thorough and technology-savvy but apparently not quick to deliver results. A classic of crime fiction, Dashiel Hammett's *Maltese Falcon* was published in 1931, when Dick Tracy had also made his debut with Chester Gould's comic strip. Otto Wernicke's Inspector Lohmann in *M* is neither a hard boiled detective like Spade or Tracy nor an eccentric genius sleuth. Lieutenant Columbo from the TV show several decades later bears more resemblance to Karl Lohmann, an ordinary looking, mild-mannered and observant man. The part was inspired by Ernst Gennat (Lange) who pioneered modern police procedures in homicide besides coining the word serial killer. *M* depicts modern policing as the management of a vast information network made possible by technical specializations.

Cast and Screenwriter. Peter Lorre, who played the murderer, had a background in theater prior to *M* which would turn out to shape his career. The Jewish actor's famous monologue would be hijacked by Nazi propaganda machine to be used in the anti-Semitic *Eternal Jew* (1940)—framed by voiceover as the admittance of inherent criminality.

The leader of the criminals is another major character, whose rhetoric and mannerism vaguely evoke the Fuehrer of the later years. Nazi Party would come to power just two years later. The year *M* was released, they already had an education minister— Wilhelm Frick who had banned the anti-war film *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Once in power, Nazis would do the same for *M* and *the Testament of Dr. Mabuse*.

Like Lang's previous films, *M* was co-scripted by Thea von Harbou. The couple's collaboration would continue until their divorce and the release of *the Testament of Dr. Mabuse*. Women had prominent parts in the last three films: a prophet in *Metropolis*, an international agent in *Spies* and the leading member of a team of space explorers in *Woman in the Moon*. The tone changes in *M* which has a mostly male cast even though mothers' agony catalyzes social action.

Remakes. One of the two remakes of *M,* the Argentinean *El Vampiro Negro* (1953) by Román Viñoly Barreto is arguably a feminist take on the story that places the mothers at the center of the story. The other remake was released in the USA by the original's producer two decades later with Joseph Losey directing in a Los Angeles setting and anti-communism context. There is subtle criticism of the red scare while the mob, psychiatry and law play important roles. In this more loquacious 1951 film, Losey provides considerable background information about the murderer—which was withheld by Lang—such as his childhood, traumas, experience with religion, relations with his mother, working life and social problems. There is also a peculiar 1959 German release of the original which was re-edited with additional sound due to "aesthetic and political" (Garncarz) concerns—i.e. in order to make it easier to follow and truncate its cynicism about official institutions.

End of the Weimar Republic. The climactic ending takes place in an abandoned brick building, a Schnapps factory—which "had gone bankrupt during the years of inflation". With its shattered windows, the dilapidated distillery is a memento of the previous decade. So much for the roaring twenties and its excesses, the cabarets, wild parties, occultism and the extravagant types featured in *Dr. Mabuse the Gambler* in 1922. *M* is closer in spirit to the genre of film noir that Lang would contribute in the 1940s—in his Hollywood period and self-imposed exile (with *the Woman in the Window*, *Scarlet Street* and *Secret Beyond the Door* to be followed by *the Blue Gardenia*). Before all that, he would make a much less

ambivalent statement two years later with his last film in Germany until 1959—*The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*.

CHARACTERS

Hans Beckert. We are given no information about the serial killer and no clues are provided about his social background.

Inspector Lohmann. Chief of the Homicide Department is amiable, detail oriented and highly perceptive. At times a comical character, Lohmann successfully identifies the culprit—after several months—and would have made the arrest barring the crime syndicate's involvement.

Schränker. A safe cracker convicted of three counts of homicide. Schränker is also the leader of the crime syndicate.

The Blind Panhandler. In *Metropolis*, the actor Georg John had appeared as the anguished worker struggling with the clock machine before being relieved by Freder's son. John was a Lang regular who mostly appeared as less than talkative characters in *Die Niebelungen, Dr. Mabuse the Gambler and Destiny*. His character in *M* is noticeably sensitive aurally. He gets exasperated when an organ grinder cranks discordant sounds and is relieved as soon as a proper melody emanates from the pipes. The panhandler's privileged hearing helps to catch the serial killer as he identifies Beckert from the tune he was whistling on the day of the abduction.

Inspector Groeber. Inspector of the Criminal Investigations Department is a minor part played by accomplished actor and another Lang regular Theodor Loos from *Die Niebelungen, Metropolis, the Testament of Dr Mabuse*. Groeber successfully (and humanely) interrogates Franz the burglar after the break in at the office block. His hunch that something is fishy leads to the unearthing of the Beckert connection and the location of the kangaroo court. Loos' roles in Lang's films mostly involved transparent and well intentioned characters; His contribution in *M* helps to present a fairly positive representation of the police.

Beckert's defender. Dressed in shabby clothing, his hand resting on a pile of books and physically demarcated from all the members of the mob, Beckert's 'counselor' at the kangaroo court (played by the essayist Rudolf Blümner) claims irresponsibility due to insanity, arguing for the need for psychiatric treatment. He is disrespected but manages to make a solid case.

Bartender. The bartender appears only once, having a chat with a police sergeant after the raid of the Crocodile club. She explains that all members of the underworld despise the serial killer—"especially the girls, as each of them hides a mother inside". The notable fact is that the actress Rosa Valetti was a cabaret owner and performer who also played in *the Blue Angel* with Marlene Dietrich. The days of dizzying Weimar social life are long gone and as one of its participants, she crowns Lang's brief revisit to the territory of *Dr. Mabuse the Gambler*.

Mrs. Beckham. Beckert's last victim Elsie's mother appears briefly at the opening, waiting in vain for her daughter to come back from school—and later at the very end, addressing the viewers directly and cautioning them.

SYNOPSIS

A man approaches little Elsie Beckmann on her way home from school and buys a balloon for her from a blind panhandler; the man is whistling 'In the Hall of the Mountain King' tune from Edward Grieg's suite to Ibsen's *Peer Gynt.* Elsie never comes home; newspapers announce the murder of the girl. In the city, mothers become fearful, tension mounts and prejudices intensify as people become paranoid about each other. The murderer contacts the news media and urges to be stopped before he strikes again—Elsie is not his first victim.

Inspector Karl Lohmann leads the investigation and modern police methods are used extensively. Illicit businesses are pressured to provide tips—mounting pressure on their rackets leads representatives of the branches of crime to gather for a discussion of possible solutions to the disruption of their businesses. The 'chairman' Schränker, comes up with a revelation to capture him themselves. Backbone of his plan rests with the tightly regimented organization of beggars who are to keep a watchful eye on every single child on the streets.

Meanwhile, bureaucrats make us of what is already available to them through public institutions: Hospital and prison records of persons who might be a potential perpetrator. Indeed, the lists of former patients of mental clinics promise a breakthrough—the name of Hans Beckert comes up as a possible suspect. Officers lie in wait at Beckert's apartment while the criminals comb the streets.

As Beckert prowls the streets whistling his trademark tune, he gets to be recognized by the panhandler, who alarms the crooks. Beckert is cornered inside an office block and captured; he is taken to an abandoned factory for a kangaroo court. One of their associates, a burglar named Franz, was forgotten behind in the hasty getaway and the police manage to get him to admit the motivation of the raid and point them to the factory.

The court presided by Schränker tries Beckert, who is even provided a competent defender to represent him. Then, the criminals decide they have had enough of the pretense of legality and move to lynch Schränker—but they are halted in their attempt by the arrival of the police who enter the basement and arrest everyone.

SCENES



A gong vibrates. Moments later, a girl's voice is heard—she is reciting a grisly rhyme about a murderer. Fade in reveals a group of children playing a counting-out game in a tenement's courtyard. They are standing in a circle with the one at the center counting and pointing at the others like the hand of a clock. Overlooking the courtyard, a woman in her balcony is annoyed by the chanting. She takes a basketful of laundry upstairs to Mrs. Beckmann, who comforts her neighbor that "at least while we hear them sing, we know they are still there". She is waiting for her daughter Elsie to arrive from school. Realism inspired composition features Elsie's mother at work in her kitchen.

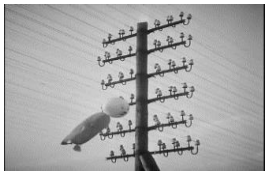


The mood is anxiety, as a serial killer of children is on the loose. Cuckoos from her wall clock blend with the bell at the school and next scene shows Elsie heading home. (Modern architecture gets the spotlight: Imposing geometry and concrete of the stairway leading down from Mrs. Beckmann's apartment.

The Crime. As the mother prepares her lunch, a man approaches Elsie and compliments her ball—from off screen except for his shadow. He is subsequently seen from a distance buying her a balloon from a blind panhandler. The man is whistling 'In the Hall of the Mountain King' tune from Edward Grieg's suite to Ibsen's *Peer Gynt.* The recurring leitmotif will serve to announce the presence of the murderer.



Back at the tenement, we follow her mother call out her name with increasing apprehension. A short sequence makes it painfully clear that Elsie Beckman will not come home: her meal is ready but her seat remains empty.



Violence is only implied—Elsie's ball rolls on the grass and the balloon momentarily gets entangled in the telegraph wires.

The Media. News circulates fast—newspaper boys come running in waves announcing the extra issue and people dash towards them to grab a copy. Pedestrians read the official bulletin collectively from advertising columns and folks discuss the story at social gatherings. Tension mounts and prejudices intensify as people become paranoid about each other. A reward is offered in exchange for information but numerous contradictory and inconclusive tips just add to the confusion. At this point, the murderer appears once again. We watch him from over his shoulder write a letter in his apartment. Apparently this is his second such effort to communicate with the press. It remains unclear whether he is intending to taunt or encourage the investigators.

The Police Investigation. Elsie Beckman is the last of several victims in less than a year and a minister calls the chief of police in order to demand results. The chief lists the actions taken and explains the difficulties involved. The phone conversation serves as voice-over narration explaining the police procedures in detail. The police concentrate their efforts on the vicinity within a set perimeter and conduct interviews. The scene signifies the rise of consumerism and mass culture in the modern city: cutout figures of Mickey Mouse embellish a pastry kiosk—the cartoon *Steamboat Willie* pioneered synchronized sound in 1928).



The abstraction of the map contrasts with the tangible model at its center.



Police work involves searching and photographical recording the crime scene in the garden colony, with forensics specialists systematically combing the vicinity of the bushes, while officers assisted by tracker dogs look for material clues which might point to the area of abduction; interviews with potential witnesses.



Technical specialists such as fingerprint analysts and graphologists examining the two letters mailed by the killer; Inquiries are conducted at train stations and homeless shelters.

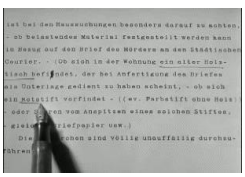


The police pay special attention to illicit businesses presuming that the individual they are looking for could be a career criminal. One such operation is depicted at length, showing numerous officers positioning themselves for a raid of the Crocodile Club—the entertainment district will soon be raided by the police. Street lights and shadows hint at the aesthetics of Lang's film noirs of the next decade.



The film gets totally muted for a while as we watch plainclothes police cover all the exits. A whistle ends the silence as several rows of uniformed officers sweep the street and enter the club. They descend down the stairs, flocking the patrons towards the basement reminiscent of the Odessa Steps scene in *Batttleship Potemkin*. The operation is executed with excellent timing and coordination—not unlike the heists of Dr. Mabuse. The nightclub is depicted as a hotbed of criminals who scatter in panic but none can escape.

At this point in the raid, Inspector Karl Lohmann jovially makes a grand entrance and the patrons tease him with friendly cheers. Identity documents are inspected and Lohmann's keen eye spots the fake ones. One by one, suspicious individuals are rounded up for the Alexanderplatz police station. Detail-oriented Inspector Lohmann resiliently investigates, patiently reading lengthy reports, correcting the grammar errors of his associates as he does so.



Alternative Investigation by Criminals. Mounting pressure on their rackets leads representatives of the branches of crime to gather for a discussion of possible solutions to the disruption of their businesses. Meanwhile the city officials and police chiefs also hold a meeting. The two meetings are shown with parallel cuts conjoined by overlapping hand gestures and speech.

The leaders of the underworld—pickpocket, burglar, con-artist and card shark—assemble at a surreptitious apartment. The 'chairman' who soon joins them is Schränker, a safecracker internationally wanted "from Berlin to Frisco" for murders of three policemen during a robbery in London. The crooks consider developing closer ties with the press to improve their reputation and increasing the number of informers in order to ward off police raids. They soon realize that stop-gap measures won't give them the break they desperately need. Waiting for the police to find the serial killer is regarded as hopeless as holding a psychic séance. After much deliberation, Schränker comes up with a revelation to capture him themselves. Backbone of his plan rests with the tightly regimented organization of beggars who are to keep a watchful eye on every single child on the streets.

Police Identify the Culprit. Meanwhile, at the meeting of the bureaucrats, a proposal for tightening social control and restricting freedoms in favor of more security is brought up. The feasibility of even more raids, inspections and warrants are questioned. The difficulty of profiling is brought up— all signs indicate that the perpetrator is an average person with no distinguishable features that could give him away. Since the murders appear as random crimes of opportunity, establishing a pattern based on the victims is meaningless. Citizens' active observation of their neighborhoods and cooperation with authorities is viewed as indispensable. However, the officials don't have much faith in the public as they believe that individuals don't care about their communities. Finally, one participant suggests making use of what is already available to them through public institutions: Hospital and prison records of persons who might be a potential perpetrator. Indeed, the lists of former patients of mental clinics promise a breakthrough. Among the individuals who had committed a similar crime, spent time at a mental clinic and discharged due to good behavior is Hans Beckert—whom we had seen previously with Elsie, later writing a letter and finally standing before a mirror in his room.

Pursuit. A detective arrives at the address of Beckert who happens to be out. He searches the room as Beckert is prowling the streets whistling his trademark tune. Once again, in the background, the city, as it is recreated in the studio, illustrates the rise of consumerism and mass culture: a bouncing arrow and a rotating spiral are eye-catching devices employed by a shop display.

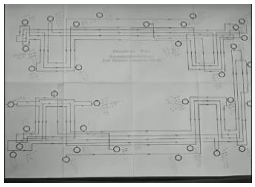


Beckert stalks a little girl for a while and then approaches another one. The blind panhandler who had sold a balloon to the murderer at the beginning happens to be in proximity. He recognizes the melody and sets his associates on Beckert's trail. To make sure that he does not get away, a pursuer chalks 'M' on his palm and casually imprints the letter on the back of the murderer's coat. Once he finds out that he is physically marked, the terrified Beckert starts running away frantically and a chase ensues.

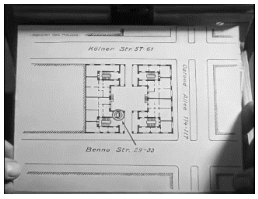
Concurrently, the detective who searched the killer's room shares his findings with Lohmann. The attentive inspector notices that the cigarette brand is the same as those butts found at one of the previous crime scenes. Officers deployed to Beckert's apartment discover more incriminating evidence there and lie in wait for his return.

Raid. The police happen to be just a little late though as the beggars have cornered Beckert outside the entrance of an office block— once again, modern architecture gets the spotlight:





Beckert manages to evade the beggars by sneaking inside just as the employees leave the building at the end of the shift. They phone Schränker, who personally leads at least a dozen gangsters to capture Beckert. After overpowering the three night watchmen, Schränker's men neutralize the alarm system. The modern alarm is abstraction at work: a diagram shows the locations of the alarm system's clock stations in the office building. These need to be routinely punched by guards patrolling the premises; otherwise, the gear mechanism would wind up, turn a wheel with its teeth and pulse an emergency code to the police station



The crooks methodically begin searching the building. Unexpectedly, one of the guards manages to trigger the alarm. Which means that the alarm has just pulsed an emergency code to the police station—where officers would use index cards to identify the source of the signal. After the alarm goes off, the gangsters calmly search for their prey and find him hidden inside the storage units at the top floor. They quickly disperse with their captive.



Trial. Police promptly arrive at the scene and find broken doors, wrecked walls and battered guards. A burglar named Franz was forgotten behind in the hasty getaway and he is taken to the station for interrogation. The criminal police are puzzled by the fact that the vault of a bank on the lower floor was untouched but the coal cellar was rummaged. At this point they are still clueless about the Beckert connection. Thanks to a trick, the detectives get Franz to confess that the hunt for the murderer was the reason for the break in. The burglar also discloses that his cohorts would take Beckert to an abandoned Schnapps factory—where a kangaroo court is to take place. In the basement of the run down building, a large audience sits silently behind Schränker who presides as the judge. The demagogue displays the ease with which a criminal could become one with the state.



Beckert has been granted a defense attorney to maintain the appearance of legitimacy. Beckert's defender—played by the essayist Rudolf Blümner—is disrespected by the criminals, but emerges as a unexpectedly powerful voice of justice.





After getting over his initial confusion and panic, 'the defendant' confronts the mob with scorn. For a moment, his lengthy and emotive monologue strikes a cord with the court audience.

His defender follows suit, arguing for a case of insanity and that 'M' should be handed over to the proper authorities for psychiatric confinement. Schränker has heard enough, and his demagoguery deflects the arguments of the defense. The crowd scrambles to lynch Beckert but they are halted in their attempt by the arrival of the police who enter the basement and arrest everyone.

Final scene shows an official court getting ready to issue a verdict 'in the name of the people'. We never learn what it is, but instead are left with a shot of the grieving mothers, with Mrs. Beckman cautioning the viewers to "take better care of children". She looks straight at the camera and her last word after the fade out is "you".

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Hans Beckert – **Disagreeable, Closed** (Touched, Orator)
Inspector Lohmann – **Rational, Agreeable** (Perceptive, Comical, Languid Bureocrat)
Schranker – **Rational** (Meticilous, Daring, Persuasive); **Disagreeable** (Ruthless, Thug in Uniform)

HANS BECKERT

In an interview (Mangione) Lang mentions that the ordinariness of Lorre's character was intended to mock the theory of the 19th Century criminologist Lombroso—that criminal character could be identified by physical features. Not only does Beckert lack striking characteristics, he comes with no background information that would make him distinct.

We gradually become familiar with Beckert's appearance and are finally given an exposition of his psyche. Beckert's 'defense' provides some insight about his mental state. He claims that he is "tormented" by a feeling of being chased by himself on the streets and he is unconscious of his compulsive actions. On the other hand, he doesn't fail to deliver a rational argument and counter-attack the crime syndicate about their antisocial ways.

Illustrative moments

Touched. He has no distinguishable traits until the society gives him one: He is marked on the back as 'M'. Hands repeatedly touch and grab him: After hearing him speak before the mob, the blind panhandler grips Beckert's arm—confirms that he is indeed the person who bought a balloon on the day of Elsie's abduction; His 'attorney' startles him by poking; Finally, when police officers enter the basement and prevent the mob from lynching him, the hand—of law—is very gently placed on his shoulder.

Orator. Monotonous talking, impassive voices and lengthy periods of silence ultimately give way to Beckert's statement at the kangaroo court, a rare and intense occurrence of emotional speech. The nerve shattering episode achieves the difficult task of humanizing Beckert.

<u>Parallels</u>

The trial invites thinking about issues such as capital punishment, psychiatry and justice. The audience of the kangaroo court alternates between cheering, empathy, amusement, anger and confusion—emotions and reactions that might be mirrored by the viewer of the film. During these moments M anticipates the court drama genre and its classics like *Judgement at Nurnberg* (1961) and *to Kill a Mockingbird* (1962). Several of Lang's other films also feature courtroom settings.

In *Secret Beyond the Door* (1947) a secretive husband is suspected of being a murderer by his wife. A courtroom scene recalls Beckert's monologue—except that it is in his imagination. He becomes both prosecutor and defendant, while the jurors and judge are all faceless silhouettes. He proceeds to debate if a man's unconscious can be considered responsible for his guilty action.

In the film noir *Scarlet Street* (1945), middle aged cashier and amateur painter Chris murders Kitty after finding out that she and her abusive boyfriend had been duping him. He suffers as a consequence of his action, but not by the hands of law—evidence points to the slimy con artist boyfriend, who is tried and sent to the electric chair.

Set in rural America at the turn of the century, *House by the River*'s (1950) idle novelist murders a maid and frames his own brother. He is quite successful at evading the law as the trial doesn't come close to unearthing the truth. While the brother almost commits suicide, the murderer enjoys the publicity and promotes his next book until his wife's suspicions increase.

One of Lang's Westerns, *The Return of Frank James* (1940) is interesting in this context. Big business and press are players in a story that takes place in the aftermath of Jesse's murder with Frank James

seeking revenge for his brother. He eventually finds out that the railroad was behind the assassins and the company's private police frame him for other crimes. There is a lengthy court scene with him as the defendant and also a romance with an ambitious reporter who happens to be the daughter of a newspaper owner.

Another related theme in some of Lang's films is justice sought outside of the courtroom through mob action. In *Fury* (1936), his first film in the USA, Lang shows how circumstantial evidence makes a suspect out of an innocent man in a sensational kidnapping case. An enraged small town community turns into a lynch party and almost murder him. His attempt at retribution culminates in a court trial of the members of the mob. Similarly, *Metropolis*' (1927) radicalized workers easily turn into destructive vigilantes. Once the heedless crowd is made to realize their mistake, this time they turn their rage towards their former leader, the female robot and crucify the false prophet.

Back to *M.* The trial scene foreshadows possibly the best known of all kangaroo courts, the People's Court which would open in only three years and rise to notoriety in 1944 with the trials, mass purges and executions following the assassination attempt on Hitler.

INSPECTOR LOHMANN

Unlike Inspector Wenk in *Dr. Mabuse the Gambler*, Lohmann is primarily a thinker and less of a man of action. He processes the data that modern police techniques produce and draws conclusions.

Illustrative moments

Perceptive (Rational) "A-ris-ton… wasn't that the brand of the cigarette butts found in the previous crime scene?" Lohmann asks when he learns about Beckert's choice of tobacco. The question is his decisive contribution to solving the puzzle. Records from mental clinics provide the essential database that includes Beckert's name but it is Lohmann who pinpoints to the suspect by making connections between the facts. Lohmann patiently reads lengthy police reports, occasionally getting frustrated only by colleagues' spelling mistakes. He is observant and obsessively detail oriented, which is his main strength. The inspector is quite competent as long as he is a part of modern police procedures.

Comical (Agreeable) The detectives deceive Franz the burglar who was arrested at the office complex, tell him that a night-watchman has died and he is the sole suspect. Franz immediately starts talking and sets them on the right track. The confession comes as such a big shock to Lohmann that he gets erratic and dunks his head under the running faucet. *M* has its lighter moments and with Lohmann, they underscore his unassuming nature.

Languid Bureaucrat. Like the hookah smoking caterpillar in *Alice in Wonderland*, the easy going and leisurely inspector keeps puffing smoke and always has his thick cigar holder handy. At a later part of the film, a scene shows Lohmann sitting at his desk talking on the phone with the camera shooting him from a peculiarly low angle from under the desk. He appears bloated with his crotch filling most of the frame. The lumpish and messy appearance of Lohmann can be viewed as Lang's ambivalence about Weimar institutions.

Otto Wernicke's success with the Lohmann character entails his reappearance in the second Dr. Mabuse film in 1933. The actor would continue making films in Nazi Germany playing the ship's captain in *Titanic* (1943) and later star in the ambitious propaganda film *Kolberg* (1944).

In the Dr. Mabuse revival of the 1960s, the character would return in the films of Reinl and Klingler, this time played by Gert Fröbe—best known as the James Bond villain Goldfinger. Back in Germany after almost three decades, Lang himself would work with Fröbe cast as Inspector Kras in *the 1000 Eyes of Dr. Mabuse.*

SCHRÄNKER

A criminal mastermind and his crack team of specialists take control of a high-tech building—this was the premise of *Die Hard* which revitalized the action genre in 1988, more than half a century after Schränker and his hoodlums' comparable feat in *M*. The criminals are as much a leading part of the story as the inspector or the killer, perhaps even more so.

The crime syndicate's chief has a striking appearance with his trademark fowler hat, cane, leather gloves and trench coat—stylized in part by Kubrick four decades later in *A Clockwork Orange* with the iconic Droog look. Schränker is as much of an organizer as he is an operator—he comes across as a corporate executive rather than a master criminal. His main concern appears to be the association which needs a respite from harassment by the police. Going after the serial killer aims to provide that but it is also a public relations move. If Dr. Mabuse of the 1922 film cared less about creating chaos and was more interested in adapting to the changing times, he might have ended up like Schränker a decade later.

Illustrative moments

Meticilous (Rational) After Schränker comes up with the idea to capture the killer, he oversees that the preparations are made properly. He personally supervises the beggars for monitoring the city and eventually leads the team that would abduct Beckert.

Ruthless (Disagreeable) When the gangsters take over the office building, they place a guard in a room to interrogate him. When he resists being questioned, Schränker has the glass door closed—presumably to drown his voice during the upcoming torture session. The camera continues shooting from outside the room alongside several gangsters who stand watching. Contrary to what the viewer would expect, a shrieking voice tears the silence and the guard right away provides the demanded information. In case viewers had a favorable impression about the motives of the crooks and approved their methods, this disturbing episode reminds them to think again.

Thug in Uniform (Disagreeable) Schränker's plan to apprehend serial killer surprises his associates because it comes down to criminals enforcing the law. He seems inclined to imitate an official whenever possible. In the first instance, when Schränker and his cohorts arrive at the office block, he is disguised as a beat patrolman in order to trick the guard at the main gate—the choice of a police uniform is rather superfluous as the guard lets them in at gunpoint. Later he presides over the kangaroo court, having changed into his leather trench coat in place of a judge's robe.

Daring (Rational) During the search for Beckert at the office block, the silent alarm is activated by a guard. Informed about the police's response time, the gangsters expect to be arrested in only five minutes. They panic and attempt to flee, except for Schränker who remains firm. He pushes forward with the search and subsequently they manage to seize Beckert, making a timely exit.

Persuasive (Rational) Beckert's defense turns into a tirade and almost wins over the audience of the kangaroo court—if not for Schränker. The demagogue skillfully twists Beckert's words and makes a hasty case for the death penalty.

The actor Gustaf Gründgens continued his successful career during the Nazi regime—which inspired Klaus Mann's 1936 novel *Mephisto: Novel of a Career*, later adapted by István Szabó into the 1981 film *Mephisto*.

"Fantastic!" Goebbels wrote of *M* in his diary at the time of its screening (Evans). Yet, once in power, Nazis would ban it alongside *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse.* Perhaps it was because of the aftertaste—Schränker displayed the ease with which the criminal could become one with the state.

THEMES

Society – Modern Media and Serial Killers
Justice – Organized Crime
Politics – Towards Totalitarianism

SOCIETY

Modern Media and Serial Killers. As Mrs. Beckman is awaiting her daughter's arrival, the doorbell rings. To her dismay, it is not Elsie—she is delivered the latest issue of the "fascinating, thrilling and sensational" feuilleton. Meanwhile, a group of kids in the tenement's courtyard are reciting a rhyme:

> *Just wait 'till it's your time*
> *Black Man will come after you*
> *With the chopper, oh so fine.*
> *He'll make mince meat out of you.*

Lang substitutes 'Black Man' for Haarman ('the Vampire of Hanover') who was an actual serial killer of the time. Two others—Kürten ('the Vampire of Düsseldorf') and Großmann ('the Berlin Butcher')—are referred to by name during the discussions of the police chiefs about the difficulty of capturing culprits who lack distinguishable traits. They terrify the society but at the same time enthrall it. The media's fascination with the serial killer anticipates later films such as Malick's *Badlands* (1973), Stone's *Natural Born Killers* (1994) and Fincher's *Zodiac* (2007).

As soon as newspaper vendors appear in *M*, they magnetically attract isolated individuals and pavements get packed. News are typically consumed collectively. People converge by the street advertising columns—"read aloud!" yells someone from the back of the group to the one fortunate enough to be standing right in front of the police bulletin about the murders. Mass media informs and entertains its eager consumers. Nerve wrecking events antagonize the populace but at the same time bind them towards a sense of community. It gives them something to talk about and a common purpose for which they eventually take action—attempt to become the judge, jury and executioner.

<u>Parallels</u>

In his Hollywood period Lang encountered a more sophisticated media environment. Reporter, editor and publisher characters appear frequently in his films from this era. His last two films in the USA suggest that news conglomerates received his critical attention.

Lang revisits some of the themes of *M* in *While the City Sleeps* (1956) with a star reporter as the protagonist. A city is terrorized by a serial killer and we get to have a closer look at how media reacts and exploits the events. A newspaper magnate's dissolute heir sets his greedy executives and editors racing to find the murderer and increase profits.

The same year in *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt,* the focus is on the power of media in shaping the public's perception of innocence and guilt. A newspaper owner and his step-son—a reporter and novelist—enact a scenario in order to demonstrate the untrustworthiness of circumstantial evidence in capital punishment verdicts. The plan is based on carefully planting self incriminating evidence in order to frame the step-son in a murder case. The thought provoking exercise takes unexpected turns before they can reveal to the public their scheme.

In *the Blue Gardenia* (1953), a popular newspaper columnist who is well connected with the police, conducts his own investigation about a murderer—evidently a woman. He addresses her publicly with a letter published in the paper and interviews people who confess to the murder or claim to know something about it. The female protagonist seeks his help since she was with the victim on the day of the murder and is unsure about her own recollections—and innocence.

JUSTICE

Organized Crime. "Who are you anyway?" Beckert asks the crowd in the trial scene. The jury and audience of the kangaroo court come across as a sampling of regular people, individuals from various backgrounds. Supposedly, they are all somehow affiliated with crime.

The first few years of the 1930s marked the premiere of some of the best gangster films. Just a couple of years before the Hays code would be fully effective, *Scarface* was released in 1932, a year after *Little Caesar* and *The Public Enemy*—and *M,* which also had organized crime at its spotlight.

The quasi-legal confederation of various branches of crime had a counterpart in real life. "Ringvereine" were associations that served as legitimate fronts of criminal activity (Goeschel). Berlin's ringvereine had around seventy clubs and five thousand members (Goeschel, 62). Their objective was mutual support and a code of silence discouraged members from cooperating with the authorities. According to Schränker,

> "Things must return to normal or we'll go under. Our coffers will soon be depleted. If we can't get funds to support the wives of these members who currently enjoy room and board at state's expense, I don't know where we'll find the money to carry out our plans."

M also echoes these associations interest in maintaining contact with the media. Improving public relations by cooperation with the press is brought up twice in debates between the crooks. Police detective Ernst Gennat attended their parties (Goeschel) and likewise we see Lohmann being cosy with the underworld.

The apartment where Schränker meets other leaders is unlike any other interior location in M—the modest apartment of Mrs. Beckham, the bland room of Beckert and the impersonal offices of the detectives. The eclectic décor includes oil paintings, ornamental furniture, gauntlets and antique pistols, modern sculpture and a hookah. This space is akin to the culture of consumerism we get to see on the streets—shop windows and advertisements—and visually highlights Ringvereine's bourgeois aspirations (Goeschel).

The question remains about the courtroom audience—are they all criminals? Or are they just an organized segment of society? In any case, the Nazis despised these associations and abolished them once in power.

POLITICS

Towards Totalitarianism. The community is faced with the challenge of finding an ordinary looking culprit who can easily blend in and is almost impossible to discern. The official solution to the problem is methodical; it proceeds slowly and aims accuracy. At its disposal are technology and records from prisons, hospitals and mental clinics—i.e. disciplinary institutions of Foucault's panoptic society.

On the other hand, the alternative put forward by the underworld cares little about precision. Numerous beggars operating under discipline monitor every single child and note anyone coming into contact with them. The beggars ultimately spot and brand the suspect with the letter M and hence make him visibly unique. After catching the suspect the gangsters show no interest in handing him over to the authorities and consider it their prerogative to deliver justice. Populism ensures that public would be satisfied with the result—as opposed to the official verdict which is legitimate even if public opinion disagrees.

While police detectives draw neat circles over the map to determine the exact area to be covered, Schränker thumps his leather gloved hand on the map of the entire city. If the two approaches are allegories of two alternatives of social order (Lange), the viewer may ponder which is preferable. Then again, it is possible to imagine what it would look like if the two merged and the thugs would become the state. That would make Lang's film a final warning. As *M* was screened in theaters in May, a lawyer named Hans Litten summoned Adolf Hitler to testify as a witness in a trial and intensely cross examined

him about how “Nazi violence was planned and structured” (The German Resistance Memorial Center). Despite his efforts, the testimony was inconclusive and would be the last of such challenges to Hitler’s ascent to power.

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