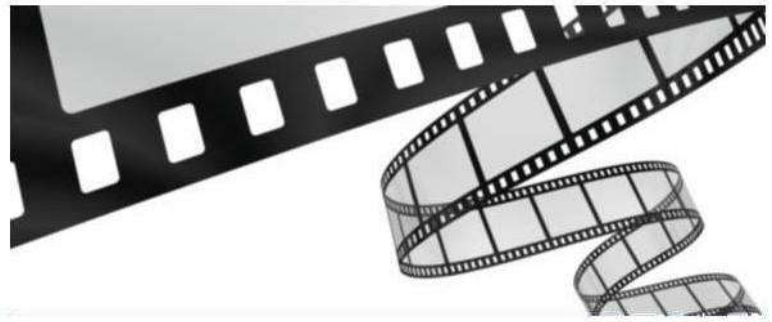


CHELMSFORD FILM CLUB

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M

(Fritz Lang, Germany, 1931)

Cast: Peter Lorre (Hans Beckert); Otto Wernicke (Inspector Karl Lohmann); Ellen Widmann (Frau Beckmann); Inge Landgut (Elsie Beckmann); Ernst Stahl-Nachbaur (Police Chief); Gustaf Gründgens (Schränker); Rudolf Blümner (Beckert's Defender)

Please note that the following discusses a key sequence in some detail

M came at a privileged juncture in history--the period when silent movies were giving way to talkies, dividing the art of cinema into two distinct kinds of narrative flow: the flow of images, intertitles, and music that achieved a kind of apotheosis in the late 20s and early 30s in pictures such as Dovzhenko's *Earth*, Lang's *Spione*, Murnau's *Sunrise*, Vidor's *The Crowd*, Chaplin's *City Lights*, Sternberg's *The Docks of New York*, and Stroheim's unfinished *Queen Kelly*; and the flow of dialogue, narration, music, and sound effects that carried images along like uprooted trees and houses in a flood. Like only a few other pictures in this exciting transitional period--Dreyer's *Vampyr*, Ozu's *The Only Son*, Sternberg's *Thunderbolt and The Blue Angel*, and Dovzhenko's *Ivan* are the first that come to mind--M draws mightily on both of these powerful strains, picking and choosing from the best of both. Building its story on visual rhymes that are carried by dialogue that periodically turns into offscreen narration, and fusing the two great traditions of silent film--montage/ editing and camera movement/mise en scene--this astonishing movie represents an unsurpassed grand synthesis of storytelling.

As a city is terrorized by the crimes of a deranged murderer of little girls, not only the police but other criminals and even beggars, threatened by the panic that puts everyone under suspicion, decide they have to help track the culprit down to protect their own interests. Lang steadily crosscuts between the efforts of these three separate factions, the public at large, and the murderer himself (Peter Lorre), graphically describing each stage of the pursuit and at the same time exposing the inner life of the city. Arguably, no other thriller has so effectively combined exposition and suspense with a portrait of an entire society, and M does this through a dazzling system of visual rhymes and aural continuities, spatial leaps and thematic repetitions, that virtually reinvents the art of movie storytelling.

One might say that Lang is positing the collective voice of the city as his storyteller as well as his subject--a collective social voice that's juxtaposed with the lone voice of the murderer, tonelessly whistling a theme from Edvard Grieg's *Peer Gynt* as his eerie signature. (Because Lorre was unable to whistle, it was Lang himself who whistled--anticipating the close-ups of his own hand in many subsequent features when close-ups of hands were needed.)

Although the social sense that makes all this collective consciousness possible seems far removed from our own era, every link in the collective chain is strikingly individualized: none of the mobs in this film is faceless. Furthermore, the film's patterns of rhyme and continuity set up an implicit process of analysis in which good and evil, innocence and corruption, intelligence and stupidity, all become relative values within the same complex tapestry.

We might assume that the murderer, the only person operating exclusively as an individual,

is pure evil and that his pursuers--police, criminals, beggars, panicky street pedestrians--are all relatively innocent. And Lang allows us to sustain this bias for most of the picture, working on our sense of dread about the barely known killer, but raising a few doubts along the way. For instance, various clusters of people on the street suggest potential lynch mobs when they settle on innocent bystanders as suspicious; and the murderer himself--a childlike gnome called Hans Beckert--is revealed to us so gradually that we aren't able to perceive him as a fully defined individual until the end. But by the time all the separate factions, including the murderer, are climactically brought together, we identify with Beckert in spite of ourselves, recoiling, as he does, from the angry mob that confronts him. Thanks to Lorre's volcanic performance, this is one of the most terrifying and emotionally wrenching extended sequences ever filmed, and the moral, ethical, and social questions it poses are virtually identical to the arguments we hear today about serial killers and what we should do with them.

Part of the awesome effect of this sequence derives from the fact that it's the only truly extended sequence in the film, as well as the only one that depends entirely on spatial and temporal continuity. Until this point the film leaps back and forth across the city, from one smoke-filled room or crowded or empty street scene to another--showing how similar cops and crooks can be while planning their strategies or charting their separate interactions with the beggars, the community, or each other. The oratorical hand gesture begun by Schranker (Gustaf Grundgens), head of the underworld, at one strategy meeting where he says, "I'm appealing to you..." is completed by the police chief at another strategy meeting, where he says, "for advice." The point of making this continuity cut isn't to imply that the crooks and cops are identical, but to point out that they're similar in certain respects, even to the point of having common interests. It's an analysis that brilliantly serves triple duty by traversing the city and advancing the plot at the same time.

If Lang has a visual signature that can be followed throughout his career, it might be the analytical overhead shot--the high camera angle that postulates individuals as pieces in some sort of pitiless board game. M periodically uses that signature, the camera most often poised over the streets of the city at night--creating images that spell out the basics of noir long before anyone dreamed up that generic term. This signature is always part of an overall pattern, part of a game in which several players are involved. Yet the film's climactic sequence occurs in a dark basement, and basements, subterranean caves, and dungeons are every bit as operative in Lang's vision as his overhead shots, defining the limits of his universe. The remainder of his movies are more commonplace, generally concerning everyday life as it's ordinarily lived between those boundaries.

It's easy, I suppose, to feel nostalgic about a time when an artist could dare to examine and embrace the entire life of a grand metropolis, from top to bottom, physically as well as psychologically. What I think I love most in M, emanating directly from the brilliance of its form, is its faith and confidence in the possibility of such an enterprise--speculating in the process on the havoc that one individual can wreak on an organism such as a city, then on the emotional havoc that organism can wreak on the individual. It assumes a kind of naive faith in the world we live in as something that can be seen, heard, and ultimately grasped, at least up to a point. Beyond that point is merely terror--a metaphysical terror connected to the vastness of the unknown, perceived as the daunting enormity of overhead and underground spaces--something that M also acknowledges and exploits to the utmost.

From: 'Fascinating Rhythms' by Jonathan Rosenbaum, Chicago Reader, 7 August 1997

Our next film: Slow West, Tuesday 13 October, 8pm