

emerged and lived to allow us to recharge it with the rich social, as well as symbolic, energy it once possessed. To know the questions to which *M*'s emphatic modernism was the answer is already half the battle.

Today's newspapers again abound with stories of serial killers, mass murderers, school shootings, 'lone wolves', stockbrokers running amok and veterans carrying the war into the cities. Are killers naturally born? Or are they made? Recent Hollywood movies – *The Silence of the Lambs*, *Copycat*, *Henry Portrait of a Serial Killer*, *Summer of Sam* and innumerable others – transform serial murder into mass entertainment. Why this fascination, this obsession with carnage, murder and mayhem? Lang's *M* is implicated in these current questions, but responds to them by suggesting through its very form that something else entirely might be negotiated in these films – something that has to do with us, with our lives, our communities, our culture.

M has been an unstable text. There is the original French version of 1932, *Me Maudit*, for instance, which ends with children dancing in a circle, celebrating, it seems, the capture of the child murderer. (The happy-ending footage was added by the French distributor.) Neglected for many decades, the film was re-released in 1959 by Seymour Nebenzal, the original producer, in a heavily altered form: it eliminated references to the powerlessness of the state and its judicial system; it cut out scenes that were not necessary to the narrative; and it added natural sound (such as traffic noise and footsteps) for greater realism. The 1959 version also changed the title to *M. Dein Mörder steht dich an* (*M – Your Murderer Looks at You*). When it was shown on German television, the title was altered again to *M. Eine Stadt sucht einen Mörder* (*M – A City Searches for a Murderer*).

Between 1975 and 1991, Enno Patakas of the Munich Film Museum worked on the restoration of the film. In 1995–96, Donat Kuensch refurbished and digitised the original soundtrack. The result of their efforts is now commercially available (also with English subtitles) on film, video, laserdisc and DVD. This restored version, 111 minutes long, comes as close as presently possible to the original film of 1931, which ran a total of 117 minutes. From the 1931 censorship records, which required a transcription of the film's spoken text, we know that one entire scene is missing (published here as an appendix), as are some small portions of the dialogue. We do not know, however, whether Lang himself made these

Klaus, Anton. *M* in BFI Classics
 London: BFI, 2000.
 cuts after the premiere. Until 1997, the Anglo-American film and video versions of *M* were based on the shortened version of 1959, which ran for only 89 minutes and was additionally marred by murky sound and inadequate subtitles. Needless to say, my reading follows the restored version.

1

BERLIN, 1931

A thundering gong rings out and reverberates over a dark screen for a full ten seconds. Lang, the consummate modernist, begins his film with the medium's bare essentials: a black canvas and a single, resonating sound. This sparseness of means introduces a highly controlled, richly self-reflexive and fully artificial universe in which nothing is left to chance except death. Although set in Berlin, Weimar Germany's bustling metropolis of more than four million people, *M* is entirely a studio production. A contradiction, a paradox? Lang called his film a documentary,¹ and it is one inasmuch as it faithfully records those deep structures of order and disorder which constitute a society in crisis. *M*, as contemporary critics noted, was pulp fiction dealing with serial murder and organised crime, but it is also a parable in the tradition of Franz Kafka: abstract, philosophical and open to endless readings.

Contemporary radio employed gongs to announce the beginning of a program and to mark the precise hour. Lang's unconventional use of this aural cue alerted the spectator from the start to the importance of sound and time. *M* shows a city in a race against time to apprehend a serial killer before he strikes again. Close-ups of clocks and timepieces punctuate the film. Waiting is presented as a test of nerves. A pickpocket, while impatiently expecting the arrival of the crime syndicate's leader, makes a phone call to get the exact time from a local office. He then pulls out seven stolen pocket watches, lines them up in a row, examining and adjusting the time on each. To possess the precise time meant to be in sync with the city, to be a fully functioning component in an unstoppable clockwork. But what if one part malfunctioned, if it followed a different schedule, if it didn't fit and even imperilled the efficiency and rationality of the whole?

A girl's voice can be heard over the black screen, faintly at first, reciting a contemporary nursery rhyme that evoked the gruesome murders of Weimar Germany's most infamous serial killer, Fritz Haarman, who was

caught and executed in 1924. Although the film substitutes his name with 'The Man in Black', it was recognised at the time as the 'Haarmann song'.

Wait, wait just a little while

The Man in Black will soon also come to you?

The first line of the song, notably preoccupied with time, issues from the dark. We hear a voice, but see no speaker – an 'acousmatic' scene in the words of Michel Chion, who uses this term for sound which is heard without its source being seen.³ The effect is uncanny; it suggests some higher command directed at the viewer: wait and the man in black will soon also come to you.

Lang was fascinated with the new opportunities that sound afforded for redefining the relationship between screen and audience. In his unpublished work journal of 1930–31 (only recently discovered), he jotted down notes about innovative uses of sound in *M*:

Shouldn't one radically break the frame of a sound film by directly addressing the audience, by turning to them with the help of loudspeakers? Be it as a moralist, as a chronicler, as a commentator ... Address by the loudspeaker, by the poet to the audience. Begin with 'Watch out and listen! Crimes have been committed, so horrifying, so terrible, so inhuman, etc.'⁴

Lang wanted sound to be independent from the movie itself so that it might mediate between the film and the audience, just as in early film a lecturer stood next to the screen and explained the movie's action to the audience. Sound which had already expanded the visual dimension laterally into off-screen space was now to extend outwards and speak directly to the audience free of all diegetic constraints. Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht had experimented with similar appeals to the audience. For them, foregrounding the apparatus was the first step in their critique of a bourgeois ideology and its theatre that was neatly self-contained and separate from real life. For Lang, however, the loudspeaker effect was less an instrument of political agitation than a form of audience control. Although, in the end, Lang did not put this idea into practice, the journal entry reveals a desire to rethink the entire filmic apparatus in the wake of the sound revolution.

As the girl's voice grows louder, the image opens to an overhead

shot of a circle of children playing a game of 'You're Out'. A girl in the middle points with an extended arm at individual children as she recites each syllable of the rhyme. Turning from child to child, her arm becomes like the hand of a clock, mechanically rotating and suggesting the urgency and inexorability of time. Whoever is present at the last word of the rhyme ('... With his little axe, he'll make mince meat out of you') must leave the circle: 'You are out.' Pure chance and fate determine where the finger comes to rest – and where the serial murderer meets his next victim.

While the children's game mimics the nature of serial killing (anyone could be next), the camera's look from above underscores a cold, analytical attitude characteristic of the film in general. No child is singled out through close-up, there is no eye-level position that might support emotional cathexis: the camera simply records the unrelenting process of the serial elimination of one child after another. Rhyme (not reason) decides who will be next, the sound of the girl's voice identifies each new victim.

The scene is set in a Berlin tenement courtyard (*Hinterhof*), surrounded by multi-storied buildings and visible, like Bentham's panopticon, from all sides. Although the space seems protected and safe, the murderer's spirit has invaded it through the sound of the gruesome nursery rhyme which, in serial fashion, is repeated three times. It is still heard when the camera begins to pan from the children's circle across the courtyard in order to explore the children's ambience. The camera's movement is jerky, as if hand-held, thus calling attention to itself. As the camera slowly moves upwards, it captures in passing two garbage bins. A chain of associations begins to form that links naive children, murder and refuse – a first map of reference points that will be elaborated in the following scenes. The camera comes to rest at a railing which cuts across the image, presenting a picture of division and separation, a tension between above, where the mothers work; and below, where the children play. The children's song off-screen, with its allusions to elimination and deprivation, underlies and intensifies the desolate images. Lang's off-screen sound expands the field of vision and suggests a space outside the frame, but it also provides a commentary on what the camera shows.

Cut to an empty staircase. A pregnant woman with a heavy basket of laundry enters the frame from below. The all-knowing camera awaits her. Through its very movement, angle, distance and length of take, the camera comments, investigates and exposes. And, like the narrator in a

M

A morbid game



'You're Out'



A watchful mother



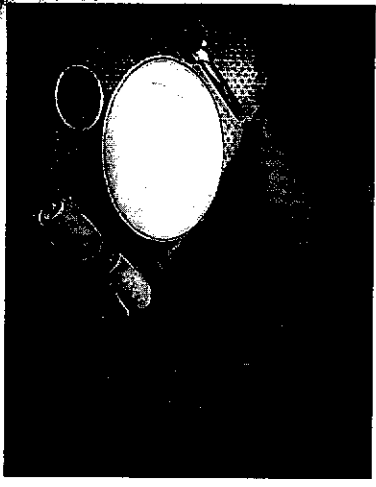
B F I F I L M
C L A S S I C S

novel by Balzac, it pretends to be omniscient, assuming, as D. A. Miller put it, 'a fully panoptic view of the world it places under surveillance. Nothing worth knowing escapes its notation and its complete knowledge includes the knowledge it is always right.'⁵

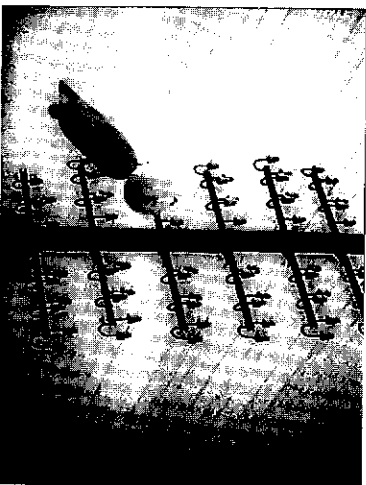
In *M*'s first scene, the camera separates the mothers (there are no men in sight) from their children by walls, balconies, railings and closed doors. After the washerwoman has climbed the stairs, she shouts down to the children to stop chanting that 'awful song', aware more than the children of the song's power to conjure up the mass murderer's appearance. As in 1931 Berlin, aggression, gloom and apprehension are palpable. The mother's interdiction stops the song for only a few seconds; the children (outside the frame) quickly resume the nursery rhyme. The result is at once funny and foreboding; the children do what they like, openly disobeying the mother's command, challenging her weak authority. They continue their game that playfully enacts serial elimination. Mrs Beckmann puts a positive spin on their wilful misconduct, emphasising the importance of sound: 'As long as they're singing, at least we know they're still here.'

Sound affirms presence and life; silence connotes absence and death. When Elsie is murdered and Mrs Beckmann's anguished calls for her across an empty staircase and attic cease, the sound film falls silent. The moving picture freezes on Elsie's empty chair (shot from above in the stark style of Bauhaus photography), on her clean plate, her spoon, her cup and her folded napkin, all neatly (and now pointlessly) laid out on the kitchen table. Inanimate objects stand in for an absent – and violently silenced – person. Coming after the cries, the silence is eerie. We have no doubt about Elsie's

Signs of absence



fate. Cut to a dry area of shrubs. Elsie's ball slowly rolls into the frame and comes to an unsteady halt, at once evoking her (because it was her toy) and metonymically replacing her. This haunting shot is followed by Elsie's huge balloon with its painted face and miniature arms, animistically come



The anthropomorphic balloon

alive in its resemblance to her. After becoming entangled in the telegraph wires for a few seconds, it weightlessly drifts skywards.

Once again, the screen darkens for several seconds and opens to a sound collage of newspaper vendors running down the streets shouting: 'Extrausgabe, Extrausgabe!' ('Extra, extra, read all about it!'). Within no time, Elsie's murder has become a headline story. The transition from the sight of telegraph wires, touched and activated, as it were, by Elsie's abandoned balloon, to the sound of street hawkers essentialises the unprecedented speed with which information was disseminated in 1931 Berlin. At their crescendo, the sounds take on a threatening quality, suggesting the increasingly irrational pursuit of more and faster sensations.

The making of *M* coincided with the rapid disintegration of the political and social structures of the Weimar Republic. In June 1930, when the first notices about Fritz Lang's new, still untitled film project were published in *Film-Kurier*,⁶ the worldwide recession had reached Germany in the form of massive unemployment, rising criminality and political unrest. In September 1930, millions of disenfranchised and embittered workers voted for the National Socialists, catapulting the number of seats held by

the Nazi party from 12 to 107, and making it the second-largest group in the German parliament. When Lang was shooting *M* in the Straken studios (a former Zeppelin hangar from World War I) outside Berlin from mid-January to February 1931, Germany's capital became the site of wild strikes, mass demonstrations and street battles. *M*, the original title of which was *Mörder unter uns* (meaning either Murderers or Murderer among Us), captures the irritable and explosive atmosphere of Germany two years before Hitler's assumption of power. At a time of widespread political violence, a title such as *Murders among Us* could easily be misunderstood. Lynch mobs and hit commands engaged in open manhunts, intimidating political enemies and spreading terror among the population. The newspapers were filled with daily reports of violent, often deadly clashes and attacks. A contemporary, well-publicised court trial against members of the SA (Sturmabteilung or Storm Troops, a.k.a. Brown Shirts), shadowed the production of *M* and culminated in a murder trial which carried echoes of the film's own mock trial.

In the late fall of 1930, hit men of the SA, Hitler's private army, had targeted, chased and killed a member of the Communist party. The highlight of the six-week trial was Hitler's appearance as a witness, three days before *M* opened. When he entered the courtroom, the defendants jumped up to greet him with 'Heil Hitler.' The judge was not amused. Boisterous young SA members filled the hall and accompanied the proceedings with applause or whistles. Hitler was asked whether the SA commando had planned the murder, 'with the purpose to kill people intentionally and with predetermination and whether these deeds are known to the party leadership and condoned by it'.⁷ In other words, were the Nazis 'murderers among us'?

By 1931, the SA had become a major underground political force of more than 100,000 men who controlled the streets and attacked anyone thought to be an enemy of the Nazi doctrine. They kept Berlin (and other cities in Germany) in a state of permanent alarm and nervous agitation. Hitler was aware of their dubious legal status (they were occasionally banned) and had to keep them from independent revolutionary action, particularly after Ernst Röhm assumed leadership in January 1931. Political murders were common; the punishment, if a crime even came to trial, was minimal. In this court case, Hitler denied any knowledge of party-sanctioned murder: 'The National Socialist party has never given the order: Strike the enemy dead. Strike the Communists dead. Strike the

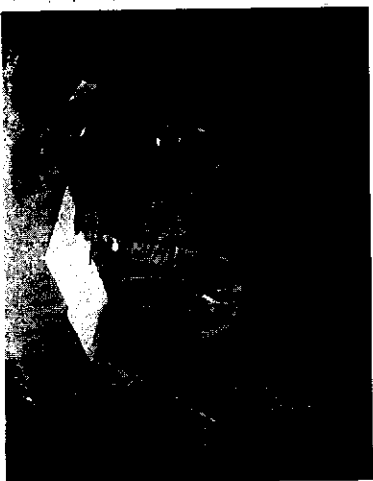
Social Democrats dead.' He went on to say that he condemned bombs, guns and violence. 'I would be for these methods only if a single person suppressed the German people. But our misfortune does not lie in the guilt of individual persons ... it lies in a certain mind set in which our people find themselves.' He portrayed himself as a victim and claimed that his appeals for restraint provoked others to call him 'cowardly, bourgeois, complacent and small-minded'. A week after *M* opened, the court case ended with mild jail sentences for the murderers.

Whether Lang saw his film as a possible intervention in the precarious political situation of 1930-31 remains unclear. He later claimed that the original title *Murders among Us* had caused him numerous problems: the Nazis thought the title referred to them. No evidence supports this claim beyond Lang's oft-told anecdote of how he grabbed the studio manager by the lapel and noticed a swastika pin behind it. An official reason for the title change, however, can be found in the *Film-Kurier* of 20 April 1931: 'The original title, *Murders among Us*, cannot be used because of several other films with the word "murderer" in their titles; therefore the new film title will come from a sign which plays a role in the film itself.'⁸ From *Murders among Us* to *M*: the title change (only three weeks before the premiere) may have determined the life of the movie. Titles raise expectations and prestructure responses. *Murders among Us* promises sensationalist and melodramatic pulp fiction. *M*, by contrast, is abstract, spare and ambiguous, an enigma and an incentive for speculation. No question, this mysterious title stood out among the 144 other German feature films of 1931.

Lang wanted his new film to stand out: *M* marked his return to the film scene after a nineteen-month absence. Rumours had spread about his fundamental opposition to sound. Lang's last silent film, *Die Frau im Mond* (Woman in the Moon), which opened on 15 October 1929, had not been a happy experience. It appeared in the middle of the sound revolution and looked strangely old-fashioned, even though it featured, as is usual in a sci-fi film, various sorts of technological inventions, including a rocket to the moon. When the Universum Film AG (Ufa) urged Lang to 'modernise' the film and add a soundtrack, he flatly refused and instead left his long-term employer before his contract expired. (Hitchcock, by contrast, did not hesitate in 1929 to add sound to *Blackmail*, which he had shot as a silent film.)

Was Germany's most ambitious director out of touch with current trends? All of Lang's silent films – particularly *Der müde Tod* (Destiny, 1921), the two-part *Dr. Mabuse* (1922), as well as the two-part *Nibelungen* (1924) and the 3½-hour *Metropolis* (1926-27) – had been critical and even, in part, commercial triumphs; they were also internationally acclaimed and celebrated. But his latest two films, *Spione* (Spies, 1928) and *Woman in the Moon* had fared less well. A fresh start was needed. While the story of *Woman in the Moon* was freely invented and convoluted, mixing high-tech sci-fi and maudlin melodrama, the story of *M* addressed events of the time and disallowed identification or emotional cathexis. At once a documentary of Berlin's underworld and a modernist art film, it oscillated between detailed reportage and abstract ornament. It featured no attractive, new young actress, no romantic interest. There was as little love lost in the film as there was between Lang and his wife Thea von Harbou. After his open but brief and ill-fated affair with Gerda Maurus (who played the lead in *Woman in the Moon*), Lang and Harbou separated, although their decade-long collaboration continued. Because the screenplay is lost, we do not know how much was added or changed between the completion of the script in May 1930 and the actual production which began in January 1931. The film's credits list Thea von Harbou as the sole author of the screenplay.

Did *M* mark a return to *Dr. Mabuse* and the crime film tradition of the early 1920s, as some critics surmised? *Dr. Mabuse*, of course, was a silent film, featuring a Nietzschean supercriminal who uses his hypnotic gaze to manipulate the stockmarket and to wreak havoc among the



Adolf Jansen, Fritz Lang, Thea von Harbou, Fritz Arno Wagner (Cinémaèque Française)

decadent upper class. How different from *M!* Sound alone demoted the criminal; he now was a subject tormented by his own uncontrollable whistling and spooked by the sounds of his pursuers. If Mabuse imposed his will through the power of the look, the child murderer in *M!*, more the object than the bearer of the gaze, is eventually betrayed by sound. For Lang, it was not a matter of adding a soundtrack to a silent film, but one of making the new technology a structural feature of the narrative itself. Sound became a signifying code that radically reconfigured the nature of the image, of vision, of film in general.

Lang was the last major German film director to adopt sound. The German film industry itself had been slow to make the costly transition, which could not have come at a worse time in the industry's history. The economic crisis after 1929 had reduced movie attendance by almost a third (from 328 million to 238 million between 1929 and 1932) and had drastically cut back the number of feature films made in Germany, from 183 in 1929 to 144 in 1931. Theatre owners hesitated to purchase and install expensive new sound projectors, while production companies did not want to make sound films that could not be shown. Reports of the commercial success of American sound films and the attendant fear of being left behind in the international market finally, shocked the German film industry into action.

In a concerted attempt to modernise, Ufa built in record time four state-of-the-art sound studios in Neubabelsberg in the summer of 1929. They were used for Josef von Sternberg's *The Blue Angel*, one of Ufa's first major sound films, which opened with great fanfare on 1 April 1930. Sound was here to stay: by the autumn of 1930 every film was a sound film. It may have been due to the rapidly spreading use of radio in the late 1920s that the emergence and full acceptance of the sound film was made possible and even inevitable. As radio technology improved, the number of subscribers grew exponentially: from 200 in 1923 to 100,000 in 1924, 1 million in 1926, 2 million in 1928 and more than 4 million in 1932. After radio had become 'a household item like potted plants', as O. A. Pallitzsch wrote in 1927,⁹ it could be assumed that most movie-goers were also radio listeners. They had grown accustomed to disembodied voices, to music that came from a wooden box and to sounds the origins of which often had to be imagined.

Germany, at the height of its silent cinema tradition, resisted the coming of sound more than other countries. Even such progressive critics as Rudolf Arnheim first criticised sound as a throwback to cinema's

dependence on theatre and a travesty of all the efforts to develop an autonomous visual language. Lang was unwilling to forsake the formative approach to film-making in which filming meant reconstituting, not recording, reality. As late as January 1929, when discussions of sound cinema filled the air, Fritz Lang extolled the virtues of the silent film in an essay entitled 'The Mimic Art in the Moving Picture'. Following Béla Balázs's theory of silent cinema from his 1924 book, *The Visible Man*, Lang argued that the close-up in silent film allowed viewers to read gestures and facial and body movements as means of unlocking a character's inner secrets and to rediscovering the human face in all its expressiveness. 'Before the film did we know how much could be signified by a closed mouth twitching, an eyelid rising and falling, a head quietly turning away?'¹⁰ Early film had made movie-goers into experts in physiognomy – a genuine achievement of silent cinema in Lang's view. Asked by the *Film-Kurier* on 1 July 1930 whether he would consider making another silent film, Lang's answer was an emphatic 'no'. But so far, he added, sound had done nothing to enhance the artistic potential of cinema. In his next film, he wanted to find ways to create a sound film 'that can carry on the heritage of silent film'.¹¹ Lang's *M!* has rightly been called a 'silent film with sound'.¹² It is a transitional film, in its sparing and expressive use of sound, squarely in the tradition of Dreyer's *Vampyr* (1922), Vertov's *Enthusiasm* (1930), Buñuel's *L'Âge d'or* (1930) and Clair's *À nous la liberté* (1931). This 'heritage of silent film' in sound referred to the self-expressiveness of voices and noises – a tradition that originated from radio and telephone, where pitch and volume, inflection and intonation, rhythm and cadence compensated for the bodily absence of persons and things.

M!'s complex sound collages are closer to Walther Ruttmann's acoustic film experiment *Weekend* (1930) than to the contemporary musicals and operettas produced by Ufa to flaunt the new invention.¹³ Ruttmann's *Weekend* was a remarkable hybrid between film and radio, consisting of an elaborate composition of voices and noises, clamour and music, all rhythmically arranged to evoke images of weekend activities. It was an eleven-minute film of sound without images, presented in May 1930 as a radio play in a film theatre before a closed curtain. Paul Falkenberg, Lang's sound editor and a close friend of Ruttmann's, drew inspiration from *Weekend* for *M!*'s richly cadenced sound collages (for example,

noontime is evoked by the sounds of clocks, chimes and bells); the use of crescendo (people's voices rising to a din); and the conscious employment of signature sounds (the obsessive whistle; the noisy honking of car horns; the insistent tapping of a nail). These noises do not simply accompany the images; they carry a strong signifying potential on their own, as if used in a radio play.

Lang's expressionist heritage, in particular its acknowledgment of the psyche's power to subjectivise and thus 'distort' the visible world, was to be extended to sound. When, for instance, the blind balloon seller covers his ears to stifle the noise of a cacophonous hurdy-gurdy, the diegetic sound suddenly stops; he lifts his hands and the sound is heard again. We hear only what he hears. This approximates what could be called an acoustic point-of-view. What looks here like a mere stylistic exercise to foreground the subjective perception of sound sensitises us to read a later scene in which the child murderer is *not* able to control the sound spinning in his head. Visibly agitated, he sits in an outdoor café and drinks brandy. As he stares in front of him, the *Peer Gynt* melody suddenly starts up again; it is unclear from where it emanates. The sound must be subjective, imagined, hallucinated because now the whistling continues, mercilessly, even after he covers both ears. Unlike the balloon seller, Beckett has no power over what he hears. The whistling is a marker of his unconscious self, a dramatic sign that in its repeated recurrence 'gives wordless expression to his inner urges'.¹⁴ Like a Wagnerian leitmotif, the whistle follows Beckett as a preverbal articulation and external symptom of his compulsions. It pathologises him from the beginning.

Lang uses sound not only for dialogue and communication. *M's* sound collages often express the unconscious of a character or the unspoken implications of a scene. Likewise, the whistling reveals precisely what cannot be put into words. When we first see Inspector Lohmann, we note that he also whistles. Thus the film's sound subtly establishes hidden cross-references and unacknowledged affinities between Lohmann and Beckett – both are single and physically unappealing; both are compulsive players in a hide-and-seek game. Beckett's whistling, which seems to come from off-screen (it is in fact Lang's own whistling because Lorre could not whistle), also betrays a split between sound and body. He is identified at the precise moment the blind beggar connects a sound to a body.

The tune, drawn from Grieg's *Peer Gynt* ('In the Hall of the Mountain King'), refers to a terrifying scene in the eponymous Ibsen play

where the trolls attack the trespassing Peer Gynt with repeated screams of 'Slaughter him, slaughter him, tear him up, tear him up.' *Peer Gynt* was staged in Berlin in 1928, in a famous production by Berthold Viertel (with Werner Krauß, well-known from his role as Dr Caligari) that Lang had almost certainly seen. *M's* frenzied mob, yelling and shrieking like the trolls, enacts the command that Beckett's own whistling of the *Peer Gynt* tune had evoked all along. The sound subtly exteriorises his subconscious, also suggesting the punishment that he expects and wants. The whistling implies an involuntary self-surveillance.

When Lang embarked on his first sound film, it was important that he have a producer with a knowledge of the new technology. After his ramorous separation from Ufa in spring 1930, he signed a contract with the small independent production company Nero-Film, the energetic young owner of which, Seymour Nebenzahl, granted Lang complete artistic freedom. Responsible for some of the finest silent films of 1929 – G. W. Pabst's *Die Büchse der Pandora* (Pandora's Box) and the experimental semi-documentary film *Menschen am Sonntag* (People on Sunday) with Robert and Curt Siodmak, Georg Ullmer and Billy Wilder – Nero-Film also produced Pabst's significant early sound features *Weyhoff 1918* (1930) and *Die 3-Groschen-Oper* (The Threepenny Opera), the controversial film adaptation of Brecht's musical play, which premiered on 19 February 1931. The latter led to a much-publicised lawsuit between Brecht and Nero-Film over the status of the author in the film industry. The company, small in comparison to the Ufa conglomerate, but independent and with a leftist image, was a financially secure and serious alternative to Ufa. Still, money was tight and the short shooting time of six weeks (very unusual for Lang) was to save money. So was the practice, as described by the *Film-Kurier*, of shooting two-thirds of the film without sound to avoid paying license fees for the use of Tobis Klangfilm equipment. Lang hired one of the most brilliant and experienced cameramen of the 1920s, Fritz Arno Wagner, whose work ranged from F. W. Murnau's expressionism to G. W. Pabst's New Objectivity realism. According to the trade papers which regularly reported on the film's progress, Lang and Falkenberg, his sound editor, collaborated in the editing of the film during March 1931. (Early sound cinema employed special editors who recorded the sounds separately from the images in order to finessé and 'edit' the soundtrack, working with scissors to produce collage effects. Image and sound became joined on one strip only at the very end.)

M was submitted to the Berlin Censorship Board on 27 April 1931 and – to everyone's surprise – passed without a cut.

When *M* opened on 11 May 1931 at the largest and most prestigious film theatre in Berlin, the Ufa-Palast am Zoo, luminaries from the political, financial and cultural world were in attendance. Outside the theatre, an untidy mob clashed with the police, unwittingly reproducing scenes from the movie playing inside. Slightly amused by this confluence of art and life, the reporter for the *Film-Kurier* (12 May 1931) wondered whether reality might have taken its cue from Lang's new film.

What struck most critics first was *M*'s topicality. Place and time were topical – Berlin in the fall of 1930, with several newspapers showing clearly readable titles and dates – as was the film's story about an elusive serial killer. *M* presents a society at war with itself. Serial murder recalled wartime slaughter and the heightened state of mobilisation of an entire community echoed experiences from the home front. War films, increasingly popular at the end of the 1920s, reminded audiences of the trauma of mass death and collective hysteria, and provided a receptive climate for *M*. The film's focus on the downtrodden lumpenproletariat, on washerwomen and fatherless children, criminals and beggars, haggard prostitutes and slovenly policemen, dramatised the widespread unemployment and economic misery in the wake of the 1929 stockmarket crash. Life in the last few years of the Weimar Republic was in a permanent state of crisis.

The chasm between cultural and political life, always an issue in the Weimar Republic, was never wider than in 1931. While the majority of the public drifted to the reactionary right, most of the cultural production was unabashedly leftist, critical, innovative and more vibrant than ever. The social turmoil injected a sense of urgency and mission. Theatre, traditionally Germany's most vaunted art form, took up the challenge, responding to the most pressing social issues in the period between 1928 and 1932. The so-called *Zeittheater* (theatre of current events) openly dealt with such problems as abortion (F. Wolf's *Cyankali*), criminality (F. Bruckner, *Die Verbrecher*/The Criminals), rebellious youth (P. M. Lampel, *Revolte im Erziehungsheim*/Revolt in the Reform School), sexuality (Fleisser, *Pioniere in Ingolstadt*/Pioneers in Ingolstadt) and the war experience (G. Weisenborn, *U-Boot S 4*). As a late outgrowth of New

Objectivity, the dominant art movement in the mid 1920s, the *Zeittheater* strove to deal with burning social issues in a documentary and authentic manner. Although Lang shared with the *Zeittheater* an interest in sociological questions, his work probed more deeply, especially in his concern with the psychopathology of the criminal mind. Nevertheless, in 1931, *M* was often referred to as a '*Zeifilm*'. Discussions particularly concentrated on the spirited arguments made for and against the death penalty; the treatment of mentally ill criminals; and the safety of children.

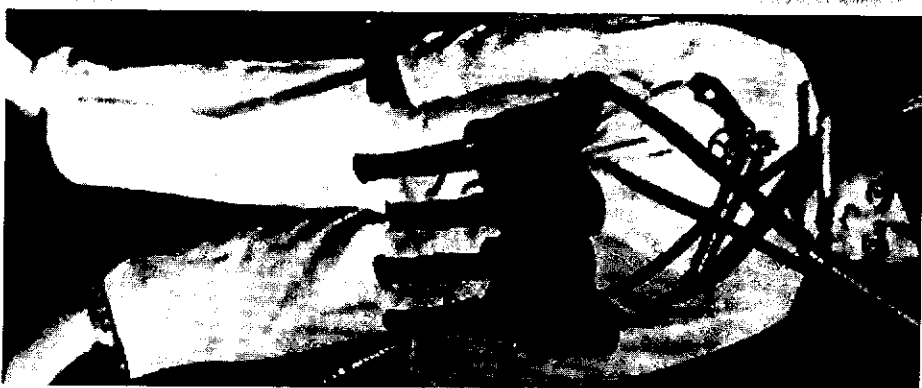
Berlin's rich cultural milieu is nowhere more evident than in the film's astonishing casting, which made full use of Berlin's distinguished theatrical elite. Despite the recession in 1930–31, Berlin's theatre still offered some of the most innovative and provocative productions, with the best acting talent in Europe. Germany's media capital attracted stage actors who also worked in radio and film. Gustaf Gründgens, who plays Schränker, the arrogant leader of the criminal underworld, was the most prominent of the actors who moved effortlessly between stage and screen. He began his film career after 1929 when sound film needed players with perfect diction. His famous role as Robespierre in *Danton* (only a few months prior to *M*), brought out the terrifying coldness that he again displayed in Lang's film. Every actress and actor that Lang engaged (with the exception of little Elsie and some extras from the underworld) had played major roles in the theatre of the 1920s. Several of them were affiliated with Bertolt Brecht, who was at the height of his German renown in 1931. Ellen Widmann (Mrs Beckmann) was well known for her working-class roles, Rosa Valetti (the barkeeper) played in Brecht and Weill's *Dreigroschenoper* (Threepenny Opera), Otto Wernicke (Detective Lohmann) was an established stage actor and the lead in Brecht's *Im Dickicht der Städte* (In the Jungle of Cities); his assistant Theodor Loos (Detective Groeber) was well known for his roles in the workers' theatre of the 1920s.

It was Brecht who had first discovered Peter Lorre, a young actor born in 1904 who had come from Hungary to work in Berlin. Lang saw Lorre perform in a Brechtian production of Marieluise Fleisser's episodic play *Pioniere in Ingolstadt* in 1929. Intrigued by Lorre's unusual voice and Austro-Hungarian accent (perhaps even reminding Lang of his own Viennese background), as well as by his odd looks and self-reflective acting style, Lang wanted him to play the main role in his first sound film. He even made him promise not to accept any other film offers. Lorre initially did not want to give up the stage and continued rehearsals for

Brecht's play *Mann ist Mann* (A Man is a Man), staged by the playwright himself to demonstrate his theories of Epic Theatre. Lorre appeared on stage at night, while shooting *M* during the day. Promoted by Brecht as the ideal actor for Epic Theatre, Lorre developed an acting style that was meant to de-psychologise the play: it was not the characters' feelings which were important, but rather their social interaction. To shift emphasis from psychology to sociology, from empathy to critical distance, from organic growth to montage, from suggestion to argument – this was the project of Brecht's Epic Theatre in 1930 which overlaps with Lang's project. Was he influenced by Brecht? Lang replied in 1963: 'Certainly. Who was not? ... Can one simply ignore a genius like Brecht? Which does not mean one has to embrace his philosophy.'¹⁵ *M* shares with Epic Theatre an episodic structure and an indirect, presentational style. A typical scenario shows a character speaking, while the camera cuts away to vignettes which illustrate (and occasionally undermine) what is said. In the spirit of Epic Theatre this technique turns viewers into private eyes, looking for clues and registering contradictions between word and image.

In Brecht's *A Man is a Man* Lorre played the lead character, Galy Gay, a simpleton who is transformed from a weak subject into a hero when he joins the army. Brecht was interested in the precarious status of the subject in the collective – can a cipher be marked, taken apart and reassembled like a car, as Brecht ironically asserted? Or is the subject, as in *M*, forever trapped in his flawed subjectivity? Lorre's monologue at the end of the film – 'I want to escape ... to escape from myself' – addressed Brecht's question, but does not provide a solution. Brecht does suggest one, albeit a paradoxical and highly ambivalent one ('forget your identity'), which he soon revised. Is *M* the psychopathological answer to Brecht's provocatively behaviourist *A Man is a Man*? When Brecht's play had its premiere on 6 February 1931 (while *M* was still in production), tumultuous protests from the audience interrupted the performance. Pictures show Lorre in heavy white make-up and armed to the hilt, while the other soldiers, wearing grotesque face masks, stand on stilts. When the protests, mostly staged by the militant right, continued, the play was cancelled after only five performances.

What did Lang see in Lorre? The theatre critic Kurt Pinthus characterised Lorre's debut in Fleisser's play as follows: 'A new face was there, a horrifying face, the hysterical son of the petty bourgeoisie, whose goggle-eyed, bloated head spilled forth yellowish from his suit. I have



as a whole to portray: a society in the grip of self-destructive urges.

When the shooting for Lang and the rehearsals for Brecht conflicted, Lorre decided in favour of his stage work. Lang had to remind him of his contractual obligations, even threatening him with an injunction to appear at the studio. The relationship between Lang and Lorre was reputed to be extremely tense, with Lang playing the same sadistic tricks on him as on all other actors in order to elicit their best performances. This arrogant behaviour may explain why Lorre never again worked

Lorre as Galy Gay

with Lang, a fellow emigrant in Hollywood between 1934 and 1964. If *M* made Lorre a film star, Lorre also made *M* what it is. For many critics then and now, the film's centre of gravity lies in Lorre's unique dramatic persona. In the final analysis, is not *M* as much a Peter Lorre film as it is a Fritz Lang film?

2

SERIAL MURDER, SERIAL CULTURE

The doorbell rings twice. It must be Elsie, late from school. Her mother, Mrs Beckmann, hurries across the kitchen to open the door. But it is Mr Gehrke who delivers the latest instalment of a crime serial. 'New instalment, Mrs Beckmann. Thrilling, stimulating, sensational.' The woman, clearly disappointed, sighs, 'Oh, yes,' and leaves the frame to get a coin. The excitement he brings – lurid tales of crime and passion – stands in ironic contrast to his mechanical voice and dull demeanour. Picking up two more instalments from his satchel, he awkwardly and impatiently waits at the door. Asked if he has seen little Elsie, he replies no. From an earlier scene, we know that well-dressed parents meet their children at the schoolgate, while Elsie's mother works at home. Our first glimpse of Elsie shows her vulnerability: she steps off the sidewalk and is almost run over by a car. Its threatening presence is signalled by a blaring honking noise even before we see it. A policeman accompanies her across the street, unwittingly delivering her to the murderer. While the other children walk

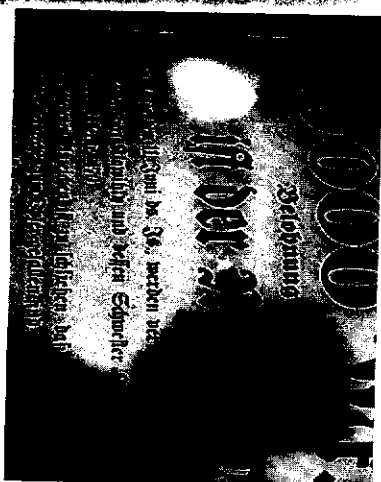


Mr Gehrke and Mrs Beckmann

with their mothers or fathers, Elsie bounces a ball as she saunters home alone. The camera follows her closely in a tracking shot, isolating her from other pedestrians and preparing the viewer for her eventual fate. While Mrs Beckmann prepares lunch for her daughter, Elsie traverses the city unprotected and defenceless. The cross-cutting emphasises the spatial separation between mother and child.

After Mr Gehrke has left, Mrs Beckmann, now visibly agitated, goes to close the door, but hesitates and walks to the staircase, which is shown from her point of view in an extreme high-angle shot. It extends down four storeys, a series of railings and steps in stark symmetry, cold, empty and silent until we hear the mother frantically call out Elsie's name. 'No answer. She walks the few steps back to her apartment, still holding in her left hand her weekly dose of pulp fiction, lifting it slightly in frustration. And once more, a third time, she looks to the cuckoo clock on the wall. In close-up, it strikes 1:15.

Just before Mr Gehrke delivered the weekly crime serial, we had witnessed a strange encounter: as Elsie bounces her ball against an advertising pillar, a shadow of a head, covering the word 'murderer' on a police poster, appears out of nowhere, bends down and, in a high-pitched voice, addresses the girl, 'My, what a pretty ball you have. What's your name?' The first image of the murderer: a shadow, the phantom-like, immaterial double that points to an unseen body, and a disembodied voice. A sense of unreality and imminent danger pervades the scene. Cut back to the kitchen where Elsie's mother, in a disturbing parallel, bends over (with a knife in her hand, peeling a potato) in the exact same angle as the child



First view of the murderer