

M

FRITZ LANG -1931

'the predecessor to all serial killer thrillers like Psycho and The Silence Of The Lambs',
'one of the defining movies of European pre-WWII cinema' and much more.

THEMES-METAPHYSICAL – Blind Justice, Long Arm of the Law, Fate

Dictionary definition of allegory:

Description of one thing under the image of another.

1. Allegory is therefore the veiled presentation in a figurative story of a meaning metaphorically implied, but not expressly stated. Allegory is perhaps characterized as (a set of) prolonged metaphor(s), in which typically a series of actions are symbolic of other actions.

Met"aphor\, n. [F. m[e]taphore, L. metaphora, fr. Gr. ?, fr. ? to carry over, transfer; meta` beyond, over + fe`rein to bring, bear.] (Rhet.)

The transference of the relation between one set of objects to another set for the purpose of brief explanation; a compressed simile; e. g., the ship plows the sea. --Abbott & Seeley. ``All the world's a stage." --Shak.

This visual reference [in a final tableau of the film] to fate and destiny dramatises a larger tension at work in the film, a tension between the forces of modernity with their emphasis on time, discipline, organisation, seriality, law and order, and those recalcitrant counterforces -- trauma, passion, illness, loss and, finally, death --that defy reason and resist integration (76).

The film's obsession with surveillance also addresses the deep-seated fear of an expanding urban population. The ease with which Beckert was able to hide . . . must have scared the contemporary audience. Berlin more than doubled in population by the end of the decade . . . Attempts to control and discipline these masses included insistent endeavors to survey, classify, categorize and supervise them. Vision and surveillance foster discipline and control . . . For Foucault, the perfect disciplinary apparatus enables a single gaze to see everything all the time. For Lang, however, even a single panoptic gaze could not comprehend, let alone discipline and contain, the psychopathological Beckert (49).

Weimar Germany

a growing fascination with a typological understanding of criminality according to physiognomy (the portrayal of the bizarre murderer Hans Beckert by Peter Lorre enabling *M*, as Kaes astutely notes, to be picked up by the Nazis as a demonstration of the ostensible ties between perversity and (Jewish) "race").

Although Fritz Lang has always denied it, it has to be assumed that one particular serial killer, the 'Vampir von Düsseldorf' (the vampire of Düsseldorf) Peter Kürten became the real-life inspiration to 'M'. Kürten brutally attacked 41 people, 9 of which died and was finally arrested May 24th 1930. After he drank the blood of some of his victims he was dubbed the vampire of Düsseldorf.

The two letters Kürten send to local newspapers sparked a flood of copy-cats and the public was in the state of mass-psychosis. Kürten was the perfect example of a serial killer with the exterior of an average citizen. Surviving victims and witnesses described him as well-dressed, friendly, trust-instilling and respectable. Kürten was executed July 2nd 1931 in Cologne. Kürten had written his letters in thick blue pencil - in 'M' it is thick red pencil.

Other influences were the cases of Haarmann, Denk and Großmann - all prominent serial killers in the late 20ies. Also a string of horrendous child killings in the city of Breslau, a crime which was never solved.

working title for 'M' was 'Mörder unter uns' (murderer among us).

It's generally agreed that *M* was critical in hastening Lang's departure from Germany in 1934.

Peter Lorre's portrayal of a serial killer is one of the defining performances of movie history. Not only did it set the benchmark for his own career (something which he may have regretted fo

AUDIO- employing off-voices and personal music themes (he even goes so far as tying a specific melody - Grieg's 'Hall Of The Mountain King' - to the dangerous state of the murderer, in one of the most impressive scenes of the movie the Beckert tries to suppress his devious instincts and as he struggles to control himself he starts whistling the trademark melody until his transformation I

to Many of the classic noirs of the 1940s and later owe a debt to *M*'s obsessive attention to the details of the manhunt, with the most minute aspects of police procedure rendered.the killer

Much has been made of Lang's innovative use of sound in *M*, and this aspect of the film benefits enormously from the restoration of the print. Most powerful is the recurring use of a motif from Grieg's Peer Gynt, a whistled phrase that becomes increasingly more ominous, functioning as both a lure for Beckert's victims and the cause of his

If you like Hitchcock, you'll love "M" as Hitchcock was director Lang's student and protege. In fact, many of the scenes in Lang's movies have been transposed (I dare not say stolen) into Hitchcock's work. Certainly, without Lang, we'd have no Hitchcock.