

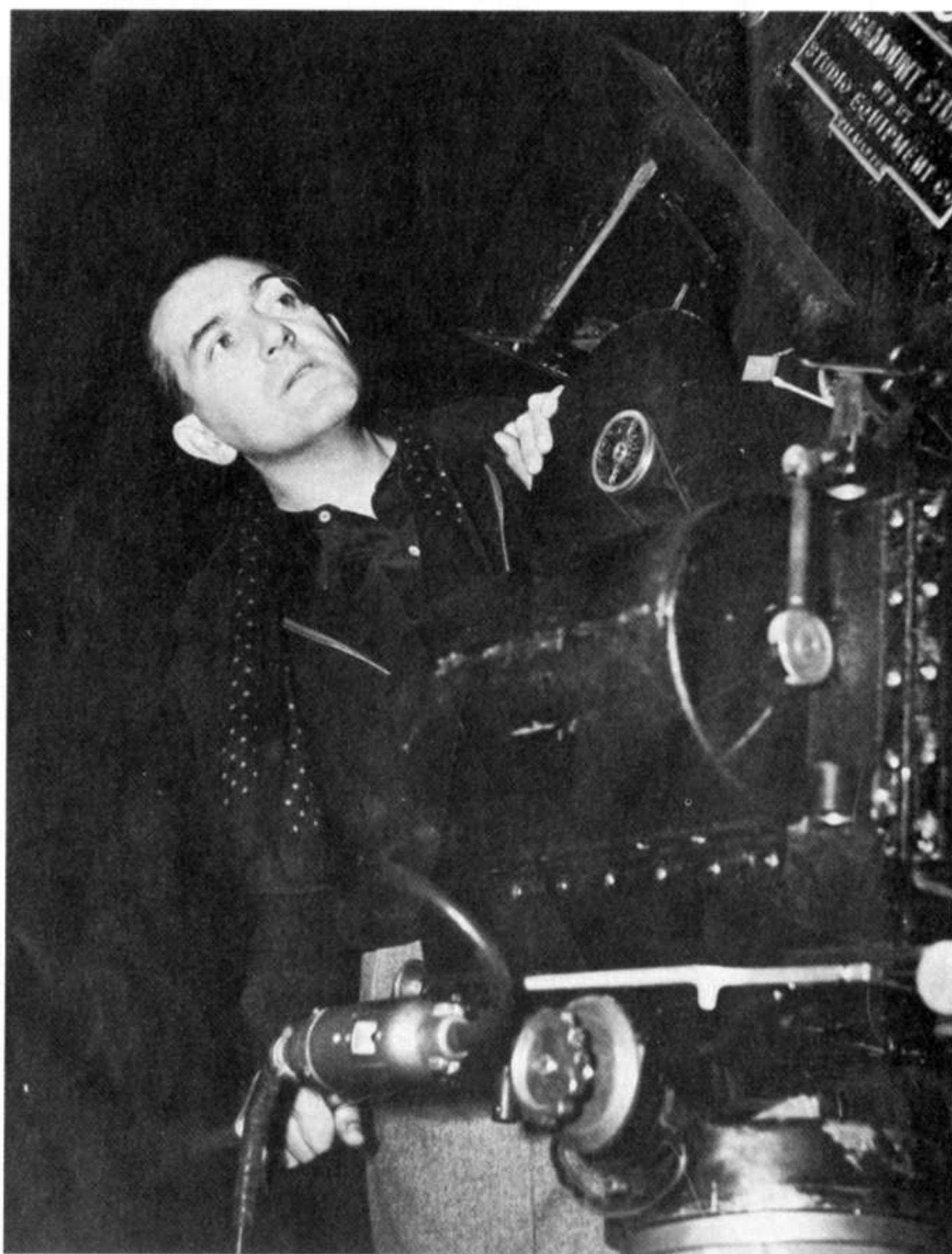
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# FRITZ LANG

*The director was a dictator, but his movies were ruled by a greater force*

Born 100 years ago, Fritz Lang was in many ways the most modern of directors, concerned with such contemporary dilemmas as governmental tyranny, urban despair and the dehumanization of mankind by machines.



**T**HE FILMS OF FRITZ LANG (1890–1976) inhabit a world controlled by vast and unknowable forces—criminal, political, supernatural. Everything seems determined by some odious geometry, a rigorous mathematical system too complex for humans to ever comprehend. All attempts at individual action are like spitting into the gale-force winds of fate. If the cops or the crooks or the

Nazis or the lackeys of the railroad interests don't get you, either God or your own corrupt animal nature will.

Some of this pessimism can be easily chalked up to Lang's surroundings. Half Jewish, born in Vienna, he studied engineering and art, and bummed around the world before serving in World War I. He turned to filmmaking in his late 20s: The Berlin part of his career (1917–1933) co-

incided exactly with Germany's humiliation and the rise of Nazism—a coincidence that would hardly support a rosy view of life or human nature.

In 1933, the Nazis simultaneously blocked the German release of Lang's *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* and asked him to head the new German film industry. According to the legend—which may be exaggerated—he packed up and left that very evening, leaving everything behind. After one picture in France, Lang, like most of the cream of European directors, emigrated to Tinseltown.

In his Hollywood movies—more than half of his 40 features, made over the course of 20-odd years—Lang's characters frequently come to a happy end. Most of the time, however, the happiness is severely compromised; other times, the endings themselves are utterly unconvincing and totally at odds with everything that has preceded, as though directed and added by other hands.

Even Lang's most involving movies feel cold and distanced. He views his characters with pity rather than sympathy, with contempt more than compassion. We are rarely encouraged to identify wholly. His German films jump around in point of view, so we never have time to latch on to any one person. Many of his American films were star vehicles, so he had to come up with other ways to frustrate us. In *Ministry of Fear* and *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* (both shamefully unavailable on video), we think we've grown close to the protagonists, only to discover that we've been misled—we've been lied to about their histories.

There is some evidence to suggest that Lang's personality was no more pleasant than his worldview. It is said that he was so dictatorial during the making of *Fury*, his first Hollywood film, that the crew (as a group) seriously decided to rig a large light so it would fall and kill him. (The plot was headed off by producer Joseph Mankiewicz.) Lang allegedly treated cinematographer Joseph Ruttenberg so bad-

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One of the most visually influential films ever made, *Metropolis* addressed the subjugation of workers to technology in a starker light than did films that borrowed from it.

the director's obsession with worldwide criminal conspiracies planning to dominate mankind. It's not really such a big leap from this sort of hoodoo to more exalted material like the German national epic *Die Nibelungen*, which Lang filmed in 1924. Kino on Video, \$29.95

## Metropolis 1926

At a reported cost of \$2 million, *Metropolis* was, at the time, the most expensive German film ever made, but every penny is up there on the screen. This bleak view of the future of industrial society is rife with most of Lang's best and worst qualities. To this day, it's dazzling to look at, with magnificent design and concise visual storytelling. Unfortunately, the story being told is simplistic, emotionally overwrought and, occasionally, downright incoherent. It is hard to view the ending, in which Labor shakes hands with Capital, without embarrassment. ("There can be no understanding between the hands and the brain unless the heart acts as mediator," the title card informs us.) Nonetheless, many of the images have achieved iconic status, and Lang's urban landscape had a clear influence on, among other films, *Batman*.

A note of warning: There are two versions of *Metropolis* available on home vid-

In *Clash by Night*, Lang turned to the myth of domestic tranquility. Robert Ryan (below) seems as menacing as he hopes to be amusing.



ly that the film's star, Spencer Tracy, told Ruttenberg, "You son of a bitch, if you don't kick him in the balls, I'll kill you."

In 1963, Lang portrayed himself in Jean-Luc Godard's *Contempt*, coming across as an elegant, world-weary sage, which he may well have been by that point. His filmmaking years were behind him. *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt*, his last American production, was such a trying experience for Lang that he decided to leave Hollywood forever. He returned to Germany, where he remade two films he had written almost 40 years earlier—they had been taken away from him at the time and assigned to another director—and produced his third and final variation on the mad genius Dr. Mabuse, the subject of one of his first major successes, 1922's two-part *Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler*.

Lang's obsessive themes recall Poe and Kafka, as well as the world of pulp fiction. (He worked in every pulp genre: science fiction, the Western, mystery, adventure, thriller, Gothic melodrama, the war movie, grotesque supernatural fantasy.) His most direct descendants are David Lynch (like Lang, an art student), with his highly wrought visual style and distrust of appearances, and Thomas Pynchon (like Lang, an engineering student), with his baroque global conspiracies.

What Lynch and Pynchon provide

that Lang lacks is humor. He never made a comedy, per se, and he is certainly the most humorless of all great directors. (That includes Bergman.) His comic relief figures either are killed off or are revealed as villains. His funniest moments are usually cruel—ironic jests at the expense of his characters.

Roughly half of Lang's surviving features—four early works are lost—are available on video. Unfortunately, thanks to the vagaries of video distribution, some of the best aren't—including *Fury*, *Ministry of Fear* and *The Woman in the Window*. With the exception of *Metropolis*, *M* and *The Big Heat*, most of what's available can be found only in specialty stores.

## Die Spinnen 1919

Lang's third feature is the earliest that still survives. In fact, *Die Spinnen* (*The Spiders*) is two features—*Der Goldene See* (*The Golden Lake*) and *Das Brillantenschiff* (*The Diamond Ship*), the first two episodes of a projected four. (The two are combined on one cassette.) These are fairly standard adventure serials, highly derivative of Louis Feuillade's *Fantomas* films and Jules Verne's romances. They are filled with exotic nonsense—Incan human sacrifices and Chinese gems with supernatural powers—but they also display



eo. Unfortunately, the more common by far is the 1984 Giorgio Moroder reconstruction. While the originator of Euro-trash disco film music deserves credit for assembling an excellent print, he deserves censure for everything else. Some sequences are tinted in two tones, a minor form of colorization; the titles are unreliable; and the score, well. . . . Does anyone actually want to hear Queen and Pat Benatar while watching a silent masterpiece? To invoke *Batman* once more, Moroder is like the Joker: he has boogied into the museum with his raucous boom box and splashed paint all over a work of art. *Video Yesteryear*, \$49.95; *laser disc*, *Image Entertainment*, \$39.95

## M 1931

Lang described himself as a visual person with little taste for music. Yet, his first talkie integrates sound in a brilliant fashion. The young Peter Lorre is a murderer of children who has an entire city terrorized; whenever his taste for tots possesses him, he starts maniacally whistling Grieg's "In the Hall of the Mountain King" faster and faster. *M* is a perfect example of the distancing effects in Lang's German work. He cuts from police to crooks to Lorre, leaving us unattached to any one character. Who is the protagonist here? The homicide detective? The crime boss? The psychopath? In fact, there is none. Lorre's ending speech—a brilliant performance—turns the killer from loathsome to pathetic. We are left with completely jumbled sympathies. *Nelson Entertainment*, \$29.98; *laser disc*, *Image Entertainment*, \$34.98

*The Big Heat* is a prime example of Lang's use of a Hollywood movie to work out ideas he'd had in Berlin, where he'd invented the genre in which the characters played by Lee Marvin and Gloria Grahame are at home.

site effect. A trapped young couple pull back a curtain to unmask the villain; all they find is a cardboard silhouette of a man and a loudspeaker wired to a phonograph. While the ethereal Oz is really just a little man, in *Testament*, what we believed to be a mere man is revealed to be an elusive and powerful force. *Nelson Entertainment*, \$29.98

## Rancho Notorious 1952

*Rancho Notorious* is the most cracked of Westerns, taking place in a completely unreal universe. Lang admired Bertolt Brecht and had collaborated with him, not very satisfactorily, during the '40s. *Rancho Notorious* is full of Brechtian distancing devices. The color is unbelievably garish, performances are way over

Even Paul Douglas, as the relatively sympathetic dupe, speaks jovially about dead children. Robert Ryan, as his more charismatic rival, constantly talks about cutting women and sticking pins in them. J. Carroll Naish starts off as an apparently comic character, yet is revealed as the most evil of all. And all these people are pawns of their unavoidably animalistic natures. On the other hand, Marilyn Monroe, in an early supporting role, looks awfully damn good in blue jeans. *United Home Video*, \$19.95

## The Big Heat 1953

Glenn Ford plays a cop whose righteous determination to nab a vicious crime lord becomes an unwholesome obsession. This crime film may be the greatest of



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## Das Testament Des Dr. Mabuse 1933

In 1922, Lang made the crime epic *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler* (*Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler*), which ended with the criminal mastermind reduced to a gibbering loonie. In this sequel (*The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*), Mabuse himself is barely a character. He is still in an asylum, but he hypnotizes the head doctor and turns him into an extension of his own mind. The psychiatrist, in effect, becomes the lunatic—shades of Dr. Caligari. Mabuse dies less than halfway through the film, but through his proxy, he has achieved immortality. He has become a spirit, an idea, and is therefore indestructible.

One scene was echoed ironically six years later in *The Wizard of Oz*, to oppo-

the top—Arthur Kennedy has one sneering close-up that always provokes laughter—and many exteriors are blatantly theatrical. A melodramatic ballad serves as narration for a mythically abstract quest story. It's hard to imagine what Western fans made of this when it was released. *United Home Video*, \$19.95

## Clash by Night 1952

It is an aspect of the coldness of these films that we rarely see normal family life. Lang's world is presented in such visually menacing terms, that, when he does show us children, we don't feel warmth so much as panic: Oh no, what terrible thing is going to happen to this kid?

Lang's adaptation of Clifford Odets' marriage drama is as bleak as they come.

Lang's postwar movies. It includes two of the most shocking scenes of violence in the history of cinema, neither of which actually occurs onscreen. One—involving Lee Marvin, Gloria Grahame and a pot of scalding coffee—is created through brilliant editing, the other through an unbelievable breach of the genre's conventions. Lang creates such a corrupt, hopeless universe throughout that the glints of normalcy at the end seem, at best, highly ironic. While Grahame, the bad girl who has sacrificed her life to help Ford, lies bleeding in his arms, he is so absorbed in reminiscing about his late wife that he doesn't even notice that Grahame has died during his monologue. *RCA/Columbia Pictures Home Video*, \$59.95; *laser disc*, *Image Entertainment*, \$39.95 □