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M

Director: Fritz Lang

Germany 1931 105 minutes • Cast: Peter Lorre, Otto Wernicke

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Fritz Lang thought *M* to be his best film, and many critics agree. Based on the true story of a German child-killer, *M* was originally called *MURDERER AMONG US*, a title the Nazis rejected. Peter Lorre, in a performance that instantly earned a place in the annals of film history, plays Beckert, the cherubic, tortured killer who, whistling the theme from the troll's dance in Grieg's "Peer Gynt," stalks little girls in the shadowy streets of Düsseldorf. Lang, in his first sound film, orchestrated a "symphony of horror" from the sounds of children singing macabre ditties ("The evil man in black will come with his little chopper. He will chop you up"), hurdy-gurdies and cuckoo clocks (one of many signifiers of "Germanness" in the film), the killer's whistle, the hysteric cries of a mother or the short, sharp scream of a night watchman, and extended passages of silence. (The montage of absence as Elsie Beckmann's mother searches for her missing daughter is justly celebrated.) Counterpointing this unnerving soundtrack with eerie expressionistic images, often shot from on high – Lang's "objective" determinism and emphasis on design is triumphantly apparent – the director conjures a pervasive atmosphere of guilt, compulsion and rampant madness. "**** Not to be missed! Peter Lorre is the first modern monster of the movies" (Dave Kehr, *The New York Daily News*).

Cinematheque History • Limited Run, 1997; Designs of Destiny:
The Cinema of Fritz Lang, 1999

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