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YOU ONLY LIVE ONCE (USA, 1937)

Credits. DIRECTION, Fritz Lang. SCREENPLAY, Graham Baker, Gene Towne. PRODUCTION, Walter Wanger (United Artists). PHOTOGRAPHY, Leon Shamroy. ART DIRECTION, Alexander Toluboff. EDITING, Daniel Mandell. MUSIC & LYRICS, Louis Alter, Paul Webster (conducted by Alfred Newman). DURATION OF PRODUCTION, 46 days. 16MM DISTRIBUTION, Contemporary Films (short with production scenes: Museum of Modern Art). LENGTH, 86 min.

Cast. EDDIE TAYLOR, Henry Fonda. JOAN GRAHAM, Sylvia Sidney. STEPHEN WHITNEY (public defender), Barton MacLane. BONNIE (Joan's sister), Jean Dixon. FATHER DOLAN, William Gargan. PRISON WARDEN, John Wray. ROGERS (prison guard), Guinn "Big Boy" Williams. DR. HILL, Jerome Cowan. EUGSY (prisoner), Warren Hymer. DISTRICT ATTORNEY, Jonathan Hale. POLICE CHIEF, Charles C. Wilson. ETHAN (operator of resort), "Chick" Sale. HESTER(his wife), Margaret Hamilton. PRISON GUARD, Ward Bond. ITALIAN FRUIT PEDDLER, Walter DePalma. MR. WILLIAMS (employer), Wade Boteler.

You Only Live Once, Lang's second American film, is one of his most highly rated, especially in France. Courtade includes it along with M and Fury as Lang's only three masterpieces, Eisner considers it "the American work of Lang which carries the purest imprint of his style," and Agel calls it "one of the purest tragedies in the history of the cinema." One reason for this enthusiasm may be the misty glow of stylized romanticism in which Lang bathes this tale of doomed lovers fleeing from the law, in a style which was very popular in France in the late thirties, especially in Carné's and Duvivier's films starring Jean Gabin. Lang's attempt at a romanticized, poetic treatment, typified by the mists and soft focus photography in studio sets, the exaggerated reactions of a gassed bank guard and a socked employer, the tender scenes at the end when Eddie, his wife, and their baby have to part, and the "cute" opening with some mild attempts at humor, may appear quite dated from the standpoint of postwar neo-realism, but it was very successful artistically, and very popular, at the time (cf. also The Informer and Winterset, made in '35 and '36). Lang himself soon moved back into the harder, harsher style of Fury and his German films, returning only occasionally to this type of romanticism (You and Me, Secret Beyond the Door, Rancho Notorious).

You Only Live Once is one of the strongest expressions of two favorite Lang themes: social commentary and Fate. The latter concept, of the doomed individual who tries in vain to escape a destiny over which he has no control, goes back to Lang's earliest German pictures and has continued to figure in his work ever since. We note how carefully Lang stacks the cards against Eddie and Joan, with a series of ironic coincidences (especially the killing of the priest) dogging their every attempt to escape their tragic fate. In the twenties and forties, Lang depicted Fate either as Death personified (he himself played "Death" in one of his German films), or as a "fatal woman" who lures men to their destruction (as in Scarlet Street). But in the thirties, during his "social" period, Lang gave the role of Fate to Society, which persecutes an innocent individual or even tries to lynch him (Fury). In 1962 Lang told an interviewer, "Fate, with the Greeks and Romans, was their God. Today, it is something else; either a dictatorship or a fight against some aspect of society that holds down the individual or tries to devour him. That is all in my work. It is basic to it." It is interesting that You Only Live Once was originally planned to show how a bad environment gets the hero into crime in the first place, but this was dropped.

Formally this film has much of interest, especially the armored-car robbery whose filming is nicely illustrated in the accompanying short subject. Those who saw Spies two weeks ago will have no trouble recognizing the Fritz Lang touch in the rainswept streets, the eyes peering out of the car, the gloved hands removing a gas-mask and grenades from a suitcase, the cascades of gas as the grenades are thrown. Much use is made of light and shadow in all the prison scenes, especially when we see Eddie caged by the bars of his death cell, and his attempt to escape in the fog and spotlights of the prison yard. Another Langian scene occurs when the hero grimly and in dead silence prepares to slash himself (cf. Matsumoto in Spies). Lang's fondness for closeups of pistols and wanted posters is much in evidence here, as is his ability to begin explaining a scene in words and then cut to the action itself as the commentary continues (especially the ticker tape message as the armored car is eerily raised from a watery grave).

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FRITZ LANG AFTER 1933. -- The second half of Lang's career began in 1933, when the new Nazi government banned his Last Will of Dr. Mabuse. Lang was then summoned to see Propaganda Minister Josef Goebbels, who told him that although the latest Mabuse was unacceptable (presumably because the evil genius espouses Nazi-like slogans), nevertheless Goebbels and Hitler had been impressed with his epics of the twenties (Metropolis, etc.), and were offering him the headship of the Nazi film industry. Lang, being of Jewish extraction, took this as the kiss of death and fled to Paris that same night, leaving behind all his money and his Nazi wife, Thea von Harbou. Picking up the pieces abroad at the age of 38, he made one film in France, Liliom (1933, with C. Boyer), and then came to Hollywood where he spent two years picking up some English and trying to sell script ideas.

Then, in 1936-37-38, he directed his first US films, the "social trilogy" consisting of the universal masterpiece indicting mob violence, Fury (S. Tracy), the highly praised lyrical tragedy You Only Live Once, and the unsuccessful Brechtian imitation You and Me (G. Raft, with music by Kurt Weill). Like Lang's classic M, these three films, all featuring S. Sidney, deal sympathetically with fugitives from the law whose wrongs were blamed more on the indifference of society and miscarriages of justice. In his American career Lang has often tended to follow current fashions in subject matter, and after his social trilogy of the middle thirties he did two average "A"-budget westerns, Return of Frank James ('40, H. Fonda) and Western Union ('41, R. Scott) just before the war, when quality westerns were very popular.

But in the years 1939-1944 he found a more appropriate genre for his talents in the anti-Nazi spy thriller, and filmed three notable examples of this genre in Manhunt ('41, W. Pidgeon), Hangmen Also Die ('43, B. Donlevy), and Ministry of Fear ('44, R. Milland), in addition to writing an unfilmed script, "Men without a Country," about a secret ray invention stolen by Nazi spies (its ending was later used by Robert Siodmak in Fly by Night ['41]). Near the end of the war Lang went into independent production with Walter Wanger (producer of You Only Live Once) and Joan Bennett (co-star of Manhunt), and created two excellent contemporary tragedies, Woman in the Window ('44) and Scarlet Street ('45); in each, E. G. Robinson played a mild little man of middle age who is enmeshed in the snares of Fate through an infatuation for a worthless tramp (played by Bennett).

Since 1945 (when he reached age 55), Fritz Lang has directed 15 films in various genres, many of them marked by brilliant scenes or characters, but which on the whole do not reach the level of his best work. The most notable of his postwar works are the western Rancho Notorious ('52, M. Dietrich), in which Lang returns to his favorite theme of the hunted man and of the inexorable march of Fate, and in which he introduced a ballad which tells part of the story (before High Noon); The Big Heat ('53, G. Ford), a hard-boiled crime story told "straight", with considerable bitterness, sadism, and brutality unvarnished by the kind of visual metaphors which Lang had previously used to suggest violence; and While the City Sleeps ('56, D. Andrews), in which the director refashioned M in a modern American setting, with John Barrymore Jr. as a sex-pervert whose compulsion to kill young women and girls brings about a giant manhunt before he is finally trapped in the asphalt caverns of a subway. Lang's other postwar films are Cloak and Dagger ('46, G. Cooper), an average spy thriller with a few good scenes; Secret Beyond the Door ('48, J. Bennett), a highly embellished, brilliantly photographed imitation of Spellbound; House by the River ('50, L. Hayward), the ironic tragedy of a murderer trapped by his own hallucinations; American Guerilla in the Philippines ('50, T. Power), Lang's only war film and the least interesting film he has ever made; Clash by Night ('52, B. Stanwyck), a triangle love affair based on Odets' play; Blue Gardenia ('53, A. Baxter), a variation on the theme of the unjustly accused fugitive; Human Desire ('54, G. Ford), a story of seduction and jealousy based on Zola's "Human Beast"; Moonfleet ('55, S. Granger), a tale of smugglers in old Scotland, highly uneven but with some fine atmospheric terror in the spirit of Val Lewton; Beyond a Reasonable Doubt ('56, D. Andrews), a very cold and detached contemporary story of crime and the miscarriage of justice. After the RKO studio folded up in 1957, Lang returned to Germany to remake Tiger of Eshnapur and Hindu Tomb ('58, D. Paget; called Journey to the City in the U.S.), based on an exotic tale of Oriental adventure which he had written in 1919; and Thousand Eyes of Dr. Mabuse ('60, P. Van Eyck), a modernized crime thriller with the evil genius from Lang's last German film in 1933. Last year Lang's young French admirer J.-L. Godard paid tribute to him by featuring him in Contempt. --SPH