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Fritz Lang: Fate, Murder & Revenge

NOTE: The following is an excerpt from a new book, "*Fritz Lang in America*," recently published in England. The author of the book is Peter Bogdanovich, a film critic and an important new film director.

Both Bogdanovich and Lang have visited the campus in recent weeks to appear during the University Art Museum showings of their films. Bogdanovich showed his new Paramount release called "Targets." Lang showed his "While the City Sleeps," made in Hollywood in 1957.

The excerpts printed include parts of an interview where Lang discussed "While the City Sleeps," as well as introductory material from the first chapter of Bogdanovich's book. Our thanks to Peter Bogdanovich for permission to be the first in this country to print this material.

—Sheldon Renan

By PETER BOGDANOVICH

Listen to the legend of Chuck-A-Luck, Chuck-A-Luck—
Listen to the wheel of Fate;
As round and round with a whisperin'
As round and round with a whisperin' sound it spins,
It spins the old, old story of HATE, MURDER
AND REVENGE . . .'

'The Legend of Chuck-A-Luck'
(from *Rancho Notorious*)

Except in France, very little of value has been written about Fritz Lang's American films, though they make up over half of his work The conventional opinion (as voiced by Gavin Lambert's 1955 Sight & Sound articles) is that after his first two pictures in Hollywod *(Fury, You Only Live Once)*, Lang went into decline, with only occasional flashes of his former talent and personality. This is as tedious and inaccurate a cliché as the theory that Hitchcock's British films are better than his American ones, that John Ford never made another movie quite as good as *The Informer*, or that Orson Welles hasn't done anything worth discussing since *Citizen Kane*.

Whereas Lang's American work is generally accessible, his German films are extremely difficult to get to see and most criticism is based on opinions formed years ago; the German films therefore are enriched by the tricks of memory, and the more 'common' American ones simply don't stand a chance. That something made *now* could possibly be better than something made *then* also seems in conceivable to most 'liberal' critics. (Lang's own preferences are strongly influenced — as he admits — by the circumstances surrounding the making of the films, and on their success or lack of it.) There is oneupmanship operating here too: if a reader is told that *Spione (1928)* is much better than *The Big Heat (1953)*, the critic isn't likely to be challenged, because the reader's chances of seeing *Spione* are poor. But that's how values in film history are set. One wonders how long it has been since the *critic* saw *Spione*.

More informative and to the point is Andrew Sarris' observation that 'both *Metropolis (1927)* and *Moonfleet 1955)* . . . share the same bleak view of the universe where man grapples with his personal destiny, and inevitably loses.' (Film Culture, No. 28, Spring 1963). Lang's work has been remarkably consistent over the years, both in theme and outlook: the fight against fate continues from *Der Müde Tod* (his first success in Germany) to *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* (his last American picture). And the 'Chuck-A-Luck' song that expresses the moral of *Rancho Notorious (1925)* could as easily be applied to *Die Nibelungen* (1942):

'. . . Revenge is a bitter and evil fruit
And Death hangs beside it on the bough.
These men who lived by the code of hate
Have nothing to live for now . . .'

It could be argued that Lang's American films are better than his German ones; certainly they are meaningful to a larger audience. As Hitchcock has said, '. . . When we make films for the United States, we are automatically making them for all the world—because America is full of foreigners.' ('The Cinema of Alfred Hitchcock', 1963.) More succinctly, he advised Truffaut when making films always to 'remember *Japon* . . .' In his own way, Lang quite consciously did the same. By changing the German super-hero into the American common man, he gave his work not only a wider appeal but more emotional impact: a far bigger audience can identify with the protagonists of *Fury* (1936) or *The Big Heat* than with the people of *Die Nibelungen*. . .

Lang cannot approach a project casually; he enjoys making films too much. Even such a relatively minor work as *The Blue Gardenia* (1953) contains as corrosive a view of society as any he has shot — all the more insidious because the surface is so normal, the people so plain. In *While the City Sleeps* (1956), this seemingly civilized exterior reveals a cancerous centre: unlike Haighi (of *Spione*), the monsters are not disfigured super-criminals plotting from subterranean cellars, but well-dressed citizens in the mainstream of life. These people who vie so ruthlessly for the editorship of a large city newspaper are much more brutalized and corrupt than the psychopathic murderer they are hunting. (Just as in *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* [1956], the puritanical woman who betrays her lover at the end commits an act more cold and reprehensible than his passion-murder of a stripper.) The sick boy (in *City*) who pleads, 'Please catch me before I kill more!' has a self-awareness, a humanity even, that does not exist in his pursuers; but the psychic destruction they cause goes unpunished, the real sickness of society is not cured.

As a creator of nightmares, Lang has few peers; his world—whether

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An Interview with Fritz Lang

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it's the 18th century England of *Moonfleet* or the middle-class railroad community of *Human Desire* (1954)—is one of shadows and night—ominous, haunted—filled with foreboding and violence, anxiety and death. The tears he elicits for the damned figures who inhabit it — the couple in *You Only Live Once*, the whore in *Man Hunt*, the artist in *Scarlet Street*, the moll in *The Big Heat* — are born from the depth of his personality; in his words, they have 'all my heart'.

LANG: The producer called me and showed me the scenario. I saw great possibilities in it as well as some things in which I didn't believe. So I got together with the writer, Casey Robinson (it was very pleasant to work with him), and, because there was also a kind of psychotic sex murderer in this story, I told him about my experiences on *M*. And I remembered that real murder case in Chicago, where a man wrote on the mirror, 'Please catch me before I kill more'. (He was confined, I think, to an insane asylum for study.) I had the basic elements for these things collected from newspaper clippings, and we put them in. We really worked hand-in-glove: sometimes I invented a scene, sometimes he invented a scene, somtimes I improved, sometimes he improved . . .

BOGDANOVICH: Did you have a lot to do with the casting?

LANG: Yes. There were a lot of so-called stars in it—Sanders, Andrews, Mitchell, Rhonda Fleming, Ida Lupino — you know why? Because the script was written so that with good planning, each star had no more than four or five days shooting. Therefore it was possible—simply from a financial standpoint — to put many stars in it; and every part was good.

BOGDANOVICH: They fit their roles very well.

LANG: Well, I worked with the writer constantly, and after we knew who would be playing the parts, naturally we made them fit a little more. And it was very good casting.

A distributor, you see, likes to have a kind of security that the money will come back, and he believes a star is security. I can tell you fifty pictures with big stars that were big flops, but who can argue with motion picture people? They never learn.

BOGDANOVICH: Weren't most of the newspeople actually more objectionable than the murderer? One has some sympathy for him but very little for characters like Vincent Price or Rhonda Fleming.

LANG: You are very romantic. They are human beings. Maybe it's like Lorre in *M* — he murders because he *must*—but these people—(with the exception of Dana Andrews and Thomas Mitchell) do exactly the things you probably do yourself but which you detest: running after a job, greedy for money. How many people have you met in your life who are ethical? So what do you expect from these people in *While the City Sleeps?*

BOGDANOVICH: Yet at the end you allow the decent people to win. Do you believe they would in life?

LANG: Maybe it's a pipe dream. I hope, I wish.

BOGDANOVICH: You once wrote an article in defense of the haapy ending.

LANG: In these days, when people are afraid about so many things (look at the newspapers), I think that a happy ending — or what we *call* a happy ending — is more satisfactory for an audience than a terribly sad one. The end of *Destiny*, for example, is that Death guides the boy and girl up to a heavenly meadow — with lots of flowers and sunshine — into which hey walk off together. A business friend of mine asked, 'You think that's a happy ending?' I said, 'Yes'. Do you know his answer? 'But they can no longer f - - k each other in heaven'. That's one attitude. Glenn Ford doesn't kill Broderick Crawford in *Human Desire*, but it still is not a happy ending. Or *Woman in the Window*: why have three people killed for nothing? That happy ending, with a touch of humor, was more appropriate to the whole picture. I have written a story called *Death of a Career Girl* [see filmography]: the ending is not that she is really dead—so would it be a happy ending? A happy ending: a woman who's dead to the world, to whom the man she loves once said, 'You are the living dead — you don't feel anything any more because your desire for power, your desire for money and God knows what, has killed the human being in you'. It is not a happy ending even though she is alive! When I made *Die Nibelungen*, in which everybody was killed — not even a *dog* was alive at the end — I *couldn't* change it because it was a German Saga. My ending for *M* (which was cut many years later by the people who had distribution rights) was that when the kangaroo court is ready to lynch him, you don't see the police come in but you know they *have* because everybody raises their hands; you see a hand come down on Lorre's shoulder and a voice says, 'In the name of . . .' *Dissolve* to three judges at the bench: '. . . in the name of the people . . .' Again *dissolve* to three women sitting on a bench and one says, 'That doesn't bring our children back to life again. We have to watch them more carefully' Even here it is not clear whether he is killed or not (first of all, because I am against capital punishment). In *Hangmen Also Die!*, hero and heroine are both 'alive.' Is it a happy ending? (You remember what it said: 'NOT THE END.') Whereas I would consider my ending for *Moonfleet*, in which the boy thinks the man is alive, a happy one — despite the fact that he dies: the boy is not disappointed — all that he saw in this man came true. There are no rules in motion pictures. Except compromise for the audience. I am against compromise.

BOGDANOVICH: Do you like *While the City Sleeps* as much as *M* and *Fury*, which I understand are your favorite films?

LANG: No, but I think — and this will only be proved by how it holds up over the years — that *While the City Sleeps* is at least an equally good picture. But, in all humility, when so many articles and books have been written about *M*, maybe one is not objective any more. For example, the last time I was in Germany, they played *M* again and it had an enormously long run in Berlin—eighteen weeks. And during this period there was a crime wave there; the homicide department couldn't find the culprits, and I have a newspaper clipping in which the reporter wrote: 'We suggest the gentlemen of the homicide department take a look at Fritz Lang's picture, *M*, to learn how to catch a murderer.' So it's very hard to say if you like something because it had a great success. Probably. But I think both *M* and *Fury* are honest films. *M* is much more honest than *Fury*, because, as I told you before, an honest motion picture about lynching has to be made with a different premise. I *think* that *While the City Sleeps* is an honest picture. I think I can still stand behind everything in these pictures, the ideas and so on.

But there is another thing that influences me. There were certain circumstances that enabled me to make *M* without any restrictions. I said to the so-called producer, 'Look, if you want me to make a picture for you, I have the choice of everything — script, actors, cutting, everything. And nobody else has anything to say.' So *M* is practically the only picture I made in which nobody else had a hand except me myself. Maybe that influences me.

Also, don't forget, *M* was the first picture about a sex maniac. A film without a love story was unheard of in those days, and if I hadn't had that contract this film never would have been made. There is a very sweet story about [Irving] Thalberg. He had a habit of playing with some gold pieces in his pocket. One day, before I came to America, he said to his staff, his writers, 'Now, come on, you bastards, I want to show you a picture.' And he ran *M*. It's over and he says, 'Na? What do you say to that?' 'It's a great picture.' 'It's a wonderful picture!' — or whatever you have to say when a producer shows you something he likes. And then suddenly one of the writers took courage and said, 'But Mr. Thalberg, tell me one thing. What would you have said if I had brought you a picture with no love story — about a child murderer?' And Thalberg played with the gold pieces in his pocket and after a time he said, 'Probably I would have said, "Go to hell!"' He was a very honest man.

Afterwards there were many pictures made about sex maniacs — and I remember two of them even used the same melody the man in *M* whistled. By the way, I don't mind if somebody steals — I stole a lot of things in my life — and I wouldn't call it stealing; I think Stendahl said, 'It is permitted to take the good things where you find them.' Cecil DeMille took the kangaroo court from *M* and transposed it into a kangaroo court in a high school [*This Day and Age*, 1933], and I was very proud about it. I mean, if somebody finds something in my work he can use, it only proves that I have reached certain people. But, anyway, I think *M* and *Fury* are social criticisms about two very important things. I really put my finger on something. And the same is probably true of *While the City Sleeps.*

BOGDANOVICH: Did you ever again have the freedom you had on *M*?

LANG: No. Never. I used to say, 'When I am reborn, I want to be a rhino.' Because they have such a heavy skin, you know. I don't think I am hard-boiled, but I was always a fighter and after *M* I fought more effectively because I knew all the answers — if you ever know all the answers. Sometimes, you see, you have to fight for certain things. In *While the City Sleeps*, Ida Lupino (who played a sob sister on the newspaper) had an affair with George Sanders, and in one scene he practically tells her, 'Look, if it will get Dana Andrews on my side, go sleep with him.' She likes Andrews, so she says, 'You mean I should go all out?' And he says, 'Look, whatever you do, I know you will do it out of love for me.' So she goes to see Dana Andrews at a bar that was established earlier as the place where all the newspapermen go; it is long after midnight; he sits there, very drunk, and she is on the make for him. She orders a very complicated drink and starts to banter with him; she takes a colour slide out of her purse, looks at it and starts to smile. And Ida Lupino (who, in my opinion, is a very good actress) played it so wonderfully that you immediately knew what the picture was: she was naked. He says, 'Let me look at it,' they start to fight, finally he tries to grab the slide and it falls behind the bar. So the barkeeper picks it up and we see that it's a picture of a naked child on a fur rug. I thought the scene was very funny and so did my cutter, Gene Fowler Jr. But the producer said, 'No, this scene is ridiculous—we'll cut it out.' I said, 'No.' I had it in my contract that the producer only had the right to cut after the previews. I said, 'Look, you have no right to cut.' Finally, after four days, I fought it through — it would be in for the preview. Comes the preview, Fowler (who is still a very close friend of mine) and I were sitting there, waiting for the scene. I'll tell you now, very honestly, I was sweating—and I kept my fingers crossed, hoping. The scene comes and the audience roars, roars, roars. Afterward the producer runs out and Gene Fowler says, "Well? Wasn't Lang right?' The producer said, *'Here, yes!* But I will preview this film until the audience *doesn't* laugh and then I will cut it out!"

Yes, you laugh, but these are the sort of things you have to face. This same man cut *Rancho Notorious* — which could have been a much better picture — to pieces, Out of spite and vanity.

BOGDANOVICH: Obviously he never found an audience that didn't laugh.

LANG: Never.

Jack London

Oakland, Calif.
Dec. 5, 1899

First letter-writing I have done for quite a while. Have been very busy. Have not had an evening at home for nigh on to two weeks, what with suppers, speaking functions, and last but not least, FOOTBALL. Did you see what we did to Stanford? In case that benighted region in which you reside has not yet received the score, let me have the privilege of blazoning it forth. Thirty to nothing, Berkeley.

It was magnificent, to sit under the blue and gold and watch the Berkeley giants wade through the Cardinals, and especially so when one looks back to the times he sat and watched the Stanfordites pile up the score and hammer our line into jelly . . .

—Jack London