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(M) Germany 1931. Dir Fritz Lang Scen Thea von Harbou, Paul Falkenberg, Adolf Jansen, Karl Vash Photog Fritz Arno Wagner Art Dir Karl Vollbrecht, Emil Hasler Ed Paul Falkenberg Cast Peter Lorre, Otto Wernicke, Gustaf Gründgens Prod Nero-Film. 118 mins. (original length); most current versions 99 mins.

In a large town a sadistic murderer (Lorre) kills little girls. The police (Wernicke) try in vain to catch him, but in the end he is trapped by the denizens of the underworld and condemned to death by their leader (Gründgens). The police arrive in time to prevent his execution.

The story was based on a news story about a real murderer in Dusseldorf. It was to have been called *Mörder unter uns* (*Murderer Among Us*) but this title was abandoned when a Nazi thought it might dishonor Germany. The film, produced almost entirely in a studio, has no music but a very expressive sound track. Peter Lorre (who was a stage actor trained by Bertolt Brecht) became world famous for his portrayal of the murderer, an outwardly gentle man who is trapped by his mental sickness and afraid to discover himself. He is characterized best by his whistling of the theme from Grieg's *Peer Gynt* whenever his desires overwhelm him, but otherwise he hardly says a word until his final despairing cry of protest at the end, "I can't help it."

The stylized realism of the sets, the sense of destiny overshadowing the characters, the use of symbols (a balloon offered to one of the victims, the glinting blade of a pocket knife, the sexuality of some of the ads) owe more to *Kammerspiel* than to expressionism.

"A Town Hunts a Murderer" was one provisional title for the film, an appropri-

ate title since the town is one of the main characters in the drama. *M* is a film in which buildings play a major role, especially in the best sequence, where the thief drives the murderer into a deserted building, and traps him as though he were locked in a vault. The climax, where the thief "squeals" to the police, seems to have been influenced by Brecht and *Threepenny Opera* (q.v.). The band of beggars and thieves in the film included some real criminals. *M* also offers a portrait of the profound troubles that gripped Germany in the years immediately before Hitler came to power.