

## Document Citation

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# M

1931 90 min. B&W Rental: \$45.00

Directed by Fritz Lang; screenplay by Lang and Thea von Harbou; photography by Fritz Arno Wagner and Gustav Rathje. With Peter Lorre, Otto Wernicke, Gustav Grundgens, Theo Lingen, Theodor Loos, Georg John, Ellen Widmann. German dialog with English subtitles.

A series of school girls are murdered by a psychopath who terrorizes a very large city. Under increasing pressure from the public, the police steps up its raids and identity checks of all known and suspected criminals. The increase in the police harassment disrupts the normal business activities of the underworld; they decide to take matters in their own hands and to capture the criminal. They organize the network of beggars, and soon locate and corner the murderer. With a display of know-how and hardware they capture M and take him to a secret location to be tried. One of the members of the gang was inadvertently left behind and, seized by the police, he is tricked into revealing the location of the meeting place of the underworld. The final sequence is devoted to the trial, the presentation of the case for the prosecution and M's defense. He is condemned to be executed because he is considered a menace to society. Suddenly the police arrive and capture the entire gang. The counterpoint of M's second trial is briefly evoked in a single shot showing the mothers crying for the children who cannot be brought back.

The film was inspired by a famous criminal known as "the vampire of Dusseldorf." As usual Lang documented very carefully the police procedures and the organization of the underworld. The stylized realism of the film is in part inspired by the style of the Kammerspiel. This film was greatly admired for the rigor of its construction, and is generally considered Lang's masterpiece. One of its most innovative features is its highly expressive soundtrack. "Of course, I adapted myself to the requirements of sound. For example, I discovered that when I sit at the terrace of a cafe, I no longer hear the sound of the street when I am engaged in a lively conversation. I realized that sound can not only be used as a dramatic element but that is the way it should be used. In *M*, for example, the silence of the street was suddenly disrupted by the whistles of the police, or by the murderer's whistling the tune constantly repeated

in the film; all that contributed to reinforce the dramatic effect" (Lang in 1931). Lang was interested in the story for several reasons. First of all, any murder story, "is a puzzle against which to match the sharpness of the mind." But there is also the manifestation of uncontrollable instincts which civilization has not curbed: "...there is enough in most of us of the wild, uninhibited creature to identify ourselves momentarily with the outlaw who defies society and exults in cruelty. The desire to hurt, the desire to kill ... is closely joined to the sexual urge, under whose dictates no man acts reasonably." And finally, there is a strange resemblance between what Lang calls secondary circumstances, like "the horrible psychosis of fear in the population, the auto-accusation of the mentally ill, the denunciations which seem to express all the hatred which seem to have accumulated as the result of long cohabitation. There are also the attempts to lead the police investigation astray. All these elements clearly exposed, chosen among secondary events, seem to the film a 'report of facts' a task which transcends by far the reproduction of artistic events: the mission is to give a warning, provide clarifications, and in final analysis to have a preventive action when real events are concerned." (Lang, 1931)

Lang's difficulty in finding a way to treat the subject matter of *M* tactfully led him to make the following comment which throws an interesting light on his approach to cinema: "...there was a problem of how to present such a crime so that it would not sicken the audience, yet would have full emotional impact. That is why I only gave hints—the rolling ball, the balloon caught in the wires, after being released by the little hand. Thus I make the audience an integral part in the creation of this special scene by forcing each individual member of the audience to create the gruesome details of the murder according to his personal imagination."

The print currently distributed is a new print based on a German copy. It contains several sequences not in the previous prints and several shots also occur in a different order than in the older version. It would appear that this version of the film is closer to the original German version, although

there is a short sequence missing at the end of the police raid. The soundtrack is also vastly superior, and so is the quality of the print in general. (BA) \*

Please note: The "searching for a victim" sequence is available separately as a Film Study Extract. See Index for page describing our Film Study Extract series.