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# Retrospective

## Müde Tod, Der (Destiny)

Germany, 1921

Director: Fritz Lang

*Cert*—A. *dist*—B.F.I. *p.c*—Decla-Bioscop. *p*—Erich Pommer. *sc*—Fritz Lang, Thea von Harbou. *ph*—Erich Nitzschmann, Fritz Arno Wagner, Hermann Saalfrank. *lighting*—Robert Hegerwald. *a.d*—Walter Röhrig (Framing Story), Hermann Warm (Arabian and Venetian Tales), Robert Herlth (Chinese Tale). *properties/cost*—from the Heinrich Umlauff Museum, Hamburg. *m*—Peter Schirman. *l.p*—Lil Dagover (*Young Woman*), Walter Janssen (*Young Man*), Bernhard Goetzke (*Death*), Karl Platen (*Apothecary*), Georg John (*Beggar*), Paul Rehkopf (*Gravedigger*), Hans Sternberg (*Mayor*), Carl Rückert (*Minister*), Max Adalbert (*Notary*), Wilhelm Diegelmann (*Doctor*), Erich Pabst (*Teacher*), Hermann Picha (*Tailor*), Max Pfeiffer (*Watchman*), Lydia Potechina (*Landlady*), Grete Berger (*Mother*). ARABIAN TALE: Eduard von Winterstein (*Caliph*), Lil Dagover (*Zobeide*), Walter Janssen (*The Frank*), Erika Unruh (*Ayesha*), Rudolph Klein-Rogge (*Dervish*), Bernhard Goetzke (*Gardener*). VENETIAN TALE: Rudolph Klein-Rogge (*Girolamo*), Lil Dagover (*Fiametta*), Walter Janssen (*Giovanfrancesco*), Lothar Mütel (*Messenger*), Edgar Pauly (*Friend*), Lina Paulsen (*Nurse*), Levis Brody (*Moor*). CHINESE TALE: Karl Huszar (*Djin Shuean Wang, Emperor of China*), Paul Biensfeld (*A Hi*), Lil Dagover (*Liang*), Walter Janssen (*Tiao Tsien*), Bernhard Goetzke (*Emperor's Archer*), Max Adalbert (*Chancellor*), Paul Neumann (*Executioner*). 7,130 ft. 79 mins. *Original footage*—7,582 ft. *English titles*.

A young couple's honeymoon in a small German town is disrupted when the husband disappears with an ominous stranger: learning that the stranger owns the land next to the graveyard, the distraught wife hurries there, only to see her husband among a procession of ghosts passing through the huge wall surrounding the plot. Treated for shock by the apothecary, she is about to drink poison when she is precipitated into a vision . . . She confronts the stranger, who is Death incarnate, and begs for the life of her husband. Death, weary with his onerous duties, offers her three chances to save his life, each represented by a guttering candle. ARABIAN TALE: Zobeide, sister of the cruel Caliph, is secretly in love with an 'infidel' Frank, who risks death each time he visits her. One day the Caliph's spies follow Zobeide's maid Ayesha as she carries a message to the Frank; an ambush is set, and the Frank is caught and left to die, buried up to his neck. VENETIAN TALE: Fiametta is engaged to the vicious Girolamo, a member of the Council of 14, but loves Giovanfrancesco. During carnival she invites Girolamo to visit her one evening, and hires a Moor to stab him with a poisoned dagger; but the suspicious Girolamo redirects the letter to his rival, who dies in his place. CHINESE TALE: Magician A Hi is summoned to entertain the Emperor on his birthday, and travels to the palace by magic carpet with his friends, the young lovers Liang and Tiao Tsien. The Emperor is pleased with A Hi's gifts of a miniature army and a magic horse, but demands to keep Liang too; when she refuses his advances, he imprisons Tiao Tsien. Liang snatches A Hi's wand, accidentally turning him into a cactus, and effects her escape with Tiao Tsien, using the wand to erect obstacles in their wake. But the Emperor despatches his archer on the magic horse, and as the couple use the last of the wand's power to turn themselves into a statue and a tiger, the archer releases an arrow that kills Tiao Tsien. All three candles extinguished, Death offers the girl a final chance to save her husband by bringing him another life in exchange within the hour. . . Coming to her senses as the apothecary dashes the poison from her lips, the girl vainly begs him, and a beggar, and the old people in the hospital to give up their lives for her husband's sake. The commotion in the hospital starts a fire which traps a baby, and the girl enters the burning building with the thought that the baby's life will serve her purpose. But at the last minute she lowers the baby to safety, and surrenders her own life in order to rejoin her husband.

Fritz Lang has explained that in the years of depression following the 1914-18 war, he and many of his film-maker contemporaries "made a fetish of tragedy" as a reaction against the sunnier excesses of pre-war Romanticism. Unlike most of the Max Reinhardt disciples, Lang did not turn to Expressionism as his primary idiom, and yet *Der müde Tod* (his first critical success) characterises the prevailing mood so well that it seems today like a source film for 'the haunted screen'. Most immediately striking is the film's exceptional range: apart from allowing itself the luxury of four parallel but otherwise dissimilar stories, with a different team determining the design for each, it takes a calculated delight in frequent switches of style from naturalism to melodramatic stylisation or broad comedy, adding gleeful trick effects, social satire and comic business throughout. The result is surprisingly cohesive, partly because of the modest strength of the framing melodrama, but mainly because of the beautiful consistency of Lang's ability to relate actors to settings; the dynamics of space applied in the film, however hyperbolic (Death's wall) or extravagant (the palace cellars in Baghdad) the sets, make the static camera more a boon than a limitation. Of course, certain of the film's qualities were generic even in 1921: the assumption that fate is a concrete force at work had been a commonplace of German Romantic literature; the theme of dark forces undermining bourgeois stability (also from literature) is shared with numerous films, among them *Nosferatu* and *Caligari*; and the exoticism of the stories behind the three candles derives from the 'pulp' adventure cycle, to which Lang himself contributed *Die Spinnen*. But the elaborate special effects, which come especially thick and fast in the Chinese tale, were virtuoso inventions, widely influential in Hollywood as well as Germany. And such Lang/von Harbou idiosyncrasies as the blend of German fatalism with vague Catholic mysticism, which blooms full in *Metropolis*, here finds its first tentative definition in the setting for Death's domain, a vaulted, cathedral-like hall thronged with burning candles, each representing a human soul. Undoubtedly, though, the film's central importance lay in its sheer profusion of incident, its capacity for assimilating a detail like the characterisation of the town councillors as avaricious, drunken oafs without deviating from the main course of the narrative. The print under review, taken from an original negative, restores such details to their rightful prominence—only a redundant score, which necessitates projection at sound speed, mars a full appreciation of the richness of Lang's achievement.

TONY RAYNS