

## Document Citation

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*Moving Pictures  
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M. (Germany 1931)

Directed by Fritz Lang; screenplay by Lang and Thea von Harbou, from a newspaper story; photographed by Fritz Arno Wagner, Gustav Rathje and Karl Vash.  
Cast: Peter Lorre, Ellen Widmann, Inge Landgut, Otto Wernicke

Fritz Lang began working in films in 1916 when he wrote scripts at the famous UFA studios. In 1919 he directed his first film, HALB-BLUT, from his own script. This and other films quickly established his reputation as a director of talent. His DR. MABUSE, DIE NIEBELUNGEN and METROPOLIS were high points in German cinema and showed great skill in creating atmosphere through the intelligent use of the elaborate stylized sets of the period. Lang and his wife, Thea von Harbou, wrote most of the scripts for his films. The story of M was based on the actual case of the Dusseldorf murder and the film was originally to be called MURDERER AMONG US. The Nazis, coming to power at this time, assumed that they would be compromised by a film with this title and harrassed Lang until he changed the name to something that sounded harmless.

M was a great success and Lang next made THE LAST WILL OF DR. MABUSE, which was banned by the Nazis because of its implied criticism of the Party. Although Lang's political views were suspect, he was obviously a film-maker of enormous talent and Goebbels asked him to make propaganda films for the Nazis. Instead, Lang left the country and went to the United States; his wife, a Nazi supporter, stayed behind. At this time Hollywood was stripping Europe's film centres of their greatest talents by offering money and fame--and superb technical facilities. Many who were thus lured away were crushed by the studio "system" but Lang was one who continued to do excellent work. His American films include FURY, HANGMEN ALSO DIE, SCARLET STREET, CLOAK AND DAGGER and THE BIG HEAT. He has always been noted for his craftsmanship and expert building up of suspense through the skillful use of lighting and other visual effects. In 1961 Lang returned to Germany and made THE THOUSAND EYES OF DR. MABUSE, which disappointed many people. He appeared, playing himself, in Jean-Luc Godard's LE MEPRIS and since then has apparently retired.

During his long and distinguished career Lang has made many fine films, but M is widely regarded as his masterpiece, a film in which a gripping story is told with imagination and skill--as lighting, visual details and camera angles reinforce the soundtrack and editing to obtain maximum effect in each scene.

The film opens with the disappearance of a little girl whose body is later discovered. This is one of a series of child murders and the whole city is thrown into a panic. In their desperate efforts to find the killer, the police disturb the ordinary activities of the underworld. To put an end to this, the criminals themselves set out to find the murderer. Peter Lorre plays the quiet inoffensive looking man who has a terrible compulsion to kill children and his interpretation is one of the cinema's great performances. Hunted remorselessly by both police and criminals, the terrified creature is finally cornered and, in a haunting and terrifying speech, tries to explain that he cannot help himself.

One critic has said, "The completed film does have political and social overtones but they are just part of the picture. Around the main story concerning the psychopath, Lang skillfully probes crime, poverty, mental illness and other sordid human experiences. He balances the psychology of crowds with the psychology of an individual, probes the nature of organized crime and organized government and manages to make each part relevant. There is no waste of film or time." (Austin F. de Besche). One of the earliest sound films, it is also one of the greatest and has scarcely dated in 37 years.

-Dawn Ryan-

#### FILM STUDY SERIES

On Monday nights at 7:30 films of interest are screened and discussed. Everyone interested is welcome and there is no admission charge.

In the coming month the following films will be shown:

April 8 : PACIFIC 231 and OVERTURE  
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