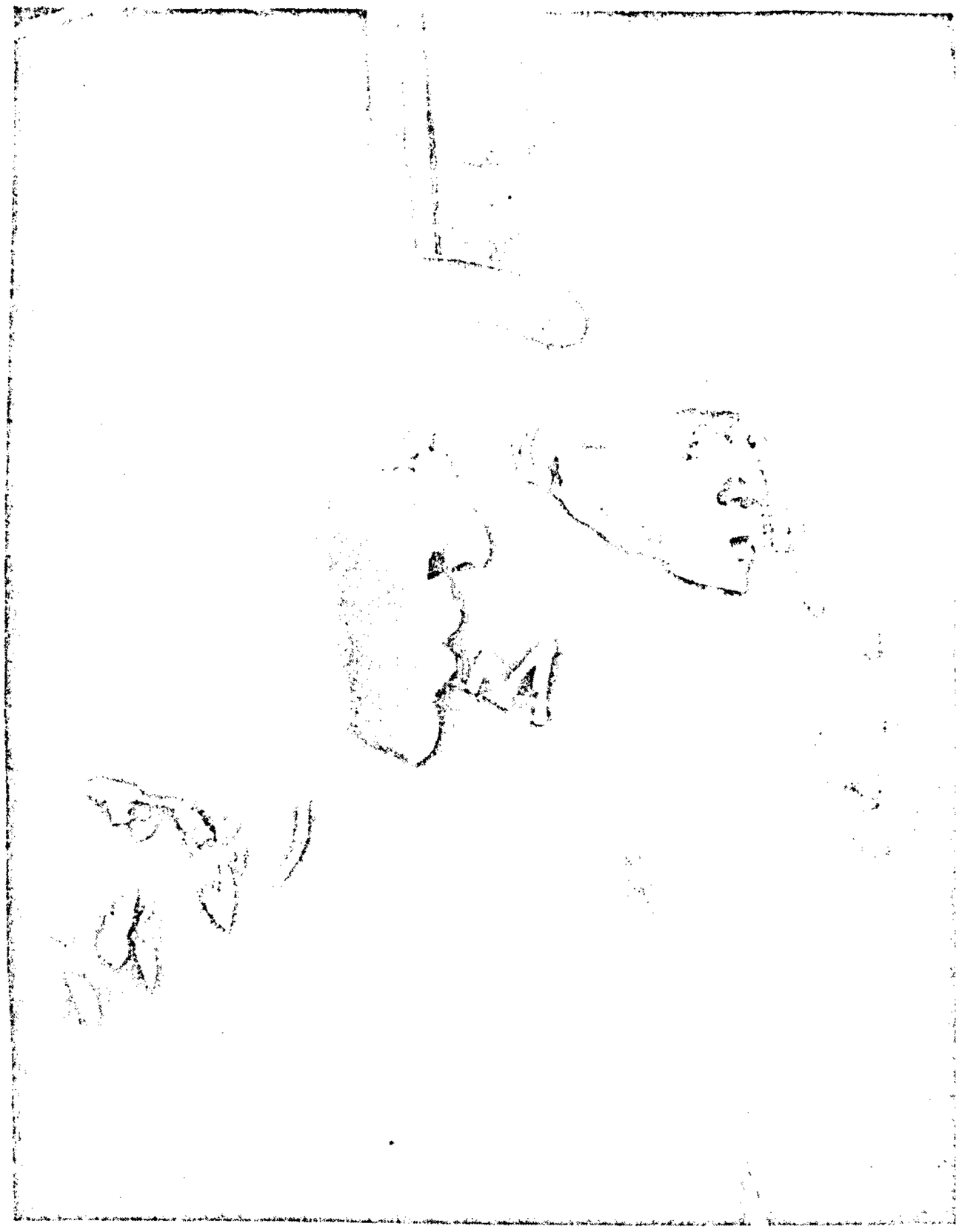
# Document Citation

| | |
|---|---|
| Title | **False reflection** |
| Author(s) | Richard Jameson |
| Source | *Publisher name not available* |
| Date | |
| Type | article |
| Language | English |
| Pagination | |
| No. of Pages | 2 |
| Subjects | |
| Film Subjects | M, Lang, Fritz, 1931 |

# FALSE REFLECTION

**Richard T. Jameson**



Fritz Lang's **M** has seen more action in the Seattle area than most film classics, having enjoyed spots in both leading University of Washington film series as well as film society showings and appearances in several film classes. Despite this exposure, it was booked into a suburban art house and proceeded to outgross first-run entries from the likes of Bergman, Truffaut, and Godard. As a movie, Lang's tale of a child murderer hunted by all strata of society and haunted by himself continues to hold up superbly for virtually the entire spectrum of filmgoers.

But in just what form does the movie hold up? The recent 35-millimeter screening raised new questions about Lang's masterpiece– namely, what is the real thing like? For this theatrical print of **M** raises to three the number of "editions" I have seen. They range in length from 90 to 97 minutes; each contains material the others do not; none comes near the full-length **M** variously reported at 114 and 118 minutes' running time.

Regrettably, I cannot identify the three editions as to the distribution herald imprinted among the titles, so I shall designate them according to present rental source:

1)**The Museum of Modern Art** 16mm print is the first **M** I ever saw and may well be the longest. Too sparsely subtitled for un- distracted viewing, this edition is superior nevertheless for maintaining Lang's most crucial motifs and retaining the film's final images, missing from both other versions: After Inspector Lohmann's hand falls on Becker's shoulder at the close of the kangaroo court sequence, we cut to a distant shot of a real but abstract-looking courtroom and several black-robed magistrates filing to their places. One echoes Lohmann's "In the name of the law, " apparently about to pronounce sentence. Cut to several grief-stricken mothers sitting along a wall, one saying, "And if we kill him, will it bring our children back?" Lacking this scene, the other versions end with a comparatively unambiguous sense of the triumph of law and order.

2)The Audio Film Center print, also in 16, is the most congenial for audiences since it offers subtitles with customary frequency. Unfortunately, it comes up seven or eight minutes shorter than the Museum's **M**..

3) The **Janus Films** print I saw was 35mm, reportedly their only such print. (Whether Janus has any 16mm prints, and whether they correspond to the theatrical 35, I do not know.) In length this **M** falls between the Museum and Audio editions. Its subtitling pattern is annoyingly infrequent, whole sequences lacking any

translation. (Lorre's confession at the end is one of the great moments in screen acting, but the scene would be even more powerful if all of his lines were rendered into titles. Images in the dialogue tie in with Lang's visual material.)

On one hand this version offers the crispest possible look at Lang's superb visuals and includes a bonanza of shots and entire sequences never seen before by audiences that have depended on semi-public 16mm showings. Among the early montages of police investigations, we glimpse images immediately recognizable as integral to the vision of Fritz Lang: a police dog bounding over a guard rail and standing in silhouette against a shining pond; an army of detectives moving down a huge studio-crafted hillside, passing among trees that evoke the forest stands of Siegfrieds Tod; more cops checking papers in a flophouse, others drifting about a great smoky depot. The same detective who will later check out Becker's room pays a visit to a man accused in an anonymous letter of being the child murderer; a goldfish bowl shimmers at the edge of the screen with cozy menace. During the raid on the underworld saloon early in the picture, a sergeant smokes a cigarette and half-listens to the landlady's complaints that the cops are ruining her business (the same woman, by the way, who played a similar role in Von Sternberg's Blue Angel).

Wonderful new discoveries--and yet in some ways this is the least satisfying M of all. Whoever did the pruning excised key scenes and entire motifs, stylistic frameworks that support Lang's essential moral assumptions and make the movie such a disturbing one. Still worse, at some point in the film's history a very bad decision was made: to add sound and dialogue effects to an early talking film built on scrupulous rhythms of sound and silence.

The Janus M lacks some of the most famous shots in the picture. During those early passages when the various departments of the police coordinated their efforts to determine the identity of the killer, we do not see the graphologist walking up and down in his office dictating his analysis of the "psychotic" handwriting; neither, shockingly, do we see the first full view of Lorre, looking in a mirror and spreading his face as if conducting a similar analysis of his own features. The latter appears as a still in many film books, including the Lorrimer (Simon & Schuster) screenplay which has been conspicuously influenced by this version.

An essential aspect of the film is Lang's relentless pursuit of analogy, one level of society to another. The Janus M shows us much more of the great cross-cutting sequence built out of the separate meetings of the top gangsters and the police commission: a crook begins a gesture and a policeman completes it; the safecracker stands up and walks behind his chair, and his counterpart continues the motion in the elegant boardroom. Both meetings grow denser and denser with smoke as the discussions increase in intensity. Smoke is one of Lang's paramount devices: The fat cigars on Inspector Lohmann's desk are there to be contrasted with the neat rows of salvaged butts collected by one of the beggars who work for the underworld; and a traveling camera takes inventory of the beggar's treasure trove as, earlier, it roamed over the tables full of tools and weapons and stolen goods confiscated in the crooks' saloon. Both these parallel shots are missing.

It has been observed that Lang and Jean Renoir represent opposed visions of society. A handy stylistic measure of the difference is that when Renoir moves his camera he unites people, discovers new friends, possibilities for warmth and growth; whereas Lang's camera discovers complications, specifically threats. Perhaps the best example of this very thing in M is the moment after Lorre/Becker realizes he has been identified and is being followed. He stops on a street corner and listens to the sharp whistled signals marking his progress. With each sound he gives a little hop in one direction, then another, negating his own movements. Finally he picks a course and turns that way, whereupon the camera pans ever so slightly to reveal a man flattened along the wall–in plain view if only Lorre had looked that way, if only the camera had made that adjustment earlier; he was there all the time, watching (like the audience themselves, who are implicated in the film's action as social critics).

The scene described occurs in the Janus edition, but many similar have been excised. Besides the removal of whole shots and sequences, the very pattern of the editing has been tampered with. The film opens in darkness, a child's voice heard on the soundtrack. Fade in to a high shot of children in a circle,, playing innocently while their parents fear for their being on the streets. The notion of encroaching blackness with which the images themselves have drawn an uneasy truce reiterates the theme of lurking danger on an almost subliminal level. Yet subsequent black cuts have been curtailed; e.g., following the murder of Elsie Beckmann the screen should go dark and the soundtrack silent for a moment till the cry of "Extra! Extra!" is raised, and we fade in shortly thereafter on a new scene in the street from which Elsie disappeared, a street where her horrible death has now become sensational news. Now a direct cut from the awful sight of Elsie's balloon caught on the power lines to someone reading a newspaper quite destroys the effect.

In this, his first sound film, Lang employed the new dimension in analogous fashion. Incidental noises are highly selected. Whole moments pass while traffic, human and mechanical, moves in the street without impinging on the soundtrack. When Lorre follows another little girl through the evening thoroughfares we see her; only the now-distant, now-nearer whistling of his obsessive "Hall of the Mountain King" theme marks Lorre's presence.