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## Fritz Lang - An Auteur of German Expressionism

by Phil McCarron

(MPTV 1113)

**F**ritz Lang, born in Vienna in 1890, would eventually become a father of German Expressionism in film, an influential pre-cursor to Film Noir, and leave behind a body of work soaked in pessimism that exposes, as he saw it, the corrosive nature of society. Lang volunteered to serve in the Austrian Army during World War I. Afterward, while recovering from war wounds, both physical and mental, Lang tried his hand at writing screenplays, eventually getting the attention of UFA studios in Germany. His stint writing films was a brief one before he took on the mantle of director. From 1919 to 1933, Lang honed what would become his hallmark style of dark, striking visuals and themes of madness, corruption, and mob rule. After a personal threat from Nazi Propaganda Minister, Joseph Goebbels, Lang fled both his country, and his wife, for Hollywood. Lang successfully married his style of expressionism to the sometimes narrow artistic scope of the American studio system, which saw both critically and financially successful films earn him notoriety as a true artist in the medium of film.<sup>1</sup>

Lang's early, German films were shot at a time when Germany was in a self-contained artistic bubble. The German Expressionism movement, influenced by the emotional scarring of World War I, was initially localized to Germany. The dark, brooding window into the corrosive elements of the human body and soul were not just explored thematically, but also visually through the intense use of light & shadow and sharp angles, making the set a character in and of itself.<sup>2</sup> Lang began playing with these stylistic concepts in his early films but they didn't truly mature for him until his creation of the Dr. Mabuse series of films. Adapted from Norbert Jacques' novels, the first two films in the series, *Dr. Mabuse, The Gambler* & *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* explored the psyche of a notorious super-villain and how the influence of the more amoral sides of humanity is as pervasive as it is unrelenting.<sup>3</sup> This theme of the motivations of criminals, large and small would recur through the body of Lang's work.

In the over 4-hour long *Dr. Mabuse, The Gambler*, Lang wove together so many narratives into a larger narrative and managed to keep it all together, spectacularly. As I mentioned, this was the start of his thematic styling, but also his visual style. One small shot captured my attention, especially for a 1922 film. In a car chase sequence, Lang shot from a moving car into the wing mirror to show the headlight of the car following. It was a beautifully-framed shot. More pertinent to his style as a sequence with the inter-title 'Night Ghosts'. In this scene, The Count is being mentally manipulated by Dr. Mabuse into suicide. Long shots of dark rooms with shadows casting patterns on the walls set the tone for a harrowing night. The furniture was jagged in shape and felt out of place in the setting as ghosts of The Count appear before The Count and torment him. It was a classic German Expressionist take on a scene from the lighting, blocking and set design to the subject matter and performance. There was also a séance scene in this film shot in a similar fashion, a scene he'd repeat many years later in the post World War II spy film, *Ministry of Fear*.

In between the first two 'Mabuse' films, Lang directed, what was at the time, the most expensive film ever produced, *Metropolis*. A sweeping science-fiction epic of the silent era that portrayed the inherent subjugation in society extending the division of classes well into a dystopian future. Allegorical in nature, *Metropolis* had overt geo-political overtones that were not only pertinent to post World War I Europe, but are still relevant in today's society.<sup>4</sup> This theme of divisiveness between the wealthy and the powerful and the abuses of power would play a role in

many of his future films to a varying degree.

In 1931, Lang would direct his second-to-last film in Germany before fleeing to Hollywood. This film was called *'M'*. Not a popular topic by even today's cinematic, morality standards, it was centered around the search for a child murderer. This was Fritz Lang's first use of sound in film and he didn't use it in a casual way either. As Lang did with the sets in all his other films, he did with sound in *'M'*; he made it a character. He used off-screen sounds, sounds to evoke action, and most importantly, leitmotif.<sup>5</sup> Peter Lorre's character repeatedly whistled a tune (*In the Hall of the Mountain King*). Lang used this as an alternate way to convey the character's presence to the audience, usually for an anxious affect. Visually, Lang implemented his array of expressionist techniques with dramatic uses of shadows (specifically when the shadow of Lorre is cast on a wanted poster) and all variety of sharp camera angles. His camera movement was also outstanding in this film with multiple shots running through entire rooms filled with action. Thematically, Lang kept with favored topics of his. *'M'* wasn't so much about a child murderer as it was about why society felt it needed to look for him. The police were complaining about being overworked but obligated because the administration was pressuring them, the administration was pressuring them because of the bad press, and the crime organizations were hunting for him because the increased police spotlight was bad for business. The mob rule in this film was a fine blend between pro-active vigilantism and apathetic morality. It culminated in a kangaroo courtroom scene in which Lorre's character begs for his life to a gallery of criminals, some of whom, are guilty of murder themselves. Lang often employed judgment into films as it relates to society. This was a beautiful example of how the wisdom of crowds inevitably depends on the crowd.

Lang's first film in America was about the story a man falsely accused and almost lynched before going on a trail of vengeance; *Fury* would receive an Oscar for best writing. While an MGM studio film, so not wholly of Lang's on conceptual ignition, it still featured the prominent thematic lynchpin of a Lang film, a troubled main character, the irrational fervor of mob violence and the destruction of one's self through one's own actions.

Lang would go on to direct a string of westerns, film noirs and post World War Two spy films during his 30-year stint in Hollywood. While none of them had the artistic purity of his earlier, German films, he always managed to infuse a little of both this visual and thematic styles into these films. Hollywood didn't agree too much with Lang as the eternal fight for creative control was often exhausting. This led to Lang being involved in a lot of projects that iconoclast elements of the American lifestyle and expose their unseemly underbelly. Taking on the free press, the American judicial system and, of course, the mob mentality. Nevertheless, while in the studio system he churned out some influential pieces of cinema, most notably in the noir genre with films such as *The Big Heat*, *Clash by Night*, *Human Desire* and *The Blue Gardenia*.<sup>6</sup>

Fritz Lang ended his career where he had begun it, in Germany. The last film directed by Lang was, fittingly, *The Thousand Eyes of Dr. Mabuse*, the final film in his *'Mabuse'* trilogy. While much of Lang's work isn't readily spoken about, the mark of his work is undoubtedly infused into the world of cinema for generations. The arch-villain in any Bond film wouldn't be the same without Dr. Mabuse as a template, or the hunt for a serial killer without the influence of Lang's *M*. His mark on cinema, lives on in the directors influenced by a undying criticisms of society at large and his visual style of using the set as an extra character.

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