M-1931: Where Fritz Lang bares the soul and psychology of the child-killer.

This is, unequivocally, a psychological thriller that all films buffs *must* see. I've now seen it three times, but I'm certain to see it again.

The fictional character of Hans Beckert (Peter Lorre) is based upon a real-life serial killer who stalked the streets of Dusseldorf. Fritz Lang, the director, had read an article about that killer and constructed this thrilling story that relates how Beckert is finally brought to justice.

The film opens with a sequence that establishes the latest disappearance of a small girl, Elsie Beckmann (Inge Landgut), with her mother (Ellen Widmann) waiting and waiting, and finally calling anxiously for Elsie from her apartment window, set high in the lower-class tenement block. The expected hue and cry ensues at yet another ghastly murder; the citizens are again outraged that the murderer is still loose; the police are stumped for clues; and, most importantly, the well-connected criminal bosses in the city are angry – because the police step up raids across the city trying to find the killer and, in that process, prevent them from continuing their criminal activities. So, they decide to find the murderer themselves and get rid of him…

And, to compound the dramatic irony, Lang has the police launch a massive manhunt, across the country, for all men with a history of mental illness. As a result of that search, the file on Beckert turns up, and so the police set up a stake-out at his apartment when clues there substantiate their suspicions.

Hence, both sides of the law are frantically trying to find Beckert, but for very different reasons. The question is: who will get to him first?

The narrative then moves on to where Beckert is currying favor with his next little victim, when he is spotted by one of the city's criminal low-life, who then follows him around to make sure it's the killer he's found. Satisfied, the man cleverly marks Beckert on his overcoat, with a large, white M, and then runs off to raise the alarm and get help from the rest of the gang.

Thereafter, it's a three-way race: Beckert finds the mark on his back and runs to ground, to hide in a large office block, but not before the criminals see him enter the building; the criminal gangs then assemble a large force that breaks into that block after hours to find him; and the police, alerted by a tripped alarm from the office block, finally rush over to find only one criminal still there, ironically forgotten by his friends.

The sequence in the office block, with Beckert trying to stay hidden, while the searchers get closer with each passing minute, is one of the most suspenseful – and quasi-comedic – actions ever put to film. Years later, Ray Milland appeared in The Big Clock (1948) with a very similar setting which, in turn, was remade with Kevin Costner and Gene Hackman in No Way Out (1987) – and both of which I'm sure owe much to Lang's superior effort with M.

It’s a great visual story (reason enough to see it, in my opinion), but it’s also Germany’s first talking film. And, to say anymore about the narrative would spoil it, if you haven’t seen it yet.

What’s equally great is Lang’s filming and direction, using light/dark; high and low angle shots; shot-reverse shot; voice-over narration that matched remote action (a first in cinema); and sequences that tell a story with no words; and all with the consummate originality and skill of a master practitioner. Little wonder that this film constantly ranks within the top 100 of all time.

Special mention must also be given to Peter Lorre, an actor unknown to Hollywood at the time of release. His portrayal of a child-killer is flawless. For the first hour, he hardly says a word, his looks and actions doing more than enough to show his character. Only after he is trapped in the office block does he break his silence, and with devastating effect. Lang then does the unthinkable, almost: he shows Beckert’s psychology and vulnerability, with exquisite irony, to the extent that the viewer begins to feel sympathy for the worst of the worst. It’s an unforgettable narrative achievement. (In contrast, who has ever felt any real sympathy for Norman Bates, the psychopath from Psycho [1960]?)

Interestingly, when Lorre did get to Hollywood, he appeared in a film called The Stranger on the third floor (1940), in which he again played the part of a psychopathic killer, this time of women. And, of course, who can forget his droll portrayal as Dr Herman Feinstein in Arsenic and Old Lace (1944)?

The rest of the cast for M is more than adequate; in fact, I understand that Lang actually used a number of real criminals during shots of the criminal gangs, and especially during the final act. I was particularly taken with the boss of the criminal gangs, Schränker (Gustaf Grundgens) and the two main policemen of this story, Inspectors Lohmann and Groeber (Otto Wernicke and Theodor Loos, respectively).

Some reviewers exhibit frustration with what appears to be an ambiguous end. Considering the times, however, I think there’s little doubt about the outcome. You’ll have to make your own assessment, obviously.

Highest recommendation for all. Rating: 9

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