The 51st Berlinale: Part 6

Berlin retrospective devoted to the films of Fritz Lang

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"I wonder what kind of films I would make today if I were able.... With the world the way it is, I think they would be very critical—very aggressive"—Fritz Lang in his last year.

Without a doubt, one of the highlights of the 51st Berlin Film Festival was a full retrospective of the work of the Austrian born director Fritz Lang. As well as featuring virtually all of his over 40 films, spanning a working life in cinema of over 40 years, the festival featured an exhibition devoted to his work as well as the showing for the first time of a reconstructed version of his film *Metropolis*. Following years of work in archives all over the world film enthusiasts were able to assemble a version of the film corresponding to the original length of the film (4189 metres) at its Berlin premiere in 1927. The restored version was shown in Berlin with accompaniment to the silent film by the Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra.

Gathered together in one place, Lang's entire oeuvre is an astonishing collection. As writer and director it is clear from today's perspective that he was a pioneer in dealing with themes which are staples of modern cinema: psychological thrillers (*M*, 1931), political spy thrillers (*The Ministry of Fear*, 1944), science fiction fantasy (*Frau im Mond-Woman in the Moon*, 1929), crime adventures (*The Big Heat*, 1953), westerns (*Rancho Notorious*, 1952), as well as films with a powerful social message (*Fury*, 1936, *You Only Live Once*, 1937). The initial reaction upon reviewing Lang's collected work is somewhat like a Max Ernst art exhibition—one has the impression one is not dealing with a single artist, but with a school or maybe a number of schools of art or film.

A review of Lang's work is complicated by the reception of his work in the countries where he was born and began making film—Austria and Germany. Following his move to Hollywood (after a short stay in France) as a consequence of the fascists taking of power, Lang's reputation suffered in Germany, where he had begun making films after the First World War. Regarded as a renegade by the Nazis, German critics after the war often dismissed the work he did in America as mere Hollywood fodder. As a result his over 20 years of work in America and earlier work in Germany were largely ignored in the country where he helped revolutionise cinema. In a talk during the festival on the work of Fritz Lang, one of his firmest fans in Germany, director Volker Schlöndorff, revealed that he only got to see the early German work of Lang when he went to Paris as a young man. At the beginning of the '60s Lang was enthusiastically taken up by French New Wave directors—in particular Jean-Luc Godard.

A comprehensive review of Lang's film work is impossible within the space of a review. I prefer to give a brief sketch of Lang's career and then concentrate on Lang's passage from Germany to Hollywood and in particular three films—*M*, *Fury*, *You Only Live Once*, all made in the 1930s—which must rank among the best work he ever did.

Fritz Lang was born in Vienna in 1890. His father was an architect. As a young man Lang was initially drawn to the world of art and literature. Following his father's wishes he begun studying architecture, but then broke off his studies to enrol instead at art academies in Vienna, then Munich. He was attracted to the artistic work of his contemporaries Gustav Klimt and especially Egon Schiele, assembling in the course of his life a valuable collection of the latter's work. The teenage Lang enjoyed circulating in the Bohemian artistic and intellectual circles in Vienna, Paris and Berlin and was attracted by the vitality of pre-war cabaret. He saw the first popular silent films as a young man in Vienna, but it was only in the course of his pre-war travels in Europe that he really became attracted to the new media. Upon seeing a projected film in Belgium he noted to a companion: "You also could paint using a camera."

He read widely—German philosophy and literature, Shakespeare as well as the paperback versions of cowboy and adventure stories of the immensely popular German author Karl May. Injured in the course of military service in the First World War, Lang took to wearing his trademark monocle eyepiece. Later in Hollywood he was advised by American friends to replace the monocle with glasses for job interviews. Lang plus monocle looked too much like the archetypal intimidating Prussian aristocrat.

Lang had his first chance to make films shortly after the war in Berlin. As one enters the current Berlin exhibition devoted to his work a statement of Fritz Lang stands out in bold text. His comment dates from the beginning of 1919 at the time of the ill-fated *Spartacist* uprising in Berlin: "My car was repeatedly stopped on the way to the studio by armed rebels, but it would have taken more than a revolution to stop me from directing for the first time." In a series of interviews in later life Lang acknowledged that he only developed a real interest in politics after the coming to power of Hitler. Nevertheless, it was impossible for any artist or intellectual to remain indifferent to the prolonged social turmoil which characterised the German Wiemar Republic between the two World Wars.

Employing his artistic background Lang made in the course of the 1920s some of the most extraordinary German silent films. The influence of expressionism and in particular Gustav Klimt was detectable in his film portrayal of the classic German mythological tale *Die Niebelungen* of 1924, just as the influence of the Bauhaus school permeated the sets and architecture of *Metropolis*.* His work in the 1920s and 1930s was carried out in the closest collaboration with a co-worker and scriptwriter who later became his wife, Thea von Harbou. Their relationship came to an end at the beginning of the 1930s when von Harbou threw in her lot with the Nazis.

In 1931 Lang made the psychological thriller *M*, a film which was one of his personal favourites and which more than holds its own today as an enthralling study of crime and the society which gives rise to it. In many

respects the film represented an attempt to investigate new territory for Lang. His artistic eye is ever-present in the precise framing of shots and his continuos attempts to overcome the unwieldiness of the cameras of that time, but *M* marks a decisive turn by Lang to social issues. The film deals with a child molester and murderer, Franz Becker, powerfully portrayed by Peter Lorre. A city, presumably Berlin, suffers a series of child abductions and murders. The hunt is on for the perpetrator. Lang delves into the sphere of mass psychology. A worthy Berlin citizen is seen in a street scene asking a young girl a harmless question. In the space of minutes he is surrounded by a mob who believe they have found the murderer. The citizen is lucky to escape with his life.

Police attempts to track down the criminal prove useless. The city's organised crime decides to find the man—after all, the hysteria in the streets and arbitrary police raids are bad for business. Crime lord Schraenker (played by German actor Gustav Gründgens [years later the model for Klaus Mann's *Mephisto*]) decides to mobilise his city-wide gang of beggars to find the culprit. In a final showdown Becker is cornered and put on trial by a mass gathering of Berlin's underworld—criminals, beggars and the socially destitute, including some of the mothers of child victims of Becker. They have little sympathy for the psychopath, but nevertheless they appoint him a defence attorney who argues that Becker is sick “and a sick man should not be handed over to the executioner, but to the doctor.”

Becker is also allowed to argue his own defence and in a passionate speech gives vent to the sublimated drives which determined his actions. In the closing scene a mother warns, “We should look after our children more.” The implication of her remark is that it is not only necessary to protect young children against the danger of molesters, but also that education and care are the only proper means to prevent the psychological derangements which plagued and determined the behaviour of Becker.

Upon release, *M* provoked a stormy reaction from the critics *The London Saturday Review* wrote: “It is questionable whether this brutally realistic film is desirable ... and it is even more doubtful whether the picture theatre is the proper place for propaganda against the abolition of capital punishment.” After the film opened in America *The New Republic* wrote: “The film is one which deserves to rank with the very best things which came out of Germany ... it is a picture which I do not believe could under any circumstances have been made in Hollywood—indeed, any American director who suggested such a thing would probably find his own sanity suspected.”

Conceived and carried out at the turn of the '30s, *M* was a powerful confirmation of the potential for the new sphere of “talking pictures” to tackle complex psychological and social themes.

Following the success of *Die Niebelungen, Metropolis and M*,* Fritz Lang was widely regarded as Germany's leading director. In 1933 and following Hitler's accession to power, Lang was given an audience by the Nazi propaganda minister Josef Goebbels who offered him the job as head of an agency, yet to be created, supervising film production for the Third Reich. Lang biographers recall that the director often referred to this discussion in later life and liked to embroider some of the details. Nevertheless there is little doubt that the meeting and offer did take place and an extremely nervous Lang attempted to leave the meeting as soon as possible. Lang had not the least intention of serving under the Nazis and made plans to leave Germany post-haste. As mentioned above he left behind his wife Thea who was firmly attracted to the ideology of National Socialism and pursued her film career with moderate success under the Nazis.

Following a brief stay in France Lang arrived in America. He had a reputation in Germany as an autocratic filmmaker who intervened in virtually every stage in the making of his films. In America Lang was forced to radically adapt his way of working to the Hollywood studios. At the same time from the beginning of his long exile he made every attempt to acquaint himself with American morals and the way of life. Fellow exiles Klaus and Erika Mann wrote the following about Lang in their *Escape to Life, German Culture in Exile* 1939:

“In Hollywood he has passed through a spiritual development which has made him one of the most interesting and versatile figures in American Film. The qualities for which he was already famous—great technical skill, fine imaginative gifts—are being enriched by others. Fritz Lang is beginning to be interested in human destinies and social problems, in the inward processes of his characters. Once the subjects of his films were a flight to the moon, or a mechanised metropolis; today he is preoccupied with the problems of human beings in their life together, with error, guilt, justice, progress.”

The Manns are perhaps exaggerating somewhat when they refer to the reforming spiritual qualities of Hollywood, but there was no denying that the American film industry in the 1930s was an enormous reservoir of talent which had benefited greatly from a wave of exiles that included some of the most talented European artists. In his first American film, *Fury*, Lang returned to a number of the themes of *M*.

M and *Fury* represented not only a change of subject for Lang, but also a switch of priorities in his film aesthetic. Instead of the stylishness of his earlier German films, Lang told his cameraman for *Fury*: “I don't want fancy photography—nothing artistic—I want newsreel photography.” In his later American films Lang pleaded for an almost documentary manner of shooting which focussed the audience's attention on the film characters.

Fury deals with an ordinary working man, Joe Wilson, played by Spencer Tracy, who is accused of kidnapping a young girl and locked up by the police of a small Illinois town. The only evidence that links him to the crime are peanuts found in his pocket. Peanuts are also found at the scene of the crime. Despite the flimsiness of the evidence against him, town inhabitants are whipped into a mob frenzy by a man who acknowledges that he is a strike-breaker. The mob burn the jail down and it is presumed that Wilson has died in the blaze. Twenty-two ringleaders of the mob are put on trial and convicted of Joe's murder. During the trial the prosecuting attorney reminds the court that lynch justice had claimed the lives of 6,000 people in America in the past 50 years. (Lang was not permitted by the studio to make the film about a black victim of a lynch-mob, as he had intended.)

In fact, Joe has survived the blaze and hidden himself away, intent on revenge. As the guilty sentences are announced, Joe, responding to pangs of conscience, strides into court to demonstrate he is still alive and lift the burden of guilt from the convicted. In his courtroom speech Joe declares: “The law doesn't know that a lot of things that were very important to me, silly things like a belief in justice, and an idea that men were civilised, and a feeling of pride that this country of mine was different from all the others—the law doesn't know that these things were burned to death within me that night.”

In the final scene Joe is reunited and kisses his sweetheart. Lang always disliked the scene which was imposed on the film at the insistence of the production chiefs. The dispute with the studio bosses over the *Fury* kiss was only one of many which was to plague Lang's relations with the Hollywood establishment.**

As *Fury* circulated in the cinemas, Lang was already working on his next project. *You Only Live Once* once again took up the themes of revenge and the twists of fate that can distort or destroy human lives and careers. Some of the themes of Lang's film were later taken up by Nicholas Ray in *They Live by Night*, Arthur Penn in *Bonnie and Clyde* and Robert Altman in *Thieves Like Us*.

Eddie Taylor (Henry Fonda) is a young petty criminal, trying to go straight but frustrated at every turn by a society which refuses to show mercy to a former wrongdoer. Taylor is planning a new life with his wife Jo when he is wrongly convicted for a bank raid which ends in murder. Taylor sits on death row and awaits the electric chair. Jo and her employer, an attorney who vigorously opposes the death penalty, do all

they can to win a reprieve for Taylor.

In the course of making an escape from prison Taylor shoots the prison chaplain. Now he is a genuine fugitive from justice. He meets up with his wife and together they begin a hair-raising flight from the police. Their faces are splashed across the media and overnight the couple are made responsible for every crime carried out in all the states they pass through. Lang had more control over the final scenes of *You Only Live Once*, which ends with the pair being gunned by the police. Riddled with bullets, they embrace for the last time. Some of the details in the film strain belief and tilt over into melodrama. At one point during their flight Jo gives birth to the couple's baby, which is then handed over to Jo's boss. The mother, who has been living for days or weeks in the car on the run, is fine and the baby is well. As a whole, however, the film establishes the ominous dark atmosphere of American society in the period of the Great Depression—a vindictive society that is unwilling to forgive a poor man for his mistakes..

Following public and critical acclaim for *Fury* and *You Only Live Once*, Lang was in demand and was able to turn his attention to a number of films which took up the theme of Nazism—*Man Hunt*, 1941, *Hangmen Also Die!*, 1943 (based on the assassination of Austrian Nazi gauleiter Heydrich—Lang worked on the script and music with Bertolt Brecht and Hans Eisler) and *The Ministry of Fear*, 1944.

Despite the success of *Fury* and *You Only Live Once*, Lang, along with many other refugees from Hitler, became himself the victim of a state-organised witch-hunt. Politically, Lang aligned himself with the New Deal of the Roosevelt wing of the Democratic Party, but he made no secret of his friendship with sympathisers and members of the Communist Party such as refugees Brecht and Eisler. In 1940, together with such prominent actors as Fredric March, James Cagney and Humphrey Bogart, Fritz Lang was one of a small number of foreign directors accused by a grand jury in Los Angeles of “advancing the ‘Red' cause in the American Film industry”. In 1952 Lang was once again regarded as suspect as the post anticommunist witch-hunt intensified with the founding of the House Committee on Un-American Activities .

There is no doubt that Lang suffered at the hands of the Hollywood studio system. On occasion, eager for work, he took up a number badly prepared projects, was forced to sacrifice autonomy to omnipotent producers and made a number of disappointing films. But on those occasions where he was able to assemble the right team of co-workers and free himself to some extent from the obtrusive influence of producers, Lang managed to produce some of the most interesting American productions of the '40s and '50s. (*The Woman in the Window*, 1944; *Scarlet Street*, 1945; *The Big Heat*, 1953; *While the City Sleeps*, 1956). More and more disturbed by the restrictions of an increasingly commercialised and star-oriented Hollywood system, Lang returned to Europe in 1958 to work on his last film projects, *The Tiger of Eschnapur*, 1959, and a remake of his silent classic about the machinations of the megalomaniac *Dr. Mabuse* (this time with the title *The Thousand Eyes of Dr. Mabuse*) in 1961.

Profoundly rooted humanist ideals permeated the life and work of Lang to the very last. In 1974, just two years before his death, Lang received an award for his life's work and stated to his audience: “All of my German films and the best of my American ones deal with fate. I don't believe in fate anymore. Everyone makes fate for himself. You can accept it, you can reject it and go on. There is no mysterious something, no God who imposes fate on you ... you make the fate yourself.”

The principles which always characterised his work—a love and concern for humanity, an enormous curiosity to explore the complexity of the individual and the society in which they live, his struggle to make honest, intelligent and provocative films, his readiness to strike out on new paths in terms of thematic material—all of these qualities are sadly lacking in much of modern cinema-making.

Despite the fact that he spent much of his life in the company of the rich and spoiled in Hollywood he was never indifferent to the plight of broad masses of people. Having lived through the most dramatic experiences of the twentieth century there is not the least trace of complacency in the older Lang, plagued in his last years by ill-health and near blindness. There was still fire in his belly. On the occasion of his last birthday, December 5, 1976, Lang reflected: “I wonder what kind of films I would make today if I were able.... With the world the way it is, I think they would be very critical—very aggressive.”

Notes:

***** Both Goebbels and Hitler expressed their enthusiasm for *Die Niebelungen* although the second part of *Die Niebelungen* was banned by the Nazis for being too “pessimistic”. Both men also enjoyed *Metropolis*, Set in a high tech city of the future the film deals with the extreme forms of exploitation found in capitalist society, but ends on a note of harmony (the capitalist shakes hands with the leader of the worker's revolt), which was entirely in accord with the fascist corporatist outlook. Lang himself expressed his own reservations about the film which was co-scripted by Thea von Harbou. In 1965 Lang made the following comment on the film: “I have often said that I don't like Metropolis and that is because I cannot accept the leitmotiv of the message of the film. It is absurd to say that the heart is the mediator between the hands and the head, that is to say, of course, between employee and employer. The problem is social, not moral.” *Cahiers de Cinema” 1965*

****** Lang had a reputation in film circles for being a hard taskmaster. His actors in particular decried the director's apparent fastidiousness. Actor Peter Lorre complained bitterly about the dozen times he had to tumble down steps as Lang attempted to get a closing scene exactly right in *M*. Lang was in fact a meticulous worker who occupied himself with numerous aspects of his films—script, production, scenery, architecture. A showcase at the Berlin exhibition of his work features meticulously detailed diagrams for scenes all worked out personally by Lang for his film *Man Hunt*.