



M is an April, 2016 LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library. Below is Kino Ken's review of the Criterion release of that film on dvd.

15 of a possible 20 points

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**Weimar Republic 1931 black-and-white 111 minutes (Criterion restored release) subtitled part silent / part sound feature drama Nero Film AG
Producer (uncredited): Seymour Nebenzal**

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

(j) designates a juvenile performer

Points:

- 1 Direction: Fritz Lang**
- 1 Editing: Paul Falkenberg**
- 2 Cinematography: Fritz Arno Wagner***
Still Photography: Hort von Harbou*
- 2 Lighting**
- 0 Screenplay: Thea von Harbou, Fritz Lang, Egon Jacobson**
- 2 Music (non-original): Edvard Grieg "In the Hall of the Mountain King"
from PEER GYNT Suite No. 1, Opus 46 (1876)**
- 2 Art Direction: Emil Hasler* and Karl Vollbrecht***
Set Design: Edgar Ulmer*
Makeup: Wilhelm Weber
- 2 Sound: Paul Falkenberg* and Adolf Jansen***
- 1 Acting**
- 2 Creativity**

15 total points

Cast: Peter Lorre* (Hans Beckert), Ellen Widmann (Frau Beckmann, mother of Elsie), Inge Landgut (j)* (Elsie Beckmann), Otto Wernicke (Inspector Karl Lohmann), Theodor Loos (Inspector Groeber), Gustaf Gründgens (Schränker), Friedrich Gnaß (Franz), Fritz Odemar (Card Shark), Paul Kemp (Pickpocket with Six Watches), Theo Lingen (Bauernfänger), Rudolf Blümner* (Beckert's defender), Georg John (Blind Panhandler), Franz Stein (Minister), Ernst Stahl-Nachbaur (Police Chief), Gerhard Bienert (Criminal Secretary), Karl Platen (Damowitz), Rosa Valetti* (Bartender), Hertha von Walther (Prostitute), Carl Balhaus (Man Who Marks Hans Beckert), Klaus Pohl (Witness / One-Eyed Man), others

An early sound drama from Germany most notable for its striking, sporadic use of sound and superb sets, M has dated rather badly. Though German film historians regard it as the finest of all German films, it ranks a somewhat humbler Number Fourteen in quality among films shot in that nation screened to date by this reviewer.

TOP 20 GERMAN FILMS SCREENED TO DATE BY KINO KEN IN RANK ORDER

- 1. BERLIN: SYMPHONY OF A GREAT CITY** silent feature Supervising Editor: Walther Ruttmann
- 2. DIE BRÜCKE (THE BRIDGE)** sound feature drama Director: Bernhard Wicki
- 3. THE WANNSEE CONFERENCE** sound feature docudrama Director: Heinz Schirk
- 4. THE ADVENTURES OF PRINCE ACHMED** silent feature animation Director: Carl Koch
- 5. METROPOLIS** silent feature science fiction drama Director: Fritz Lang
- 6. GERMANY YEAR ZERO** sound feature drama with interiors shot mainly in Italy Director: Roberto Rossellini
- 7. JUDGMENT AT NUREMBERG** sound feature drama Director: Stanley Kramer
- 8. THE LAST LAUGH** silent feature drama Director: Friedrich Murnau
- 9. THE MURDERERS ARE AMONG US** sound feature drama Director: Wolfgang Staudte
- 10. SOMEWHERE IN BERLIN** sound feature drama Director: Gerhard Lamprecht
- 11. ASPHALT** silent feature crime drama Director: Joe May
- 12. ANNA BOLEYN** silent feature costume seriocomedy Director:

Ernst Lubitsch

- 13. KAMERADSCHAFT (COMRADESHIP) sound feature drama Director: Georg Pabst**
- 14. M part silent, part sound feature drama Director: Fritz Lang**
- 15. NOSFERATU silent feature horror drama Director: Friedrich Murnau**
- 16. ÜBERFALL (ACCIDENT) silent short crime drama Director: Ernö Metzner**
- 17. FAUST silent feature horror drama Director: Friedrich Murnau**
- 18. THE NINTH DAY sound feature drama Director: Volker Schlöndorff**
- 19. ROSENSTRASSE sound feature drama Director: Margarethe Von Trotta**
- 20. EFFI BRIEST sound feature drama Director: Rainer Werner Fassbender**

Here director Lang, heavily influenced at the time by Bertolt Brecht's **THE THREEPENNY OPERA** and Georg Pabst's film version of it, tried his hand at elevating the Berlin underworld to star status. Fusing a current news item, the horrific crime spree of Peter Kürten in the Düsseldorf area, with various urban criminal lowlifes, he created a film centered on a psychopathic child molester and killer whose random murders and mutilations lead to constant police identification sweeps. Choosing to set his tale in the larger metropolis of Berlin, Lang cast Peter Lorre as an obsessive murderer whose darkest fantasies are represented sonically by whistlings of Edvard Grieg's melody signifying trolls in the Henrik Ibsen play **PEER GYNT**. Listeners are prodded to identify Lorre's Hans Beckert with Peer, whose troll host's children bite and drive him to distraction in the Dovrefell.

At the opening of the film, a ring of children is playing some kind of elimination game. Its lyrics refer to the crimes of a child murderer still at large. Overhearing those ghastly words from an apartment above, a laundress orders the leader to stop singing such a horrible song. There is a brief silence. Then the chanter resumes her ditty in defiance of adult command.

Viewers should note the director's abysmal supervision of that scene, for the children's actions make no sense whatsoever. Watch the girl in the middle count the same child out twice as another participant turns to gaze first backwards, then to a playmate waiting to be tallied. He never once glances at the singer. Though physically present, this clueless youngster is mentally a thousand miles away. Another child gets exited in the next round but steps right back in again, throwing off the count and sabotaging any order the game might have had. Lang's attempt at realistic depiction of childhood street games is a complete failure.

Film credibility starts to recover when a small schoolgirl named Elsie Beckmann, played with wonderful single-mindedness by Inge Landgut, leaves school at noon, backpack and rubber ball her only companions. Distracted by farewells to departing friends, she starts to run out heedlessly into the street. A car horn honks. Fortunately, one protective patrolman stationed at Elsie's public school grabs her arm and pulls the child back to safety on the sidewalk. Fazed only momentarily, the girl is soon on her carefree way again, skillfully bouncing a multicolored rubber ball on the pavement, oblivious to everything else, including a poster warning readers, which this girl blatantly is not, that a serial child murderer is still operative. As her ball bounces against that placard, a shadow looms over those words, giving viewers their initial look at the silhouette of Hans Beckert. His face remains in shadow while Grieg's melody makes its film debut in whistled form. This will become the cue announcing a murderer about to strike, a kind of leitmotif for Beckert.

He determines the girl is alone, impractically fearless, polite, quite willing to let a stranger buy her a balloon from a blind street vendor. A succession of quick silent shots follow. Elsie's ball rolls to a stop in grass with no chaser in sight. Her balloon snags for a moment in telephone wires. Then it breaks free and continues travelling skyward. Frau Beckmann calls out her daughter's name repeatedly. There is no response, just scenes of a courtyard without human presence, empty sidewalk, a stairwell devoid of climbers. Hans has struck again, baffling police, parents, and unwary children.

Back home in a rented apartment, Beckert writes a postcard to one of Berlin's newspapers, taunting authorities to identify and locate him before his next crime. This item eventually comes into the possession of Inspector Karl Lohmann, head of the city's homicide squad, who sends it to a laboratory for closer analysis. What follows is a fairly lengthy series of shots focusing on then contemporary fingerprint investigation and handwriting analysis. Neither scientific method gets the police any closer to determining the identity of Berlin's child predator.

Meanwhile, the city is in a hubbub of mob vengeance and groundless accusations. Witnesses claiming to have observed child victims or likely perpetrators of attempted seductions differ, often violently, in testimonies offered the police. Contradictions abound. Publicity seekers seize opportunities to obtain fleeting popular attention by making unsubstantiated claims about knowledge of the mysterious killer. Law enforcement vainly raids nightclubs, rounds up clusters of prostitutes, arrests dozens of citizens lacking official papers. None of this frantic activity leads to even a probable

suspect. Foot-by-foot searches of crime scenes are just as unfruitful. Even canine pursuers are stumped, unable to find adequate scent leads.

However, with boulevards, train stations, hotels, beer halls, and omnibuses overrun by uniformed guardians of the law, Berlin's criminal element finds itself unable to conduct business as usual. Numbers of nonviolent crime incidents drop dangerously. Key operatives are arrested every day and night. Profits sink to discouraging lows. How will respectable criminals earn a living? This fiendish coward preying on Berlin's children is curtailing more lawbreaking activity than the police.

Ruling over all five departments of a unified crime conglomerate is a single individual known as "Safecracker" for obvious reasons. He is a triple murderer himself, yet utterly merciless in ordering the capture of whomever is responsible for Berlin's string of unsolved child killings. Just how this can be accomplished isn't clear. Not at first.

Just as frustrated are officers of the law. Hundreds of criminal arrests have not led to leads, informers, or removal of the desired target from free access to city streets and school-age pedestrians. The hunt goes on, and on, and on. It appears unending.

Gangsters hit on the notion of using Berlin's beggars as scouts and reporters. Why not? Panhandlers were already positioned throughout the city. Everyone was accustomed to seeing them hawk toys and trinkets for small change. They could interact freely with children and adults without attracting undue notice.

At about the same time, search of records documenting recent releases from state institutions of psychologically troubled patients revealed potential candidates for the mysterious killer. The paper trail leads one investigator to a deaf landlady whose renters include Mr. Beckert. Search of his apartment unearths a written postcard and cigarette wrappers which will eventually prove Hans's undoing.

Not even beginning to suspect public security officials and mobsters are separately taking steps to permanently retire him, Hans visits a small café. On the way there, he is obsessively enticed by a young girl alone nearby. Her reflection in a store window catches his eyes. A parent unwittingly rescues the potential victim, arriving at a propitious moment before Beckert can begin a seduction. So Hans settles instead for two cognacs, hoping to steel himself for future lurings. Necessary equipment: a trinket, apple, or balloon acquired readily and cheaply around town.

But victims are harder to locate than in the past. There are so many volunteer watchful guardians who must be avoided.

Yet he still manages to find another girl traveling solo, courteous, trusting, sufficiently tempted by fruit to strike up conversation with an unknown elder. This time Beckert makes several purchases for his prey before disclosing their purpose. These include a balloon obtained from the same man who sold him one earlier for Elsie. This time, the seller recognizes a familiar tune Beckert is whistling. He correctly connects it with the fellow who walked off with a little schoolgirl previously after buying a gift from him.

The trap starts to close. Will it do so before another unsuspecting child is deprived of life?

Occasional shots of actual city locations, not all of them taken in Berlin, are interspersed with sets faithfully reproducing urban architecture of the period. These detailed reconstructions were supervised and designed by Edgar Ulmer, who would later direct such American films as DETOUR, THE BLACK CAT, and STRANGE ILLUSION. Though most Hollywood films of this period utilized built sets with flagrantly artificial appearances, this is not the case with M. Differences between location photography and studio camerawork are much harder to detect in it, a tribute to greater attention paid details in the German film.

Annoying to today's screeners are M's arbitrary interjections of silent sequences between sound passages and vice versa. With no clear logical basis, these interruptions are jarringly violent contrasts. Why should police arrive silently in red light districts, then engage in noisy debate with inmates? What reason exists for Beckert to whistle as he writes a mocking challenge on a card? When officers invade the Crocodile Club, its patrons berate them. Similar entry into an abandoned distillery later only generates profound silence from occupants. The goal seems to be dramatic contrast. It is achieved through less than credible distortion of sound recording, with application of mutes being matched at times by jumpy accelerations of movement resembling silent film projected incorrectly at faster sound speeds. Lang was experiencing considerable difficulty deciding whether he wanted to make a sound film with silent interludes or a silent film with sound interruptions. The mix he finally resolved to employ does not fully satisfy aesthetic requirements of either sound or silent format. Its hybrid nature is as odd as overemphatic gesticulations and muggings of cast members who all too often resort to silent histrionics undermining what ought to be soberly delivered dialogue. Key lines, such as those which finish off the film, are spoken with an uninflected colorlessness rendering them more sermons than summations.

Lively variations in camera angles and point of view shots partially compensate for glaring deficiencies in acting and narrative construction. *M* lacks character development, a protagonist, and resolution, three key elements essential for coherent storytelling. No one changes or shows signs of growth in knowledge or understanding. Heroes are absent, a bow to Brecht's philosophy that only weak societies have need of them. A Nazi propensity to override due process in favor of rampant emotionalism is clearly on display. Since Lang chose not to inform viewers of any verdict climaxing Beckert's trial, they must infer the director had no interest in either supporting or challenging the death penalty. Indeed, the final outcome of Hans's case is left unstated, leaving each individual to apply his or her own sentence. The presumptive moral of *M*, that Germans must watch their children more carefully, was a prescription taken to heart by Hitler and his henchmen. They were more than happy to assume watchguard duties over youth in place of "negligent" parents.

Production design is exemplary, particularly with regard to use and placement of props and integration of sets with exterior location photographs. Sound recording and lighting are arresting, expertly engineered and memorably executed. Certain performances emerge victoriously from a general swamp of stereotypes and grotesquely exaggerated makeup. Particularly praiseworthy are Peter Lorre's self-incriminating apologies, Rosa Valetti's belligerently earthy banter with a police sergeant, and Inge Landgut's blithely irresponsible Elsie Beckmann.

Not quite on the same commanding level as his earlier *METROPOLIS*, *M* nonetheless was an important step forward in authenticating use of sound to advance drama and reinforce ambience. Due to sordid thematic material used, *M* is suitable viewing only for adults.

Criterion's double disc dvd release includes as bonuses a thirty-two page booklet featuring an essay by astute film critic Stanley Kauffmann, several newspaper articles from the time of *M*'s release, and script for a scene not currently found in theatrical prints of the film. There is also a fifty-minute interview of Lang by director William Friedkin, Claude Chabrol's short homage film *M LE MAUDIT (MR. DEMON)*, an interview with Chabrol about Lang's nearly inimitable editing techniques, a stills gallery, classroom tape excerpts of Paul Falkenberg's comments about making the film, and an interview with the son of *M*'s producer.

Thanks as usual to IMDB for credits information, and also to the same source for visitor comments about the film, including the intriguing fact that

actress Inge Landgut would go on to become Germany's equivalent of America's Shirley Temple and the German voice of Wilma Flintstone.