FRITZ LANG AND THE FILM NOIR

By Barry Lyons

The film noir is a predominantly American genre which combines elements of the thriller and the gangster movie. These tightly plotted, fast-paced films generally are set in the shadowy night world of our large urban centers — a milieu saturated with violence, anxiety, and corruption. Fate often plays an important role in the melodramatic plots of the film noir, the protagonists (who are often cops as well as gangsters) are predestined to defeat and humiliation. Such American classics as John Huston’s THE MALTESE FALCON and THE ASPHALT JUNGLE are in the film noir tradition, in addition to Howard Hawks’ SCARFACE and THE BIG SLEEP, Nicholas Ray’s THEY LIVE BY NIGHT, Alfred Hitchcock’s THE WRONG MAN and Orson Welles’ TOUCH OF EVIL. The acknowledged master of the genre, however, is the Austro-American director, Fritz Lang, who has produced a long string of distinguished movies in this form: FURY, YOU ONLY LIVE ONCE, HANGMEN ALSO DIE, MINISTRY OF FEAR, SCARLET STREET, CLASH BY NIGHT, and THE BIG HEAT, among others.

Fritz Lang would be interesting as a director if for no reason other than the fact that he has been involved with movies for such a long time. He began his cinematic career by writing a screenplay (PEITSCHE) back in 1916, and continued to be active in film making up until 1963, when he appeared as himself in Jean-Luc Godard’s LE MEPRIS (CONTEMPT). Encompassed in this period would be the emergence of the silent film as an accepted art form; the work of Pudovkin and Eisenstein on editing and montage; the introduction of sound, color and widescreen. Politically, the period covers the aftermath of World War I, the rise of totalitarianism, the second World War, and the beginning of the Atomic Age.

It would be interesting to look at the films of any competent hack, just to see the effects of the technical and social changes that occurred during this period on his films. With Lang, however, we are dealing with someone who is a major artist, whose films go beyond mere technical competence. And yet the curious thing about Lang is that, despite all the changes he has lived through and absorbed, his films really haven’t

METROPOLIS (1926), directed by Fritz Lang. The harsh expressionistic contrasts and archetechtonic structures of Lang’s German period were modified somewhat in his later American films, which were necessarily more realistic.
changed much at all. His films from DER MUDE TOD (1921, Lang's first major success) right up through DIE TAUSEND AUGEN DES DR. MABUSE (1960, the last film Lang directed), are marked by a remarkable consistency in terms of themes and style.

Andrew Sarris points out that "METROPOLIS (1927) and MOONFLEET (1955) share the same bleak view of the universe where man grapples with his personal destiny and inevitably loses." Perhaps because of Lang's German heritage and his strong anti-fascist views, his vision of the human condition is rather pessimistic. This is evident in all of his films, be they fantasy (DER MUDE TOD), melodrama (M, FURY, THE BIG HEAT), or even his westerns (RANCHO NOTORIOUS). The inexorableness of fate, the fight against an invisible, impersonal (and usually hostile) destiny; the loss of a man's soul; the hopeless struggle against overwhelming odds — these are the elements of the Langian universe.

Lang was born in Austria in 1890. His father was an architect, and Fritz was originally trained to follow in his father's footsteps. Not digging architecture too much (he wanted to study art and see the world), he wound up leaving home to do just that. But as Paul Jensen points out in The Cinema of Fritz Lang, though Lang rejected architecture as a career, "his contact with that field prepared him for expressionism and its creative use of physical surroundings."

The study of architecture also gave him a sense of functional structure, which often helped him to keep his pictures uncluttered, austere, and fast moving. In many of his films, Lang uses buildings almost as though they were a microcosm of the universe itself. In THE THOUSAND EYES OF DR. MABUSE, for example, the proto-Nazi Dr. Mabuse controls the lives of thousands from his roost in the Luxor Hotel. Through the use of hidden microphones and cameras, he knows everything that goes on in the hotel; and via his underlings, a good deal of what is happening in the outside world as well. With this knowledge, he can exert some control over the environment, leaving little or nothing to chance.

The characters and their environment are carefully structured and laid out in a Fritz Lang movie.
The heart of his films deal with the struggle for mastery of the environment (or destiny), either by one character over his own life (like Henry Fonda in *YOU ONLY LIVE ONCE*), or between a master criminal/mad scientist/political dictator, like Dr. Mabuse.

Certainly Lang's early training in architecture influenced the visual aspects of his films. This is particularly true of his German silent movies, because they were shot entirely on studio-constructed sets. Here, Lang could exercise absolute control over what did and didn't get recorded on film. His grasp of architecture enabled him to construct a semi-stylized world which still resembled the actual outside world in its structural essentials. In most of Lang's films, the presence of rain, fog, and darkness was virtually a signature, and these textural elements could best be photographed in the studio, where they could be controlled.

Some of Lang's most effective scenes achieve their effectiveness largely because of his skill with the visuals. The prison courtyard scene in *YOU ONLY LIVE ONCE*, when Henry Fonda is about to break out, is an excellent example of Lang using more than just the action to get an idea across. We know almost from the start that Fonda is doomed (by fate), but because he was going to be executed for a crime he didn't commit, we sympathize with him. Fonda then shoots the priest who is trying to tell him that his innocence has been established, thus making Fonda actually guilty just as the law had declared his innocence. Lang liked to play around with the idea of the ambiguity of guilt and innocence, just as this is a favorite theme with Alfred Hitchcock.

Visually, this prison scene is magnificent. The indecisive Fonda stands in the prison courtyard with a gun pointed at the doctor: the oppressive fog enshrouds them like a poisonous cloud. High up on the prison walls the warden and the guards are deciding whether or not to open the prison gates and let Fonda loose. They are, in effect, symbols of the coldly calculating fate that has already doomed Fonda, now deciding what will happen to him — whether his struggle is to continue. Destiny in this film is indeed blind, for the entire prison sequence is enveloped in fog—the prison officials don't see the man.
whose destiny they are determining, and Fonda doesn't see the "fates" that are still controlling his life. The fog and the prison officials can be taken to represent the idea of an impersonal destiny, a theme which is seen in so many of Lang's films. Fonda's fight against his destiny is hopeless, but he fights anyway.

Lang has said that he considers this "fight against fate" the most important thing in life. In an interview with Peter Bogdanovich (included in Fritz Lang in America), the director states: "I once wrote in an introduction to a book that the fight is important—not the result of it, but the revolution itself. Sometimes, maybe, with a strong will, you can change fate, but there's no guarantee that you can. If you just sit still, however, and say, 'Well, I cannot do anything'—bang! At least you have to fight against it." This idea is crucial to the prison scene of YOU ONLY LIVE ONCE, and indeed to the whole movie, for the point is not that Fonda has any chance of victory—we know he doesn't—but that he will struggle for his dignity just the same.

The depth that can be found in Lang's films is a tribute to the depth of the man himself. In this sense, although he creates a very ordered world on film, he is, as Jensen notes, somewhat spontaneous. It is this ability to transfer his ideas and personality into a solid, consistent vision that makes his films great, and makes them uniquely Langian. Certainly one would have a hard time mistaking a Fritz Lang film for one by Hitchcock or Huston, who have also worked in the film noir genre.

From his early silents right up until his return to Germany, Lang also showed himself to be a master at using textures and structures to give atmosphere to his films. A scene with a Chinese magician from DER MUDE TOD is given an eerie mood by the starkly knarled and twisted vegetation, while the bleak sand and mountains and the few dim stars lend an atmosphere of vast loneliness and emptiness in many of the scenes from DIE FRAU IM MOND. In YOU ONLY LIVE ONCE, Lang uses many extreme low angle shots, giving the settings an awesome dominance, and an air of almost gothic coldness and oppressiveness. In one scene, Fonda awaits his execution in a small cage in the middle of a room that is bare except for one fat guard. Light filters through the bars, casting some unbelievable shadow patterns on Fonda and the floor—this is truly an isolated man, a picture of a thoroughly defeated individual who still doesn't know when to give up.

Paul Muni in SCARFACE, directed by Howard Hawks. The brilliance of this shot is due in part to the delicately textured lace curtains in contrast with the stark figures and the expressionistic lighting effects.
Humphrey Bogart in *THE MALTESE FALCON*, directed by John Huston. The *film noir* is not a “pure” genre, for its characteristics are shared by other genres as well: the thriller, the detective mystery, the gangster film, the “woman’s film.” A number of these genres reached their greatest popularity in the forties.

Nothing much is ever said about the films Lang made when he returned to Germany in 1951, DAS INDISCHE GRAMBAL, DER TIGER VON ESZNAPUR, and DIE 1000 AUGEN DES DR. MABUSE. The first two are remakes of an old Joe May film which Lang did for strictly commercial reasons. He wanted to show the producer that he still meant dollars in the drawer so that he could again have the artistic freedom he had when he did his masterpiece, *M*. As a result, these later movies seem dull and hollow, people more with a collection of cardboard cutouts than with characters of any depth. DR. MABUSE fares much better, but is still very slow and druggy. However, I would argue with anyone who thinks that films like THE BIG HEAT, MINISTRY OF FEAR, and SCARLET STREET are marks of “an artist’s waning star,” as has been argued by some critics of Lang’s later American period. It is true, however, that in his late German films, Lang doesn’t seem interested in surpassing mere technical competence: the old pizazz isn’t there.

*KEY LARGO*, directed by John Huston. The trench coat and soft hat were indispensable props in the *film noir*. Lighting tended to be extreme and stylized, as in this shot, where the lighting from above accentuates the moist roof of the car, and the dust-streaked windshield. The light from within the auto is from below, thus throwing the features of the actors into eerie contrasts.

Like several of Lang’s pre-war and wartime films, MANHUNT (1941) deals with violence, espionage, and the desperate lengths to which Nazi Germany would go to conquer Britain.

I think the finest quality of Lang’s art is that he can make an artistically rich film that is still thoroughly enjoyable as an entertainment. Like a few other directors (Ford, Hitchcock, and Penn come to mind), Lang has successfully integrated his personal artistic vision with the tastes of a mass audience. Were he still making films of the calibre of *M* or FURY, he would have (at least in America) the audience that Godard or Bertolucci or even Fellini, Bergman, and Antonioni fail to reach. That a working-class film-goer can find THE BIG HEAT a good, rock-em sock-em thriller, and a knowledgeable cinema buff can consider it a profound and subtle work by a great artist is indeed a fine testimonial to the man and his work.

SUGGESTED READINGS

Based loosely on the life of Al Capone, SCARFACE is one of the first (1932) of a long series of gangster films in the thirties. Like the *film noir*, gangster movies emphasized urban settings, unpredictable outbreaks of violence, and a nighttime milieu.