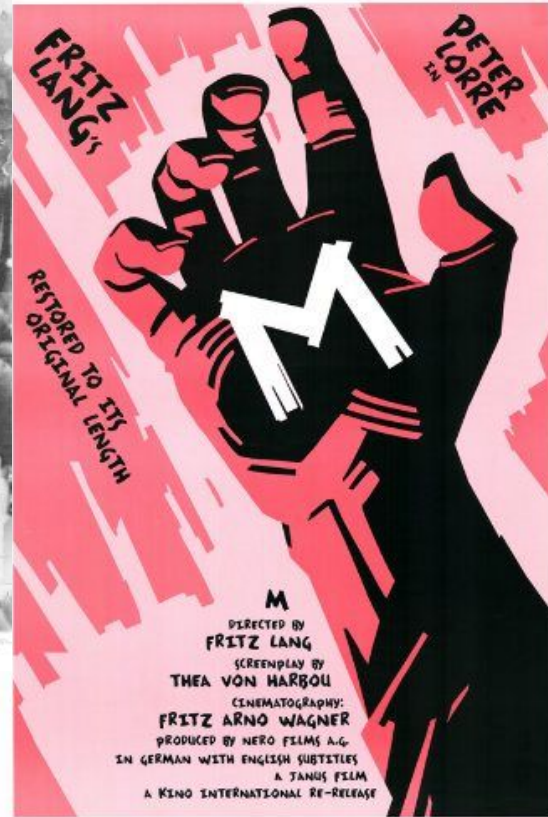


The Philosophical Ideas and Implications Present in M (1931)



By Stella Crouch



Overview of the film M

-M is a German film directed by Fritz Lang that was released in 1931.

-The film's screenplay was written by Lang and his wife Thea von Harbou, and it was Lang's first sound film.

-The film stars Peter Lorre in his first big leading role.

-The film follows Hans Beckert (played by Peter Lorre) who is a serial child killer in Berlin. A wanted poster warns of a serial killer targeting children, as anxious parents wait outside a school on high alert. The film shows the ensuing hysteria as the police are unable to catch Beckert. Elsie Beckmann, kicking her ball on the way home from school is approached by Beckert who buys her a balloon from a blind street vendor. He later kills Elsie. This is shown through an eerie scene showing Elsie's place at the dinner table empty, her ball rolling away across a patch of grass and her balloon tangled up in the telephone lines overhead. Beckert's behavior slowly becomes more and more erratic, and he begins to experience a mental breakdown.

-As the film progresses, the criminal underworld also becomes concerned about the killer's actions, as the increased police presence is disrupting their own criminal activities. They decide to take matters into their own hands and launch a manhunt for the killer.

-The blind vendor recognizes Beckert's signature whistling when he is with another child and tells a friend about his suspicions. The man follows Beckert and eventually chocks a letter M onto his hand short for "Mörder" or "murderer" in German. He then pretends to trip into Beckert marking the M on his coat so that other "beggars" on the street can track him.

-They contact the criminals who eventually catch Beckert and put him on a trial on a kangaroo court in an abandoned distillery. Beckert pleads to be handed over to the police, asking: "Who knows what it is like to be me?"

-Before the criminal mob can kill Beckert the police arrive to arrest everyone. As a real panel of judges prepares to deliver a verdict at Beckert's trial, the mothers of three of his victims weep in the gallery. Elsie's mother states that "No sentence will bring the dead children back" and that "One has to keep closer watch over the children". The screen fades to black as she adds, "All of you".

In the Hall of the Mountain King

The film was one of the first to use a leitmotif, a technique borrowed from opera, associating a tune with Lorre's character, who whistles the tune "**In the Hall of the Mountain King**" from Edvard Grieg's Peer Gynt Suite No. 1.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2YKi01udnOk>

Philosophical questions and dilemmas posed

-What is the role of the individual in society? "M" explores the tension between individual freedom and social responsibility, as the police and criminals clash over the best way to deal with the child murderer. They both want him gone but for different reasons.

-Can justice ever be truly served? The film raises questions about the efficacy of the justice system and whether it can ever bring closure and healing to victims and their families.



-What is the nature of evil? "M" portrays the child murderer as a deeply disturbed and troubled individual, but it also suggests that evil is a pervasive force that can infect even the most seemingly ordinary and innocent people.

-Is it possible to rehabilitate criminals? The film raises questions about the potential for redemption and whether criminals can be rehabilitated, or if they are doomed to repeat their crimes.

-What is the role of technology in society? "M" features the use of cutting-edge forensic techniques at the time such as fingerprinting and handwriting analysis. It raises questions about the impact of technology on society and what complex problems it can and will solve in the future.

Discussion Time

