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Professor Gottlieb

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The Creation of the Sympathetic Villain in Fritz Lang's *M*

The thought of finding sympathy for a man who murders children may seem distressing to some. After all, most consider the act to be among the most depraved that a human being can commit. Fritz Lang's 1931 film *M* seems to argue that it is entirely possible to feel empathetic towards such a madman. The film focuses on the psychopathic Hans Beckert, a man who appears to be responsible for the deaths of countless children. Though he may seem unsavory, Lang, through every technique available to him, manages to turn this "villain" into perhaps the picture's only sympathetic character.

Sympathy for Beckert stems from a wealth of sources in the film, not the least of which being that he is the only character who seems to have any humanity. It would seem that every other character in the film has a preoccupation and obsession with order and routine. Lang emphasizes this through a recurring motif of time and clocks, symbolic of said order. Characters constantly inquire of one another: What time is it? When will someone arrive? When is something going to occur? They constantly look at their watches expecting their lives to fit within a set plan and pattern. The cold, mechanical clock motif is carried out visually as well, permeating almost every aspect of the setting and arrangement of characters in many scenes throughout the film. This can be seen most strikingly at the very beginning of the picture, when a group of children

stand in a circle, one in the center. The center child spins around, chanting a macabre rhyme and pointing her finger at her comrades. This systematic game of elimination not only prefigures the deaths of children that are to follow, but reflects the mechanical nature of these people as well. Shot from above, the circle of children at play appears to look almost exactly like a large clock. Their play appears to be no longer a fun pastime, but an involuntary motion that they are somehow compelled to act out as part of their day. Through the use of this motif, Lang has turned the denizens of this world into little more than robotic shells that appear to be people.

The sense of order and mindless completion of tasks that define many characters in *M* only help to emphasize Beckert's humanity. Beckert is the only character that seems to have a soul, who openly shows his emotions and distinct personality. While the characters that populate the background of *M* are essentially devoid of personality and life - even the children - Peter Lorre's portrayal of Beckert is heart-wrenchingly human. Under Lang's skillful direction, the serial murderer becomes childlike, innocent, and diminutive. This deflates any notion of "the demonic serial killer". Instead, Beckert "is shown as pitiful and unremarkable" (Kaes 75). The humanity and depth of character that are seen in Beckert help to make him more identifiable, and, horrifyingly enough, "more real and pitiable than his victims" (McGilligan 155).

Adding to the flatness of characterization of the innocent public is the manner in which they are shot by the camera. Almost every shot that takes place outside is taken from above. In this way, it is all but impossible to distinguish faces and tell one person apart from another. By choosing to shoot people in this manner, Lang has in effect dehumanized them by taking away their identity. Because of this, the audience can feel

no emotion towards them – it is difficult to feel for a character that you never truly see. The fact that these individuals are shot from above also places the viewer on a completely different level from them. They are not face to face with the audience; no connection between the two can be established. Though Beckert is initially photographed from behind or in shadow, making him as flat and faceless as those who surround him, once his face is shown for the first time, the viewer is almost always on the same level as him, seeing what he sees, and most importantly: seeing his face. This establishes a bond between audience and character. Simply seeing Beckert's face gives him a sense of humanity, and allows the viewer to feel emotion and sympathy for him. Not only does the audience see Beckert's face - they also see his emotional state painted boldly upon it. This is in stark contrast to how Lang shows the faces of other characters (when he chooses to do so). Where Beckert's face is almost always clearly shown, other character's faces are often obscured in some way. This is frequently done by placing them slightly behind other characters, or behind a "veil" of sorts, such as cigarette smoke or shadow. Lorre shows the wide range of emotions that the character of Beckert feels not only with his expressive face, but his entire body as well. Again, this is unlike all other characters: their faces are stony and almost devoid of emotion, their bodies rigid and straight, even when overcome by "passionate" outbursts of rage.

Perhaps strangest of all, Lang manages to transform characters the viewer "should" find sympathy for into shells devoid of humanity as well. This is seen most clearly in the character of Mrs. Beckman, whose daughter is kidnapped and murdered at the start of the film. Even when it becomes clear that her daughter will never again return home, Mrs. Beckman is shown simply walking around her home, mechanically

completing her daily chores. Here, Lang uses sound to emotionally draw the audience away from her, making it difficult to feel sympathy. The voice of Mrs. Beckman can be heard plaintively calling out for her missing daughter, but it is essentially detached from her body. Accompanying her cries are images of the deserted apartment building, and an empty chair where Elsie presumably would have been seated down to eat. Through the absence of her face, only hearing her voice, the audience is suddenly one step removed from the grieving mother. Any sense of concern was all but impossible to detect in her behavior until her cries began – thus, the image of the sorrowful mother is no longer connected to the woman the audience had previously seen. Though viewers “should” feel sorry for the situation that she is now in, the disconnection that Lang created through sound dilutes the emotion. By portraying the characters that populate the world of *M* as mechanical and almost devoid of any emotion, Lang emphasizes Beckert’s humanity, causing the audience to easily find sympathy for him.

Over the course of the picture, Lang makes it painfully clear to the audience that Beckert has no control over his actions. Knowing that he is essentially “not responsible” for his crimes makes him easier to empathize with and feel compassion for. This fact becomes obvious the first time the viewer ever sees Beckert’s face. When a handwriting analyst is called to examine a letter that the murder sent to the police and newspapers, he details many traits that define this particular psychopath. One such trait is in that there is likelihood he enjoys “play-acting”. The very second that these words are spoken, the image of the erudite analyst suddenly cuts away to Beckert looking into a mirror, playing with his face while making grotesque expressions. Though this scene only lasts a matter of seconds before returning to the image of the handwriting analyst, it is vitally important

in raising the audience's awareness that there are essentially two "sides" to this man, one of which he has no control over. With this concept in mind, it is easy to see why Lang decided to use the image of Beckert gazing upon himself in a mirror, seemingly "playing" at madness. There are two Beckerts present in the scene: the one who is looking into the glass, and the one whose image is present in the glass. In a way, his reflection "reveals the torments of [his] soul" (McGilligan 148). The way in which he purposely contorts his facial features to "mimic" psychosis seems to hint that this is the only way in which he can feel in "control" over the demons that torment him. He forces himself to look the part of a crazed madman, an identity that he does not readily accept or desire. Beckert's grotesque expressions reflect the confusion, pain, and anguish that he is suffering inside. He longs to gain power over his actions, but knows that attempting to do so is as foolish as believing that his reflection and himself are two separate beings. This few seconds of footage instantly provides the audience with the impression that Beckert cannot control what he does, but longs to – in order to stop himself from committing these violent acts. At several other points in the film, Lang uses this image of Beckert looking upon his reflection in glass to emphasize this truth.

Lang also uses sound to convey the notion that Beckert is not in command of his actions. *M*, unusually, has no background music serving as a soundtrack for the action onscreen (McGilligan 155). The only music that is heard comes from the characters in the movie themselves, in the form of whistling or playing an instrument. But these instances are far and few between. Lang uses the leitmotif, or recurring musical theme, of Grieg's "In the Hall of the Mountain King" to signify the appearance or presence of the murderer. Lang's choice of this tune may be seen as symbolic. The piece is selected

from the musical accompaniment to the play *Peer Gynt*, from a scene in which hellish trolls sing “slaughter him, slaughter him, tear him up, tear him up” in reference to the play’s protagonist. This can be seen as both an unconscious way for Beckert to express his longing for “the punishment that he expects and wants” (Kaes 21) for his deeds, as well as foreshadowing the cries of the court of criminals that indict him at the end of the film. The audience becomes aware of Beckert’s presence by his incessant whistling of the tune. While it is obvious that Lang chose to use this in order to signify his appearance in a scene, it can be argued that this uncontrollable whistling also gives the impression that Beckert cannot control his actions. The whistle is essentially a nervous verbal “tic”, something that Beckert does shortly before committing an atrocity. It is almost as though the tune is a “trigger” for the unsavory, uncontrollable side of Beckert to awaken, forcing him to commit unspeakable acts (Kaes 20). In many cases, Beckert seems to be mentally stable, until he sees a young girl – then, he begins to whistle this song. Much like his reflection in a mirrored surface, the whistling of “In the Hall of the Mountain King” shows how Beckert’s personality is evenly bisected; it is painfully obvious that he cannot control his behavior. Because of this, he appears all the more innocent and blameless, causing the audience to take pity on him.

In the world of *M*, the public seems to have a sick fascination with crime and violence, simultaneously excited and repulsed by sensational news. Hans Beckert, on the other hand, commits the crimes that the denizens of this world are so enthralled with – yet he feels uncomfortable and sick about doing so. This odd contradiction forces the audience to question whether it is the “innocent” public or the murderer who is truly evil. On more than one occasion during the film, Lang chooses to depict an excited crowd

talking with wonder and disgust about an atrocious happening. Often, these crowds are gazing upon large posters and placards posted in public locations that detail gruesome events. Lang seems to comment that “murder [has become] a media event” (Kaes 38), as opposed to a real life tragedy. Not only is this image of excitement over tragedy disturbing, the fact that Lang has chosen to shoot the crowds from behind deprives these people of their humanity by erasing their faces. In this way, an already distressing image becomes doubly so. The public’s sick fascination is perhaps most disturbingly portrayed once again by the “sympathetic” character of Elsie’s mother. While she waits for her errant daughter, a postman comes to her door bearing the latest serial of pulp fiction that she subscribes to, a magazine noted for its sensational and lurid stories. Through Lang’s use of intercutting, the audience sees that she receives this publication that speaks plainly of unimaginable violence while her daughter is spirited away by the murderer. The fact that Elsie’s mother subscribes to such a publication is incredibly disturbing when juxtaposed with the horrifying image of her child being led away to her doom.

Once again, the character of Beckert, though he is the villain of the film, is shown to be more sympathetic than the townspeople he “terrorizes” by his disgusted attitude towards the atrocities that he knows he cannot help but commit. In one arresting scene, Beckert is shown gazing into a shop window at some cutlery. The image is shot from inside the shop window, showing Beckert through the glass and framing his image in a reflection: a diamond constructed of knives that are on display. Lang expressively illustrates the madman’s violent tendencies in this shot. However, Beckert’s face is not at ease, nor is it calm. His expression is contorted; he appears to be suffering from intense pain and anguish. The reason for his suffering becomes clear when the camera’s position

shifts to record the same image, but from a different angle. Now, the audience is able to see what Beckert sees: the reflection of a young girl who is standing behind him, framed in the same diamond constructed of knives. It is clear that her position in the reflection is evocative of Beckert's desire to commit violence on her. However, his expression as seen through the same glass is one of sorrow and pain. He is not gleeful at the thought of killing another innocent child. In fact, the notion appalls him. This essentially "confirms his [later] claim that he kills against his will" (Kaes 61). As mentioned previously, Lang again makes use of the killer's face in a reflection to illustrate his dual personality, as well as his pain in the fact that he cannot rein in his impulses. The same ideas that enthrall and excite an entire town horrify a man who actually commits these violent acts – it is through this distressing paradox that Lang presents Beckert as sympathetic.

In the world Lang creates for *M*, the systems of justice that would attempt to right Beckert's wrongs clash strongly with the viewer's sense of fairness and truth. Because of this, the audience is somewhat compelled to feel for the criminal, almost hoping that he avoid capture. Lang shows that there are two groups who are searching for Beckert, in order to capture him and punish him for what he has done. One is a system of "traditional" justice, that the audience would feel a natural tendency to support – the police. The other group searching for Beckert is a network of organized criminals that the audience is not as willing to advocate. Lang crafts a distressing visual analogy between the two groups through the use of intercutting. In a scene where leaders of the underground crime syndicate sit around a table to discuss their plans for finding Beckert, "as his actions have disrupted their activity" (McGilligan 150), the image of crime bosses enrobed in the suffocating smoke of cigarettes cuts away to a similar discussion that is

being carried on by the police. The police are arranged in manner that is almost identical to the criminals. They too are shrouded in smoke. Lang cuts quickly between the two discussions as the conversations grow more intense. It becomes clear to the viewer that the criminals and the police are mirror images of one another, with members of both groups gesturing in identical ways and speaking almost identical dialogue. The visual comparison that Lang appears to be making is one that places the police on the same level as the criminals, perhaps hinting at the idea that the two groups are not so dissimilar. The metaphor can even be taken so far as to suggest that the cigarette smoke that enfolds the two groups is representative of the murky motivations and goals that they share.

It is important to note that it is not the police who apprehend Beckert; it is the criminals who catch him first. Again, the concept of “justice” being carried out by criminals can be taken as Lang’s comment on the corruption of the penal system. Everything about this “court” is portrayed as barbaric, from its dank, shadowy location to the manner in which Beckert was caught: by being literally “branded” as a murderer and hunted down as though he were an animal. Beckert is placed before a jury that will also serve as his executioners, consisting of lowlifes who are filled with an unquenchable rage. In many ways, the anger that they feel is more animalistic and demonic than human: their faces becoming contorted and grotesque, their voices becoming little more than indistinct cries for blood – reflecting an “insane public demand for a culprit” (Kaes 32). In this way, the character of Beckert is reflected as pathetic and innocent – contrasting those who would accuse him. Though he begs and pleads for mercy, his face and body twisting in pain, the “court” refuses to allow him freedom, or even a stint in an asylum. Instead, they laugh manically at his suffering. In this way, Lang juxtaposes killer with

victim and police with criminals. Once again, the audience is “roped into sympathy with ‘this monster who doesn’t deserve to live’” (McGilligan 158).

Fritz Lang’s *M* openly toys with the notion that a murderer can be presented in a sympathetic light. By using several different editing techniques, as well as the new development of sound, Lang was able to achieve just that. *M* calls into question the traditional idea of evil, making it easier to feel sympathy for a psychopath than those who he has terrorized.

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