

2012

The Man In Black: A Sequence Analysis from Fritz Lang's *M* (1931)

Timothy J. Edwards

University of Western Ontario

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/kino>



Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Edwards, Timothy J. (2012) "The Man In Black: A Sequence Analysis from Fritz Lang's *M* (1931)," *Kino: The Western Undergraduate Journal of Film Studies*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/kino/vol3/iss1/4>

The Man In Black: A Sequence Analysis from Fritz Lang's *M* (1931)

Keywords

Fritz Lang, *M*, sequence analysis

Cover Page Footnote

This paper was originally written for “German Exile Cinema: From Berlin to Hollywood,” an undergraduate course taught by Dr. Tobias Nagl at the University of Western Ontario in 2011.

The Man In Black: A Sequence Analysis from Fritz Lang's *M* (1931)

by T.J. Edwards

Fritz Lang's first sound film, *M* (1931), was also the first feature film about a serial killer. Set against the backdrop of a rapidly deteriorating Weimar Republic, *M* depicts the city of Berlin as a paranoid and self-destructive society in the grips of not only poverty, but also pervasive criminality. Germany in 1931 is in the grips of not only a global recession, but also a political system plagued by dysfunction. It is also interesting to note that the release of Lang's *M* coincided with the rise of the National Socialist Party. By the time the film was released the Nazis held the second most seats in the Reichstag. Adding to the very topical quality of *M* is its direct address to the 'serial killer culture', a recent development and area of fascination and intrigue for the German public both in the literary and public spheres. Names of serial killers like Fritz Harman and Peter Kurten were as common to the people of 1931 Berlin as indeed names like Ted Bundy and Charles Manson are to most people today. In addition to these historical and social contexts, other interesting developments are taking place in 1931 Berlin, developments in the areas of both film and theatre. The prominence of Expressionism as a style and ethos in Germany can be observed in works like *Das Cabinet Des Dr. Caligari* (1920), however, in the years surrounding *M*'s production, the rising New Objectivity Movement transformed many of the stylistic and thematic goals and tendencies of both mediums. This shift can be greatly attributed to the 'Epic Theatre' of playwright Bertolt Brecht (Kaes 24). In Brecht's plays Expressionist techniques can be observed as no longer reflecting character psychology, but instead placing emphasis on sociological issues. Peter Lorre was featured in several Brecht plays around the same time as *M*, and to much acclaim. It should come as no surprise then that Fritz Lang sought him out so that he might bring his talents to bear on the character Hans Beckert, the child murderer who is at the centre of Lang's film. The twelve minute sequence in which Hans Beckert is first discovered and pursued by both the police and underworld of Berlin serves to perfectly encapsulate the themes and formal style of Lang's masterpiece. The sequence and the whole of the film more generally constitute a style which represents the intermediary between German Expressionist Cinema and the later film noir by restricting Expressionist tropes to only its visual aspects.

The sequence begins with a static shot of a café patio. Shrubbery covers most of the seating area on the left and right sides of the frame. Beckert enters from the right of the frame and seats himself at a table on the left side, his figure now covered by the bush. The way that Beckert is shrouded by the bushes evokes the way that his identity as the killer is still not known. Beckert's indecisiveness when placing his drink order makes it clear that he is on edge. While Beckert is not actually off-screen, hearing him interacting with the server at the café while he is shielded from the camera but the server is not, creates the impression in the mind of viewer that Beckert

is nearing closer to being caught. This juxtaposition between the visibility of the server and the quasi-visibility of Beckert fosters suspense in the viewer. The viewer is now beginning to expect that Beckert will soon be captured, but the question still remains how, and by which party?

Another aspect of this sequence which creates suspense is the use of sound. Sound is used quite sparingly throughout the sequence; in fact, the only sound to this point has been dialogue. The first camera movement of the sequence, in addition to initiating the process of voyeurism in which Beckert becomes revealed to both the viewer and to the respective parties who are actively hunting for him, also sets up the first extra-diegetic sounds of the sequence. The camera moves from its original position right up to the bushes covering Beckert. When the camera comes to a halt we are able to see Beckert's face in more detail. It is at this moment that the same whistling from the beginning of the film when little Elsie Beckmann was killed is heard once more. We then see Beckert anxiously pull out a cigarette from his pocket before the disembodied arm of the server begins pouring Beckert's cognac. It is significant that the camera does not move to include the body of the server; it remains static as its purpose is now to reveal not only the face of the killer, but to gain insight into his pathology. The disembodied arm is also repeated at the film's conclusion when the police break up the underworld's mock trial of Beckert. It quickly becomes clear that the whistling is not emanating from the mouth of Beckert, but seemingly from within his mind. After Beckert drinks two cognacs, the whistling is heard once again. Beckert throws his cigarette in frustration and cringes, gripping his collar against his head. Now more restless than before arriving at the café, Beckert stands up to leave, and it is at this instant that the camera pulls back to its original position. This quick pull back of the camera positions the viewer as a peeping tom, recoiling to avoid being seen by their subject; this serves to increase the voyeuristic role of the camera. Beckert pays the bill and storms out of frame.

In an instant we are transported to police headquarters. The two detectives responsible for catching Beckert occupy the area around a desk. While detective Lohmann sits and smokes his cigar, the other detective stands beside the desk reading facts from a related case. Cut to a shot which is framed at desk level framed in a mid-shot of Lohmann and we see his look of concern and deep thought as he considers the facts being read aloud, now from off-screen. When Lohmann makes the connection between the cigarettes found at the scene of Elsie Beckmann's murder and those found in the apartment of Hans Beckert, the camera inches closer each time he says the name to himself. The camera moves forward in three intervals, until finally stopping at a close up of Lohmann's face. Just as Lohmann reaches for the phone, the camera cuts back to the previous shot, including the standing detective within the frame. It is also important to make note of an interesting piece of the mise-en-scene: the map pinned to the wall behind Lohmann. Throughout the film there are constant visual and aural associations between both the criminals and the police. Lang uses these cues as part of a cynical criticism about the true nature of justice and the

legitimacy of the rule of law. Another one of these cues appears in this scene in the form of the map, as the criminals are shown earlier in the film with the same map which they also use to narrow in on Beckert. Scholar Anton Kaes's account of *M* astutely posits that these cues are best understood in the context of Ernst Junger's theory of "Total Mobilization" (Kaes 44). Junger's "Total Mobilization" provides an account of how wartime mobilizes and militarizes the entire population as part of a process of modernization, not simply during wartime, but after as well. The mobilization of the German nation in WWI continued on after the war with the focus of the mobilization being turned inward. New technologies and techniques for surveillance, supervision, registration, and the like drastically increased in scope. This process dissolves (and continues to dissolve) civil liberties and results in a society which thrives on suspicion and mistrust: suspicion of the population, of neighbours, of police, and of state. 'Extra' newspaper issues—like the ones that are being sold on the street at the beginning of *M*—kept the nation up to the minute on all the happenings in the war. After wartime this trend continued, but with the effects of mobilization turned inward newspapers began to thrive on home-grown morbid and sensationalist stories. Serial homicide was just one focus of this post-war, still "mobilized" press. The camera throughout *M* functions as a part of this atmosphere of surveillance. It moves like a spy or detective, focusing in on details and moving around the terrain almost as if it were trying to survey the undetected.

After Lohmann calls his assistant to request the "Marga Perl" file, we cut to a mid-shot of the blind beggar selling balloons from the beginning of the film. Sound is silent except for the whistling heard by the blind man. This use of sound in the sequence coincides with the use of camera movements in several instances. Even though there are many people around the beggar, we most clearly hear Beckert's distinct whistling. Beckert's whistling is heard above all other sounds because that is what has caught the attention of the spying ears of the beggar. At the same time the whistling is heard, a shadow is cast into the frame. This is the exact pattern which takes place at the beginning of the film, only now the viewer is aware that the shadow originates from Hans Beckert. The camera then moves slightly left, then into a close-up of the blind beggar. Similar to the way in which camera movements corresponded to Lohmann's realization, so too does this close up correspond to the blind beggar's realization of the whistle's origin. The camera then begins to move back to its original position, people pass the man in the opposite direction, then the camera tracks his movement as he moves toward the whistling. The beggar finally calls out to Heinrich for assistance. The young man informs him that he sees the man talking to a little girl. The beggar quickly orders Heinrich after Beckert. Heinrich runs out of frame in hot pursuit.

After Heinrich's pursuit ends with him slapping the enigmatic capital 'M' onto Beckert's back, we find ourselves back in Lohmann's office as he reads through the facts of the Perl case. Lohmann cites the three Ariston butts found within a one-hundred-fifty metre radius of the crime scene. The other detective mentions that while

the brand of smokes is the same at the crime scene as at Beckert's apartment, there was "no old wooden table". The detective begins to entertain the idea that Beckert could have written the letter on another surface. He then glances around until his eyes fall on the window ledge. "The window ledge!", he exclaims. We then cut to a close up of the detective's disembodied arm holding a magnifying glass over the window ledge. Lang uses an impressive match on action to create an unexpected temporal shift, from the office to Beckert's apartment. After the two find the red pencil which Beckert used to write the letter to the press, Lohmann proclaims: "My God finally, we're finally on his trail." Immediately following this breakthrough, we are brought back to the criminals' table where they are being made aware of the development. They are revealed to be speaking with Heinrich, who informs them that they are one step ahead of the police.

Beckert and the little girl continue to roam the streets, being watched on all sides by agents of the criminals. The fact that Beckert is being watched so intently from all angles and is still unaware presents Berlin's urban milieu in a way, which is very much like Foucault's 'Panopticon', whereby he is completely exposed to prying eyes, but cannot know who is in fact watching him (Kaes 41). He seems to be conscious of something being unusual, but he has no way of knowing who is watching him, and therefore cannot hide or escape. The two stop at a shop window. Lang shoots from the interior of the store, looking at the two through the glass. This choice of shot turns Beckert's gaze on itself, showing that it is not the wares within the shop that are the object of his desire, but the little girl. This point is driven home by the *mise-en-scène*, which associates him with the objects inside the window. The mechanical jester toy repeatedly moves its legs in the shape of an M, and Beckert's face is also framed by knives. The visual motif of glass and mirrors is further utilized when the two are about to go into the shop. The little girl points to the M on his back and, maneuvering, he looks in the mirror, sees the M, and realizes that he has been marked. In further support for the notion of Berlin's streets as a panopticon, it is relevant that after seeing the M we enter a point of view shot, where Beckert looks at a man watching him from behind a truck. The man watching Beckert quickly disappears from sight. This is significant because even though Beckert is now fully aware that he is being watched, he is still unable to identify his pursuers. After fleeing past several of his pursuers, Beckert becomes trapped on all sides at the train station.

Recalling the first scene of the film, where the children are shot from above, Lang uses an extremely high angle in this instance as well. Just as the high angle made the children appear small and helpless, so too has the same fate befallen Beckert. Cutting back to ground level, we see Beckert run into the train station, where the camera follows just behind him. Beckert, now standing against a wall, hides from both the police waiting for him on one side of the station, and the criminals waiting for him on the other. Lang makes use of point of view shots in this sub-sequence; when Beckert looks to either end of the station, the shots are framed with columns in the field of view. These points of view shots convey a sense of entrapment or imprisonment

felt by Beckert. Vincent Brook points out that these “prison shots” are also a visual motif which is repeated throughout *M* (Brook 74). The final shot of the sequence is a long shot of Beckert from the doorway looking to the inside of the station. Sirens that are heard off-screen draw Beckert’s attention toward the camera and the street. As the fire truck passes through the frame from left to right, Beckert disappears.

Fritz Lang’s *M* not only establishes the thematic and stylistic conventions for future serial killer films, but it is also fair to say that it functions in many ways as a template for the American film noir of which Lang is arguably the originator. It would be another three years before Lang arrived in America to begin his legendary career as one of Hollywood’s most successful and influential filmmakers.

Works Cited

Brook, Vincent. "The Father of Film Noir: Fritz Lang." *Driven to Darkness: Jewish Émigré Directors and the Rise of Film Noir*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2009. 58-79.

Kaes, Anton. *M*. London: BFI, 2000.

Films Cited

Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari. Dir. Robert Wiene. Decla-Bioscop, 1920.

M. Dir. Fritz Lang. Nero-Film, 1931.