

New Objectivity: A Review of Fritz Lang's *M* (1931)

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New Objectivity, or *Neue Sachlichkeit*, literally “new matter-of-factness” (Evans, 2004, p. 124), is an artistic movement that emerged in Germany between 1925 and 1931. This style came into being after Expressionism (1905-25) and before the period of Nazi Art (1933-45). Also known as New Realism, New Objectivity is noted for expressing a more social realist form of representation across different art forms—painting, photography, literature, and film—concerned with alienation and loss of values and the warmth of human relationships because of the dominance of instrumental rationality in modern society (Aitken, 2001).

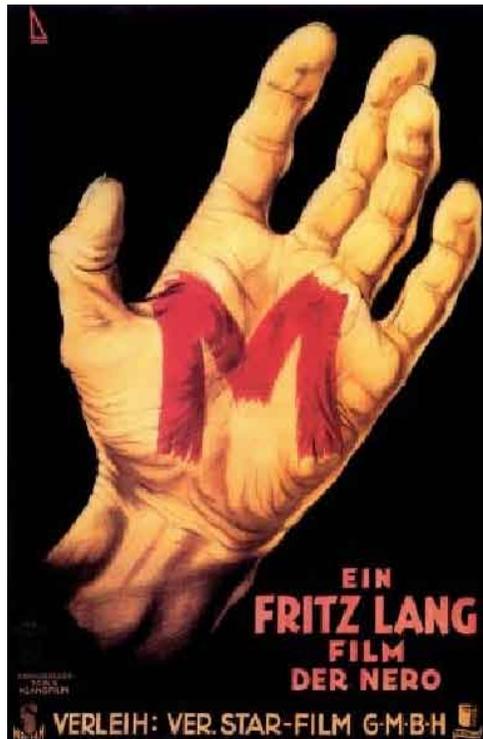


Figure 1. Poster of *M* (Fritz Lang, 1931)

Released in 1931, *M*, Fritz Lang's first talkie, is considered as his "first important film" (Kracauer, 1974, p. 219). Set in a German city, this drama-thriller about the police's pursuit of a child-murderer, complicated by other criminals joining in the manhunt, is also considered as Lang's "most universally admired film" (Gunning, 2000, p. 163). Manvell & Fraenkel (1971) assert that Fritz Lang claimed that "he had Hitler in mind when making this film [...] though when the film is seen today it appears very doubtful whether the German public world have grasped the parallel intended in this brilliantly made fantasy" (p. 64).

Compared to Expressionism, New Objectivity is generally concerned with the portrayal of external reality, rather than subjective states. Gustav Hartlaub, the director of the Mannheim Museum who is credited with inventing the term, related the new temperament:

...to the general contemporary feeling in Germany of resignation and cynicism after a period of exuberant hopes (which had found an outlet in expressionism). Cynicism and resignation are the negative side of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*; the positive side expressed itself in the enthusiasm for the immediate reality as a result of the desire to take things entirely objectively on a material basis without immediately investing them with ideal implications. (Myers, 1966, p. 244)

The realistic style that portrays the every-day (Gunning, 2000; Kracauer, 1974) can be illustrated by Elsie Beckman's mother doing the household chores (figure 2, panel 1). Sound is also a characteristic feature of the film (Manvell & Fraenkel, 1971; Gunning, 2000; Kracauer, 1974). The tune whistled by the child-murderer whenever he experiences a malevolent episode becomes a signature motif of the film. Even before we see his face, we hear him whistling this tune when he buys little Elsie a balloon from a blind vendor (panel 2); writes a mocking letter to the police (panel 3); and completely enters his murderous trance (panel 8).

News about Elsie's disappearance reveals the loss of humanistic values among the people in the city. The gentlemen's conversation about the serial killer quickly turns into paranoid finger-pointing (figure 3, panel 1); this is echoed on the streets, as the people exhibit mob-like tendencies and violently apprehend a man suspected of being the serial killer (panels 2-5). Amidst all these, the authorities conduct a routine and mechanical investigation (panels 6 and 7). The conversation between the two bureaucrats—"Mr. Secretary" and the "Commissioner"—reveals the disenchanting nature of



Figure 2. Whistle tune as a signature motif in the film.

the endeavour, as both of them are just concerned about projecting a good image of their respective institutions so that, in keeping with instrumental rationality, they can keep their own jobs and privileges within the system.



Figure 3. The “machine world” dealing with human tragedy

Aside from its critical take on the disenchanting human condition in modernity, Fritz Lang’s *M* is also remarkable for its ambivalent portrayal of the “monster”: the child-murderer, Hans Beckert (played by Peter Lorre). While the graphologist is pompously analysing the fugitive’s handwriting as published in the newspaper (figure 4, panel 1), Hans plays with his image on the mirror (panel 2) as if to mock those who are in pursuit of his reality. Later, as he is seated at a coffee shop, we see him whistling the familiar tune. His trance is broken when the waiter comes to take his order. We see him in his “normal” state as he orders coffee, changes his mind and chooses cognac instead. Moments later, we see him quietly struggling. He smokes a cigarette and glugs two consecutive shots of liquor (panel 3) as if relying on these “vices” to silence the voices in his head. It does not work. We witness him being overtaken by the madness (panel 4) as we hear the violent whistling tune not from his lips but from inside his tormented mind.



Figure 4. Portrait of a “monster.”

The film reaches its climax at the “trial” scene wherein a group of vagabonds take it upon themselves to judge Hans Beckert who demands to be handed over to the police, to be brought before a real court of law (figure 4, panel 5). They express their distrust of the system wherein Hans could plead insanity, spend the rest of life being cared for by the state, then break out of asylum or receive pardon, then kill again, protected by the law on the grounds of insanity. A lynch is impending. Hans blurts out that he can’t help it—the cursed thing inside him, the fire, the voice, and the agony. Pleading to be understood, describes that this torment is akin to shadowing oneself (panels 6 and 7). Some of those who hear him discretely nod their heads, recognizing the familiar monster inside every being (panel 8). Finally, the mob takes shape, and a violent lynch is about to come to pass. The policemen arrive and stop it.



Figure 5. The “cold realism” of the modern condition.

“Cold realism” is powerfully rendered early on in the film. Elsie’s mother, while anxiously waiting for her daughter to come home, calls her daughter’s name (figure 5, panel 1) in vain, as the tenement (panels 2 and 3), this uniform dwelling, neither hears nor cares, even when each successive crying out of

this mother becomes more and more desperate. The film parodies both the inefficacy of the machine world in dealing with the human crisis and it being a contributor to this degenerate condition by poignantly unravelling the haunting shots of the child-murderer's shadow on the public notice about him (panel 4) and the balloon entangled with the power lines (panel 5) and eventually released, leaving us with the intuitive understanding the Elsie is now dead. Another subversive representation of resignation is the film's choice to affirm the blind man's care for the child as he recognises the tune that Hans whistled the day Elsie Beckman was killed, thereby identifying the criminal. At the end of the film, however, "cold realism" returns to assert its full dominance, when, after the child-murderer is handed over to the court (panel 7)—the start of another routine procedure—Elsie's mother, in a separate room with the others sharing her plight, emotionally voices out the last lines of the film, "This will not bring our children back. One has to keep closer watch over the children! All of you!" These words close Fritz Lang's *M* (1931) and, true to the vision of New Objectivity, bear our souls to our own disenchanting existence in modernity.

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