

Fritz Lang's *M*
"The Kangaroo Court"

Russell J Lowke, December 2nd, 2002.

Fritz Lang's 1931 German masterpiece *M* is unusual as it conveys a message of radical distrust in the state and its process. The making of *M* coincided with the rapid disintegration of the political and social structures of the Weimar Republic; German defeat in the First World War had resulted in a general erosion of public trust and governmental authority. Recession had reached Germany in the form of massive unemployment, rising criminality and political unrest.¹ Berlin had become the site of wild strikes and mass demonstrations. Lynch mobs engaged in open manhunts.² Violent crime was seen as a symptom of a system that was rotten at the core.³ Lang's film culminates in a "kangaroo court," the focus of this essay. The court is coordinated by criminals and held in the basement of a defunct cognac distillery. Lang places the justice system and its process under scrutiny, calling into question who has the right to judge, give retribution, and to punish.

The film echoes historical events in Germany at the beginning of the 1930s. The country had just witnessed an epidemic of serial killers, coupled with an unprecedented public interest in serial crime. Lang's own penchant for sensationalist and serial cinema is served by the subject matter of *M* — the focus of which is Beckert, a child serial killer.⁴ Like Beckert, the historical figure of Fritz Haarmann was a German serial killer. Haarmann's widely publicized trial introduced the question of the murderer's mental capacity. From early on Haarmann had been in and out of prison, and frequently transferred to clinics and asylums after pleading insanity (Paragraph 51), then escaping to continue his murderous spree. The audience of *M* were well aware of Haarmann, and a number of other serial murderers. Also of interest is that the production of *M* was closely shadowed by a murder trial against members of Hitler's SA (Sturmabteilung). The SA had targeted, chased and killed a member of the Communist party. The punishment was minimal, Hitler denied any knowledge of party-sanctioned murder and the killers all received mild jail sentences.

¹ Anton Kaes. *BFI Film Classics M*, (London: BFI Publishing, 2000): 14.

² Anton Kaes: 15.

³ Anton Kaes: 67.

⁴ Anton Kaes: 30.

The kangaroo court that Lang depicts has overtones of this trial, and Lang suggests a mockery of the law and procedures of the Weimar system, implying that the courts are being run by criminals.

Lang's kangaroo court is both the climax and conclusion of *M*; here the child murderer Beckert is finally given a prominent role and his testimony heard. The court is a massive assembly of criminals and representatives of the underworld, a self-appointed jury gathered to convict Beckert. Schränker, the master criminal, acts as head prosecutor. He and other ring leaders sit at a table which is lit by a makeshift lamp in the shape of a gallows. No judge presides over the kangaroo court, this role is reserved for the movie audience. There is a strange dimension to the court, one does not climb up steps, instead one climbs down them into the basement. The proceedings of the court are not interested in truth or justice, but in the elimination of an outsider. From a strictly legal point of view Beckert is prosecuted without any conclusive evidence.

Once the court is satisfied that they have their man, based upon flimsy identification by a blind man, Schränker addresses the camera, which has adopted the viewpoint of Beckert. "You talk of rights, you will get your rights," says Schränker as he points with a gloved finger, "we are all law experts here. From six weeks in Tegel prison, to 15 years in Brandenburg." The camera cuts to an angled close shot, slowly panning across the stern expressions of the underworld jurors, the great majority of whom are men. This jury of ex-convicts has sarcastically been introduced as "experts in law." There is a parallel here with the Weimar Republic, the implication being that the state's juries are filled with the ranks of criminals. We see a close shot of Schränker at his desk, his hands are resting on his thick walking cane, a symbol of power. "You will get your rights, you will even get a lawyer" states Schränker, "everything will be done according to the rule of law." In other words, everything will be done under the guise of a legal trial, but conducted by those unfit to judge. If Schränker believed that the state could conduct an adequate trial, then he would simply turn Beckert over to the police. The Weimar system is impotent.

In the name of “justice” the kangaroo court assign to Beckert a lawyer, to warrant a “fair trial.” Lang shows us an angled medium close shot of Beckert, he is crouching on the ground, eyes bulging from his face, his expression that of anger and fear. “A lawyer? A lawyer? I don’t need a lawyer” retorts Beckert, “who is accusing me? You, maybe? You?” The “you” stresses his indignation of being tried by murderers. A hand drops down from the top of screen, tapping him on the shoulder. The camera pans up and to the left, following the owner of the hand, resulting in a medium shot of the elderly lawyer, who is played by the then well-known expressionist poet Rudolf Blümner.⁵ On his table are a number of dusty old law books; these represent the lawyers belief in the written rule of law, as opposed to judgment by appearances. Blümner’s known role as a poet is in direct juxtaposition with his screen role as a lawyer. “Just a moment. If I were you, sir, I’d keep quiet” says the lawyer. “Your life’s at stake, in case you don’t know it.”

Beckert jumps up from his crouching position, screeching in distress, “Who are you?” The lawyer replies, “I have the dubious honor of being your defense council.” He puts on his hat and tips it in greeting, “But I’m afraid it won’t be of much use to you.” The intention is to kill Beckert, regardless of what he might say, an unjust system with a preconceived conclusion. “But, but... Do you want to kill me? Murder me, just like that?” screams Beckert at the lawyer. The lawyer turns away from him, ignoring him, and blowing dust off a document he has just drafted, he spares Beckert only a cursory glance. We see Schränker at his desk again, wielding his cane. “We just want to render you harmless,” Schränker pronounces, again pointing his gloved finger — “but you’ll only be that way when your dead.”

We see a medium shot with both Beckert and the lawyer at his desk in frame, Beckerts hand rests on a dividing banister between the two. Beckert screams in retort, “But if you kill me, it’ll be cold-blooded murder!” There is shrill laughter from the crowd. They are eager to kill Beckert, and happy to do so in cold blood. The lawyer slowly shakes his head, urging his client to control himself, while also implying to the viewer that what is happening is wrong. Beckert’s eyes bulge in

⁵ Anton Kaes: 66.

horror and terror at the injustice of their justice, he lurches towards the camera and screams “I demand that you hand me over to the police.” Laughter from the crowd intensifies, and at the top of his lungs Beckert desperately pleads, “I demand to be handed over to the jurisdiction of common law.” The laughter from the crowd escalates, there are sarcastic, jovial calls of “richtig” (right). The irony that Beckert, the murderer, is pleading to be handed over to the police.

Schränker responds from his desk, visibly backed by the grinning faces of the mob jury behind him, “That would suit you, wouldn’t it? Then you’ll invoke paragraph 51 and spend the rest of your life in an institution at state expense. And then you’d escape, or else get a pardon, then there you are, free as air, with a law protected pass because of mental illness, off again chasing little girls.” There is more laughter from crowd. Schränker brings his cane up to rest on the desk and states, “We’re not going to let that happen. We must make you powerless. You must disappear.” The audience is reminded of the specter of the Haarmann case, where the murderer claimed insanity. Schränker’s statement is against the ineptness of the Weimar system, a system that allowed a killer who, once caught, then continued his murdering spree. Haarmann killed twenty-seven young men. It is clear the Germans have lost faith in the system.

Beckert now launches into his dramatic plea to a double audience, the jury in the movie and the spectators in the theater. His plea is that he can’t help what he does, and can’t escape his compulsions. He must obey. The crowd listens, some discuss, some nod their heads. Beckert appears to find release in being able finally to relate his emotions. When relating his condition during the murders his hands twist like claws at his chest, his eyes roll back into his head, and his mouth forms a small grotesque smile. Lang modeled the scene from the actual Haarmann trial. Haarmann was known to have pleaded similarly, stating : "Often, after I had killed, I pleaded to be put away in a military asylum, but not in a madhouse... Oh, believe me, I'm not ill. It's only that I occasionally have funny turns."⁶ Sexual deviance and criminality carried anti-Semitic undertones, which need not be spelled out to an audience in 1931. The scene would later be used by the Nazis

⁶ Anton Kaes: 34.

in an anti-Semitic propaganda film, claiming a child murderer was made to look like a sympathetic victim, thus subverting law and order.⁷

After Beckert's plea, Schränker stands from his table, and gives his appraisal: "The accused has said that he cannot help himself. That is to say, he has to murder. As this is the case he has produced his own death sentence. Someone who admits to being a compulsive murderer should be snuffed out like a candle. This man must be wiped out, eliminated." Schränker's appraisal strongly resembles Nazi rhetoric. He conveys the mindset of the people of the time. "Perfect, just what I think!" — agrees a man in the crowd. The mob claps, perhaps so does the movie audience. Beckert crouches huddled in fetal position, with a hand over his ear.

"I wish to speak," declares the lawyer, standing. We see the lawyer in a medium-close shot next to Beckert, who is still in fetal position. A voice from the mob declares, "The defense lawyer will speak." The lawyer starts, "Our very honorable president, who is, I believe, wanted by the police for three murders -" His is protesting the legitimacy of the accusers; they who make mockery of the law. To this Schränker interjects, "That's got nothing to do with it." The lawyer continues, "- claims that because my client acts under an irresistible impulse he is condemned to death." "He is right," the crowd yells. "He is mistaken," says the lawyer, "because it is that very fact that clears him." We see a close-up of one of the more surly criminals in the crowd who hollers, "Just a minute, enough!" Another, a more respectable type, shouts at the lawyer, "Mad old drunk!" The lawyer keeps talking, "It is this very obsession that makes my client not responsible and nobody can be punished for something he can't help."

Lang shows us a medium shot of the jury crowd. An irate woman, in absolute fury, projects herself out from the mass of people and screams, "Ridiculous! Do you suggest that this brute should get off?" The lawyer responds, "I mean this man is sick. A sick man should be handed over not to the executioner, but to the doctor." There is a cry from the prosecution table, "Can you promise that he'd be cured?" The lawyer responds, "What use are asylums, then?" Lang cuts to

⁷ Anton Kaes: 71.

an extreme medium angled shot of the prosecution table. The angled perspective adds a degree of tenseness by being a non-traditional viewpoint. One from the prosecution table cries, “And what would happen if he escaped? Yes. Or if they release him as harmless?” Schränker now repeats his earlier statement: “And what if the compulsion to kill returns? Another man hunt for months. Paragraph 51 again. The asylum, then another escape or release. Then the compulsion all over again, and so on, and so on.” There is clear anxiety that the system will let the child murderer Beckert off. Although Lang always insisted that *M* was a plea against the death penalty, the movie seems to endorse it, or at least is ambiguous. Goebbels, after seeing the movie *M*, wrote in his diary: “Fantastic! Against humanitarian sentimentality. For the death penalty. Well made. Lang will be our director one day.”⁸

“No one can kill a man who isn’t responsible for his own actions. Not the state, and certainly not you,” claims the lawyer, “The state must see that this man becomes harmless and no longer is a danger to his fellow citizens.” Once again, there is much laughter from the crowd, the laughter becomes overwhelming. There is a medium shot of the mob. A woman stands, saying, “You’ve never had children, huh? So you haven’t lost any. But if you knew what its like to lose one... Go ask the parents! Ask them what those days and nights were like when they didn’t know what happened. And then when they finally knew. — Ask the mothers.” Here is the appeal for justice from the women. Here is the request for retribution.

The movie cuts to a close-up shot of Beckert with his hands firmly over his ears. The movie cuts back to the medium shot of the woman. “Do you think they will have mercy?” she yells. The crowd responds, and the camera follows their contorted faces in a series of rapid successive close-up shots: “She’s right.”; “ I’ll say she is.”; “No mercy!”; “ No pardon.”; “Give the murder to us.”; “Kill the beast.”; “Crush the brute!”; “Kill him!”; “ Beat him!” The language of the crowd contributes to the dehumanization of Beckert. He is not a human being, he is a “beast” —

⁸ Anton Kaes: 73.

an “animal.”⁹ The Nazis later adopted such vocabulary to dehumanize Jews. The next shot is a medium shot of the lawyer alone, who takes a final stand saying, “All that won’t silence me. I won’t allow a crime to be committed in my presence. I demand that this man be given the protection of the law. I demand that this man be handed over to the police.”

In anticipation of the mob’s action, Lang cuts to an extreme long shot from above; he shows the crowd from the perspective of the lawyer. Members in the crowd clamor, “To the police! Filthy stooge,” and the mob rush toward camera, surging forward to kill Beckert — then they stop, immobile and silent in their tracks. The police have arrived. The mob react to the off-screen force by slowly raising their arms in surrender. Schränker reluctantly raises his hands last. Beckert raises himself from his fetal position and, as had the lawyers hand previously dropped in to rescue him, the hand of the state now drops in from the upper right of the screen. The police inspector’s voice is heard, unlocalised and omnipotent, announcing: “In the name of the law.”

Lang cuts to a long shot of an empty court room. Judges enter and sit, one of them proclaims: “In the name of the people.” The scene is brief and depicts no trial, but suggests Beckert as the defendant. There is no verdict. The shortness of the shot challenges the institutions power. The Weimar court is called into question by the immediately subsequent image of three of the mothers of the child victims. They are wearing the black veils of mourning. The center mother wails, “This won’t bring back our children. We too should keep a closer watch on our children.” The appeal to the mothers of Germany betrays the public lack of faith in the state’s power to protect its citizens. The center figure is wide eyed and distraught. This is the final image with which the audience is left. There is no resolution as to what happens to Beckert. There is a feeling of lack of justice. There is a slow fade to black as the movie ends.

The kangaroo court made the assertion that if Beckert was placed in the hands of the state, he would plea insanity and wound wind up merely in a mental asylum. There is a mockery of the law and its legal procedures. The mob is more effective than the police in catching the criminal.

⁹ Anton Kaes: 74.

Throughout the film the efforts of the authorities achieve nothing, disrupting normal functioning of the community. The film portrays the police inspector repulsively, with correlation to the murderer — both are shown as gluttonous. The film implies that justice is not carried out. Lang, with his movie *M*, exemplifies German convictions of the time: he exemplifies the lack of confidence in the Weimar Republic, and he justifies the people's turn towards radical solutions, such as the support of Hitler and his National Socialist Party. Oddly, the actor's future lives would reflect the parts they played. Peter Lorre, who played Beckart, would be forced to flee Germany by self-appointed mob executioners; they considered him a Jew. Conversely, Gründgen, who played Schränker, would become one of the Reich's most celebrated theater personalities.¹⁰ Fritz Lang's *M* gives us a glimpse of the sentiments found Germany which would allow the political anomaly of the Third Reich to rise into being, a political power that was indeed run by criminals.

¹⁰ Anton Kaes: 72.

Bibliography

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