



DRAMA · THRILLER · CRIME

M

1931 · Directed by Fritz Lang

Early Sound

Suspense

German Expressionism

Art Cinema

A Berlin gripped by fear as a string of child murders goes unsolved. Fritz Lang's first sound film follows a city under pressure, with a sprawling cast and a cool, procedural eye rather than a single hero.

DIRECTOR	Fritz Lang
YEAR	1931
RUNTIME	1h 50m (110 min)
COUNTRY	Germany
GENRES	Drama, Thriller, Crime
CAST	Peter Lorre, Ellen Widmann, Inge Landgut, Otto Wernicke, Theodor Loos
IMDB	8.3 / 10 (179,355 votes)
ROTTEN TOMATOES	100% (critics)
TMDB SCORE	8.1 / 10 (2,552 votes)
WHERE TO WATCH	Stream (US): HBO Max Amazon Channel, Criterion Channel, HBO Max, IndieFlix Shorts Amazon Channel Rent: Apple TV Store, Fandango At Home Buy: Apple TV Store, Fandango At Home

Part one is spoiler-free. Part two, "After watching", reveals the story, scenes and ending.

Before watching

Spoiler-free

WHY WATCH THIS?

1 Fritz Lang's first sound film, and a landmark of early sound

Lang's debut in sound and one of the defining German films of 1931. It shows how a director used silence, offscreen noise and overlapping speech to shape suspense when talkies were still new.

2 The film that made Peter Lorre an international name

Lorre was known mainly on the Berlin stage. This role gave him a screen presence that is unlike the usual villain of the period and carried him into a career abroad.

3 Suspense built from sound, editing and a whole city

The film earns its tension through sound design, precise cutting and a point of view that spans many characters and places, not one hero. It is a template for the modern crime thriller.

WHY IT MATTERS IN CINEMA HISTORY

A pivotal work of the transition from silent to sound cinema and of late Weimar filmmaking. It links Expressionist visual style to the realism and procedural detail that later crime films adopted.

WATCH WITH INTENTION

YOUR LENS

Watch it as a study of how sound and editing can make ordinary rooms and streets feel tense.

THREE THINGS TO NOTICE

- How often the soundtrack carries information the image withholds: voices off screen, sudden silence, a repeated sound that returns in different contexts.
- Compositions built from shadows, doorways, windows and reflections, which turn everyday spaces into places of pressure.
- How Lang links separate scenes by overlapping a line of dialogue or a gesture from one room into the next.

ONE QUESTION TO CARRY WITH YOU

How does a film make a whole city, rather than one hero, its main character?

CINEMA AT THE TIME

- **Technology:** Sound had arrived in Germany only a few years earlier. Cameras were bulky and many early talkies were static and stage-bound, so mobile, expressive sound was still unusual.
- **Industry:** Berlin's studios were among the strongest in Europe, with skilled designers and cinematographers. The film was made independently of the biggest studio, Ufa, by Nero-Film.
- **Dominant styles:** Expressionist shadows and angles were giving way to the sober, observational mood of New Objectivity. The film draws on both.
- **Director's moment:** Lang had made large silent spectacles such as *Metropolis*. Here he works on a smaller canvas, with a contemporary setting and dialogue.

WHERE IT CAME FROM

FILM

Dr. Mabuse the Gambler (1922)

Lang's earlier crime epic of a corrupt city and a network of criminals, which *M* reworks in a smaller, more realistic and more ambiguous form.



MOVEMENT

German Expressionism

The dramatic shadows, tilted spaces and psychological use of design in *M* descend from the Expressionist silent films.



MOVEMENT

New Objectivity

The sober, documentary-like attention to city life and social problems in late Weimar art and film shapes the film's realism.



THIS FILM

M (1931)

NEW AT THE TIME *An early sound thriller that treats sound as a storytelling tool, through silence, offscreen noise and recurring audio motifs, and tells its crime story across an entire city.*

SOCIAL CONTEXT

Made in the last years of the Weimar Republic, as mass unemployment and political violence shook Germany and the Nazis were gaining ground.

- **Country and moment:** Shot in 1930–31, after the 1929 crash hit Germany hard. Millions were jobless, governments ruled by emergency decree, and street fighting between Nazis and Communists was routine in Berlin.
- **Society and audience:** Berlin was a huge, anxious metropolis with widespread poverty and fear of crime. Press coverage of notorious serial killers, such as Peter Kürten in Düsseldorf (arrested 1930), had made public panic over such cases very real.

- **Politics and censorship:** Weimar film still faced a censorship board, and conservative and Nazi groups attacked films they saw as immoral. The Nazis took power in 1933, and this film was later banned, with a reworked version appearing in their era.
- **The filmmaker's situation:** Lang was Germany's most celebrated director, working with producer Seymour Nebenzahl's independent company. He and co-writer Thea von Harbou later parted ways. Lang left Germany in 1933 after Goebbels's regime courted him.

WHAT TO EXPECT

- **Pace:** Deliberate and procedural at first, with long dialogue scenes and many characters. Tension builds through accumulation rather than action.
- **Sound:** Early talkie with very little scored music. Silence, ambient noise and offscreen sound do much of the work.
- **Colour / aspect:** Black and white in a near-square frame, with strong contrasts of light and shadow.
- **Language:** German with subtitles. Dialogue is brisk and Berlin-flavoured, so subtitles matter.
- **Versions:** Surviving prints vary in length and quality. A modern restoration is the best way to see it.
- **Performance:** Theatrical but controlled. Many small parts are drawn with a distinct physical type.

WATCH WITH KIDS?

12+ SUGGESTED AGE

Ratings range from PG (GB) and all audiences (FR) to 12 (DE). Twelve fits the disturbing central subject, plus the subtitles, long running time and talky pace.

Official ratings: UK PG · Germany 12 · France TP

- **Good for:** Older children and teens curious about classic cinema may enjoy the tense atmosphere, inventive early sound design, sharp black-and-white visuals and a gripping, morally complicated story that rewards discussion.
- **May unsettle, mature themes:** The story centres on harm to children. Nothing is shown graphically, but the subject is distressing and may weigh on younger or sensitive viewers.
- **May unsettle, intensity:** Sustained dread, paranoia and a growing atmosphere of fear and suspicion run through much of the film, building to some very tense sequences.
- **May unsettle, pace:** At nearly two hours, with long dialogue-driven scenes of investigation and debate, it can test the patience of children used to modern films.
- **May unsettle, dated attitudes:** Some views on crime, punishment and mental illness reflect 1930s Germany and are presented in ways that may feel old-fashioned or unsettling.
- **Explain first:** It is an early sound film from 1931: black and white, in German, so you will need subtitles and some patience with its older style.
- **Explain first:** The story deals with a threat to children in a city. Consider telling them beforehand that it is serious and dark, not an action adventure.
- **Explain first:** Made in Germany between the wars, it reflects a society under strain, with fear, distrust and debates about how justice should work.

Talk about it after: *The film asks who has the right to judge and punish someone. What do you think makes a fair trial, and why does it matter?*

Cinespective's own guidance, a draft. Check it against the official ratings and your own judgement.

After watching

CONTAINS SPOILERS

THE FILM, UNPACKED

CENTRAL IDEA

The film can be read as an investigation of how a society reacts to fear: through institutions, through informal networks and through the crowd. It keeps asking what justice means when everyone has a stake in the outcome.

THEMES

- **Justice and its imitations:** Official law and a rival, self-appointed order each claim the right to judge. The film sets them side by side and lets the viewer weigh them.
- **Collective fear:** Suspicion spreads through the city, turning neighbours and strangers into possible threats. Panic is shown as a social force as much as a personal one.
- **Compulsion and responsibility:** The film asks whether a person driven by something he cannot control can be held to the same standard as others.
- **Parallel worlds:** Police and the criminal underworld mirror each other in method and organisation, so the line between order and crime looks thinner than expected.
- **Vulnerable childhood:** Children appear in ordinary moments, which makes the threat feel intimate. The film shows the harm by implication, not on screen.

Key scenes

The mother waiting at the door

Lang shows a death through empty stairwells, a ball and a balloon, never the act itself. This restraint is the film's key moral and stylistic choice and shows how implication can be more disturbing than display.

The recognition by sound

A simple whistled tune becomes a trap. It shows how early sound cinema could turn a sound into evidence and a character signature, and why sound motifs matter so much in the film.

The cross-cut meetings of police and criminals

Two conferences are stitched together by matching gestures and continuous speech. The editing argues that the two groups think alike, which gives the film its structure and its irony.

The mock trial

The film turns into a debate about guilt and judgment. The accused is allowed to speak, and the crowd's certainty is tested against his plea, which complicates sympathy and leaves the ending uneasy.

Filmmaking

- **Sound design:** Lang uses silence and offscreen sound as tools. A recurring tune acts as a leitmotif, and there is almost no conventional score, which makes ordinary noises feel charged.
- **Editing:** Sound bridges and cross-cutting join distant locations and show how information moves through a city. The rhythm tightens as pressure rises.
- **Cinematography and design:** Shadows, mirrors, shop windows and architecture frame characters as watched or trapped. Expressionist inheritance is applied to realistic locations.
- **Performance:** Peter Lorre's physical and vocal control gives the central role fragility, and the ensemble is filled with sharply drawn types.
- **Structure:** The script, by Lang and Thea von Harbou, follows institutions rather than one protagonist, and shifts from procedure to a moral confrontation.

THE FULL STORY

The full plot, including the ending.

Berlin is terrorised by a killer of children. When a young girl, Elsie, disappears after leaving school, her mother waits and calls her name through the stairwell, and the film shows only the empty places she should be.

The police, led by Inspector Lohmann, comb the city, raid bars and follow forensic clues. The pressure ruins business for the criminal underworld, whose boss, Schränker, decides to hunt the killer with his own network of beggars and watchers.

Hans Beckert, the killer, is a quiet man who whistles a tune when the compulsion takes hold. A blind balloon seller recognises the tune, and a beggar marks Beckert's coat with a chalk letter M. He is hunted through an office building and hides in an attic, where the criminals find him and carry him to an abandoned distillery.

There a crowd of underworld figures puts him on trial. Beckert pleads that he cannot control what drives him, and a defender argues that he is ill and belongs to the law. The crowd demands his death until the police arrive and take him into custody.

The film ends before any verdict. In the courtroom a mother says that more care must be taken of the children.

BEHIND THE FILM

- **Lang's first talkie:** M was Fritz Lang's first sound film, made after a string of large silent productions. He used the new medium sparingly, with little music and a lot of silence, which gave it a distinct character among early talkies.
- **Casting Lorre:** Peter Lorre was a stage actor in Berlin and not a screen star. Lang cast him against type as a soft-featured, unthreatening man, and the role made him known internationally.
- **A script by Lang and Harbou:** The screenplay was credited to Lang and Thea von Harbou, his writing partner on many silent films. It was one of their last collaborations, as their marriage and working relationship ended soon after.

- **Exile:** After the Nazis took power in 1933, Lang left Germany and Lorre, who was of Jewish descent, also emigrated. Both continued their careers abroad, so M stands near the end of an era in German film.
- **The remake:** Joseph Losey directed an American remake in 1951, moving the story to Los Angeles. It is a useful comparison of how each period handled the same material.
- **Myth:** Peter Lorre was already a famous film star when he made M. **Reality:** He was known on the Berlin stage and had few major film roles. M brought him international recognition and led to work in Hollywood and Britain.

LEGACY AND CONNECTIONS

Its place in the lineage before → after

FILM

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THIS FILM

M (1931)



MOVEMENT

Film noir

Lang and other German exiles carried its shadowed urban look and moral ambiguity to Hollywood, where they became central to noir.



FILM

M (1951)

Joseph Losey's American remake transplants the story to Los Angeles and shows how the same material changes with the period.



FILM

Se7en (1995)

A modern serial-killer thriller that shares M's focus on a methodical investigation, a bleak city and the limits of justice.

Reception and reputation

The film premiered in Berlin in 1931 and was widely praised in Germany and abroad. Critics noted its use of sound, its realism and Lorre's performance. It was also controversial, since it dealt with a child murderer and put judgment itself on trial.

It is now regarded as Lang's best-known sound film and a cornerstone of the crime thriller. Its reputation has grown as later films adopted its methods, and Lorre's performance is often cited as a landmark of screen acting.

Cultural impact beyond cinema

- **Whistled menace:** The killer's whistling of Grieg's "In the Hall of the Mountain King" became a shorthand for lurking threat. The tune is still borrowed in parodies and thrillers to signal a predator nearby, even by people who have not seen the film.
- **Lorre's screen persona:** The role made Peter Lorre an international star. His wide-eyed, sweating, pleading face shaped his later typecasting as a sinister or haunted figure, and became a staple of impressions and caricatures in Hollywood comedy and cartoons.
- **The chalk letter:** The chalked "M" on the killer's coat, and the blind balloon-seller who identifies him by his whistle, are among the film's best-known images. They are widely quoted as symbols of branding and of being marked out by a crowd.
- **Justice debates:** The underworld "trial" and Lorre's final plea about compulsion have made the film a regular reference point in discussions of mob justice, criminal responsibility and the death penalty. It is also a common text in film and sound-design courses.

Its lasting influence

Its mix of procedure, urban realism and moral ambiguity shaped the police procedural, film noir and later serial-killer films. Its use of a sound motif and of sound bridges became part of the common language of suspense.

GO DEEPER

Reviews, video analysis and documentaries

Reviews

M (1931) Movie Review

Jerome Weiselberry · 7.7K views · 23 min

M Review (1931, director: Fritz Lang)

kubricklynch - Film History by Evan Chester · 3.8K views · 6 min

M LE MAUDIT CRITIQUE du FILM culte de FRITZ LANG de 1931 (sans et avec divulgâchis)

Compendium · 3.7K views · 11 min

WHAT NEXT?

CONTINUE THE DIRECTOR

Metropolis (1927)

Lang's silent spectacle shows the visual ambition and fascination with systems and crowds that M later applies to a small, realistic story.

EXPLORE THE ERA OR MOVEMENT

Frankenstein (1931)

Released the same year, it shows how Hollywood used early sound for horror, including its own treatment of a hunted outsider and an angry crowd.

SEE ITS INFLUENCE

Double Indemnity (1944)

A defining film noir that carries forward the shadowed urban style and moral ambiguity of M, shaped by Austrian and German exiles.

COMPARE ANOTHER APPROACH

Psycho (1960)

Hitchcock also focuses on a disturbed killer, but asks the audience to identify with the story's perspective in a very different way.

JUMP FORWARD

Se7en (1995)

A modern thriller that shares M's procedural method, urban atmosphere and unsettling questions about justice.

FULL CAST AND CREW



Fritz Lang
DIRECTOR



Peter Lorre
ACTOR
as Hans Beckert



Ellen Widmann
ACTOR
as Frau Beckmann



Inge Landgut
ACTOR
as Elsie Beckmann



Otto Wernicke
ACTOR
as Inspector Karl
Lohmann



Theodor Loos
ACTOR
as Inspector Groeber

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