FRITZ LANG - Curated Transcript of BBC In Our Time podcast
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In Our Time is hosted by Melvyn Bragg. Melvyn's guests on this podcast are:

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Joe McElhaney
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And

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Transcript:

[Melvyn Bragg] Hello. Fritz Lang, 1890 - 1976, was one of the most celebrated filmmakers of the last century, working first in Weimar Germany, then in Hollywood. Later audiences know him best for Metropolis, a groundbreaking dystopian vision of the silent era, or for crime movers such as The Big Heat in 1953. Yet others, such as M, his first film with Sound, have been even more influential, and with his earlier silent film Mapusa The Gambler, even more disturbing. With me to discuss Fritz Lang are Iris Luppa, Senior Lecturer in Film Studies in the Division of Film and Media at London South Bank University, Joe McElhaney, Professor of Film Studies at Hunter College, City University of New York, and Stella Bruzzi, Professor of Film and Dean of Arts and Humanities at University College, London.

[Melvyn Bragg] Stella Bruzzi, if you were to sit down in a Berlin cinema in the 1920s, knowing nothing about the film playing, what would make you think, "Ah, this is Fritz Lang"?

[Stella Bruzzi] Firstly, I think you need to think about Berlin in the 1920s. Lang shared with many of his contemporaries - fellow filmmakers, the playwright Bertold Brecht, with whom he later collaborated on "Hangmen Also Die!", film critics and theorists such as Siegfried Kracauer and many others. The experience of World War I, the Weimar period and then the birth of Nazism. This kind of background is, I think, absolutely crucial. Just as the 1920s rose out of the ashes of World War I, the decade was also a golden era for cinema - not just in Germany, but in Hollywood and in Russia. It was a medium of spectacle and of modernity, and I think that's what one thinks of when one thinks of its Lang's early films. It was a hugely exciting moment. Films such as Metropolis exemplified that excitement - its futurist vision and the spectacle, just the sheer spectacle of movement.

[Melvyn Bragg] One thing to say about Fritz Lang, he himself had fought in the First World War and a shrapnel had gone in one of his eyes [and it] was out of commission and he wore a black patch sometimes. So that was just to add to what you said about the First World War.

[Stella Bruzzi] Yes, absolutely. That's quite crucial. He didn't just take the kind of legacy of the First World War, but he really carried the First World War with him.

[Melvyn Bragg] [When] would you say? Ah, this is a Fritz Lang film.

[Stella Bruzzi] There are two ways of looking at that. One is that there's a certain thematic consistency to Lang's films. The arguably predictable preoccupation in the early films with, for example, mob rule and group think, which is carried on into the later films, and his more than slightly obsessive scrutiny of justice - characters who turn evil, for example. There is also very clearly the visual intensity of Lang's work - especially the early stuff. Not only the conventional expressionist traits of exaggerated lighting, looming shadows, angular sets, but also the more Langian touches of the reflection in the mirror or the shop front, for example - the ripples of light shed by torrential rain falling against windows. There's an interest in stylistic excess, the long shadows, distorted angles, dramatic, futuristic sets. But in Lang, you get someone who really lives and breathes cinema.

[Melvyn Bragg] What else was being made in Germany at that time that stands comparison with Fritz Lang? ... Was he on his own or was he one of several?

4:26
[Stella Bruzzi] ...Definitely one of several. ...I think, firstly, the way that one thinks about, or one contextualizes Lang, are the German/Austrians who, with the rise of Nazism, went to Hollywood. There was Fred Zinnemann. There was William Wyler. There was Wilhelm Murnau, Robert Siodmak, Douglas Sirk...you know... Billy Wilder. So there were all those filmmakers who later went on to kind of define Hollywood, really, if you like, and created film noir. But going back to the 1920s in Germany, the kind of big expressionist flagship films that were, you know, alongside Fritz Lang were,

for example, Robert Wiene's "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari", Murnau's "Nosferatu" (the first Dracula film) GW Pabst's Pandora's Box, starring Louise Brooks as a female seductress. These were the sorts of films alongside him. And, for example, I mean, it was really it was a concentration of filmmaking that one saw in Berlin and Germany at the time. Even Alfred Hitchcock went to work as an assistant director in Potsdam in 1924. And you see expressionism really feeding into and bleeding into his third film, The Lodger, which he made when he came back to the UK.

[Melvyn Bragg] That's a terrific summary. There's a great richness there. Thank you. Iris Luppa, how did Fritz Lang get into film making in the first place? And get started?

[Iris Luppa] ...Fritz Lang, was born and raised in Vienna, and he was enrolled to study architecture when he discovered that he preferred painting and he enrolled in the Fine Arts in Vienna University instead. He was quite influenced by the paintings of Egon Schiele, Gustav Klimt, and he also spent some time in Paris, where he went to galleries and studied painting. But in August 1914, Lang returned to Vienna and voluntarily enrolled in the army in 1915 and he served in the infantry. And it was in 1916 that when Lang was convalescing in Vienna, after having received an injury at the Eastern Front, which is the shrapnel in the eye that we referred to earlier, that he met another film director called Joe May, who was a fellow Austrian like Lang. And after being discharged from the army in August of 1918, again due to injury, Lang met up with Eric Pommer, who was a Weimar film producer and who owned a production company called Decla. And at this point, Pommer invites Lang to come to Berlin and work as a scriptwriter for Decla. So Lang then writes several quite successful scripts for Decla and Lang was promoted to direct his own script, Die Spinnen (The Spiders) which is another serial adventure movie.

[Melvyn Bragg] Of the early films can you talk about [Dr] Mabuse the Gambler? What makes that stand out?

[Iris Luppa] So Mabuse the Gambler premiered in one of Berlin's splendid picture palaces in the spring of 1922. ...Dr. Mabuse on the surface [is] a respectable psychoanalyst, but in reality is this master criminal hypnotist and murderer. We could think of him as a symbol of corruption, the duplicity and the power struggles during that political instability.

[Melvyn Bragg] Yeah, but you can think of him as the man he was, and he was a gambler. He hypnotized the people he gambled with and therefore tended to win all the time. He fiddled with the stock exchange, stock market and so on. He was a swindler right, left and center and a terrible man. Nothing stood in the way of his quest for power and money through gambling of various sorts.

[Iris Luppa] He plays with stock market shares, with money, with cards, with people and their destinies. And that actually, this gives us this enticing idea of the similarity between the character of Dr. Mabuse and the role of the film director. So the way that Mabuse has power over all the characters and conjures up these fantastic images and visions. There's a moment in part two of Dr. Mabuse where ... he hypnotizes the whole theatre audience to see images and visions of a caravan with camels and servants walking through the lecture theater, which we as audience in the cinema share. And perhaps again, a very telling moment is the opening moment of part one of Dr. Mabuse

where we see the opening shot of someone holding a set of cards, and the cards are portraits of the same man in various disguises. We then have dissolved to the second shot and we have this incredible moment where the stack of playing cards is dissolved onto the face of Dr. Mabuse. We see him shuffling the cards and then he picks his first disguise of an elderly stockbroker and that sets the action in motion.

[Melvyn Bragg] Thank you very much. Joe McElhaney, what kind of reputation was Lang starting to make at this stage, especially with the film that Iris has just talked about?

[Joe McElhaney] Well, the 1920s really marked the high point, I would say, of Lange's international reputation. And he didn't do it alone, though there were two key figures here, Eric Pommer, whom Iris has already mentioned, and the other is the writer Thea von Harbou, and he met von Harbou, Lang did, in 1920, and they began collaborating on screenplays. In fact, she would go on to write or co-write all of his screenplays through The Testament of Dr. Mabuse, 1933. And she was also frequently on the set of these films. Now they married in 22, and that was the same year he became a German citizen. But if I can go back one year to 1921, which is a key year for them, because that was the year they made the allegorical drama,"The Weary Death", or "Destiny" as it was called in English speaking countries. And that was really a breakthrough of success for them. It was a film Hitchcock and Luis Buñuel would later cite as a crucial film for them and showing them that the cinema now was truly a distinctive art form. For the next few years, they could do no wrong, I would say. And Lang was helped in no small measure here by Eric Pommer, first through his company, Decla Bioscop, which is where Destiny was made, and then as the head of production at UFA Studios.

[Melvyn Bragg] When Decla was absorbed into UFA, what changed? Let's come to Metropolis in 1927. A massive film and for many people, the one people remember most.

[Joe McElhaney] First of all, the film was the most expensive production in the history of UFA studios. And it was designed by Pommer, along with Murnau's "Faust" (made earlier) to compete with Hollywood - to show that the Germans could make a film on the same kind of scale and the same kind of international appeal as Hollywood. The film was, as was Faust, a huge financial failure. It was such a failure that, in fact, Pommer lost his job at UFA.

[Melvyn Bragg] For those listeners who don't know, can you just say what the central story was?

[Joe McElhaney] The core of Metropolis is the story of a young man named Freder who was the son of the owner of Metropolis, this huge city of Metropolis that employs factory workers who are exploited by the head of Metropolis, the father figure that Freder is rebelling against. Freder falls in love with a woman named Maria who is trying to lead the workers into a much more enlightened state and to effectively to revolt against the master and Freder becomes involved in this particular situation.

[Melvyn Bragg] He did an immense amount of clashing of different styles inside it, didn't he?

[Joe McElhaney] Metropolis? Yes, in particular, because there is, first of all, the fairy tale element, the Gothic Romantic element, there is the biblical element, there is the futurist element, there's the allegorical, all of these I'm probably leaving out about six or seven other things going on in this film. It is so layered in terms of what Lang and von Harbou were attempting here. I think it was just too much cinema for people at once. When it opened, Bunuel reviewed it. And he said that the story was completely moronic as far as he was concerned - a completely banal story. But he said the spectacle of it was just stunning, just overwhelming and truly innovative.

[Melvyn Bragg] Stella Bruzi, in 1931, Lang made "M" his first film with sound - a talkie, if you like, or half-talkie. What opportunity did sound give to him? I think that M is an amazing film.

[Stella Bruzzi] I would say it's Fritz Lang's masterpiece. It tells the story of a character, "M" of the title, called Beckert, played by Peter Lorre, a city terrorized by someone who is abducting and killing children, and they chased down Peter Lorre. A wonderful illustration of the integration of the visual expressiveness that one sees in Lang's film is the first time that we see Beckert, the Peter Lorre character. The schools have just finished for lunch. This is where it all starts. There's a nursery rhyme. There's a little girl walking home, bouncing a ball. She bounces the ball against a poster offering a 100 marks reward for any information that will lead to the capture of the child murderer. The shot lingers. A visual clue straight away that this is a more than passing detail. Then the silhouette of a hated man comes into view, casting a shadow over that poster, in particular the word murder. The silhouette looks down a little and the childish voice of Peter Lorre says, "What a pretty ball you have there". It inclines towards the little girl and says, "What's your name?"."Elsie Beckmann", She says. There's a cut at that point; not to the man himself (we still don't know who this person is) but rather to the mother [whom] we've seen earlier preparing lunch - an edit which is hugely ominous with maximum economy. We realize through a deft combination of sound and image, the full danger of this moment. We then see M again, but from the back so again, we don't see Peter Lorre's face - a high-angle shot of him buying Elsie a balloon from a blind street seller. He's whistling Grieg's "In the Hall of the Mountain King". (And if I can, there's a nice point of trivia, which is that Peter Lorre couldn't whistle so that's actually Fitz Lang whistling that you hear on the soundtrack.) M must think he's safe from detection, but clearly isn't - the whistle is therefore a kind of sound equivalent of the shadow, another light motif that functions as a shorthand for M. So you see the integration of sound and image very clearly. After a few minutes later, two ominously silent shots come of a child's ball rolling across scrubland and a balloon entangled in telephone wires before drifting up, perhaps into void, perhaps to heaven, we don't know.

[Melvyn Bragg] It's fascinating, the power of the silence. Iris do you want to add to that and take the story on as it were? So this little girl we know has been murdered and what happens next that's significant and significantly new in this half-sound, half-silent film?

[Iris Luppa] So I think the way that Elsie's death is actually depicted through a set of objects the empty chair at the kitchen table, the empty staircase and as we said, the ball that rolls out of the hedge and the balloons tangled up in the wire. And they are powerful images that, interestingly as spectator, keep us in a somehow detached

observational position which is quite remarkable considering the topic. But interestingly, the film doesn't sustain this mode of film making. And actually what the film does, it moves on to kind of really testing our viewing habits and checking whether we as audience are able to play close attention to what's happening on screen. So following the death immediately is that we don't return ever to the children or the mothers until the very last shot of the film and instead, the film invites us to focus on the mass hysteria that is created by the murders. And, of course, in the race between the police and the ring organizations, the criminal organizations of Berlin. So the film takes us through the press coverage, the police and the criminal detection and how it gets underway. And so Lang uses sound bridges and parallel montage to blur the distinction between the police and the criminals. And he then even goes a step further by aligning us closer and closer with the criminals. So the police are presented as, you know, kind of bumbling and forensic, but slow. Whereas the petty criminals are really wiley and effective, especially when they enlist the help of the city's beggars in finding the murderer. If I may say, the petty criminals gang together and this man is ruining their profession. Every one of them is being examined. Every one of them is suspected of being the murderer. And they can't get on with being criminals, really. And they decide that they will track him down.

[Melvyn Bragg] Joe, do you want to take us to what Fritz Lang is saying about the moral degradation of M? We have this heavily built man, Peter Lorre in his trilby hat intent on the most terrible deed.

[Joe McElhaney] Well, first of all, Lang said his intent in making the film was to create a picture of a society in the grip of self-destructive urges. And I think that's manifested in the film in several interesting ways. We can begin, for example, with the title itself and what the letter M represents, which is most obviously murder. But also the lines on the palm of every hand have the letter M on it, which is the "line of fate". So the hand in this film performs several functions. When one of the criminals draws a chalk mark on the M line of his hand he uses the weight of imprinting the letter M on the back of Hans Beckert's jacket so that it not only becomes a mark of shame, it's also a trace of something left behind so that Beckert can be tracked down and caught and Lang's cinema increasingly becomes a cinema of traces, inscriptions, marks, things left behind and often related to crime.

[Melvyn Bragg] And a hunt.

[Joe McElhaney] And a hunt - absolutely, yes. One of his anti-Nazi films in Hollywood is called Man-hunt. But there's also the importance of gesture to the film and how gestures connote this aspect of a degraded, self destructive, or simply destructive society. The way that Peter Lorre's, Hans Beckert indicates his helplessness in the face of his own urges quite often is done through gesture. In particular, the trial sequence, with his fat hands.

[Melvyn Bragg] And even before the trial sequence, there's that wonderful sequence where he sees the girl through the shop window in the toy shop, and he turns and he puts his hand to his mouth and he sort of just takes a deep breath in and resets himself. And you think, now he's going to go and do the terrible thing.

[Joe McElhaney] Yes, this trying to contain this sense.. He said, he's on trial, "I can't help myself. I can't help myself". And you see that through gesture. But he has the body of a child and the hands of a child. And one of the sort of ironies of the film, really, is the fact that these children in the film children aren't afraid of him. They don't run from him. They happily sing about him in the opening sequence of the film, "One day the man in black will come along and chop your head off". They don't care. It's the adults who are frightened of all this; the adults who want to rise up and get rid of this Hans Beckert who's making their lives more complicated than they need to be. And the character of Schränker, the gangster thief, is so interesting in relation to this, because in the trial sequence, for example, his hands are always covered in leather gloves, so he doesn't leave any trace of himself, any fingerprints behind. And when he's in the trial sequence, he's constantly pointing his index finger at Hans Beckert - hypocritically convinced of his own moral rightness.

[Melvyn Bragg] Stella, can we go to that kangaroo court? It's been mentioned two or three times.

[Stella Bruzzi] Very swiftly, Beckert realizes that he'd be better off in a real court of law. There's this lovely tight pan along the faces of the criminals as their leader declares that they're going to try him. And there they are, kind-of packed into the basement of this dilapidated distillery. But the institution of law is always, in Fritz Lang films, severely limited in terms of its inability or ability to meet out justice. And here you get, very ironically, the city's criminals whose livelihoods are seriously threatened and curtailed by the child killer's activities, putting on trial this child murderer. You get them, though, however, giving him a defense attorney, another petty criminal, which is really interesting because he raises the issue about should we be actually killing this person? Because one of the most moving sequences, and it's a very classic Fitz Lang moment really, is that we've kind-of hated Beckert. But as Joe said, obviously, Peter Lorre is very childlike - rotund, huge eyes, big pudgy fingers, just like kind-of toddlers, really, toddler's fingers. He's described, very movingly, how he feels this compulsion to kill. And there's this wonderful monologue, and done in wonderful close-ups. In Lorre's monologue, he details these compulsions, and the voices that he hears. [It] is actually the most emotional it's emotional core, the most emotional speech. So we, as the spectators, are really torn. Iris has talked about us being detached and observational. For most of the time we are, but here we're suddenly thrown into the turmoil, if you like, of the true ambiguities of finding the truth, of executing justice. I mean, should we execute this person?

[Melvyn Bragg] And also the straight-forwardness of him saying, "I can't help it, I have to do it". And you cut to some of the criminals nodding as if they too have been in that position.

[Stella Bruzzi] Yes. But then you cut later, just a few moments later, to the mothers saying, "Kill the murderer. Kill the murderer." So you've got this real kind of tension and the open-endedness of the ending, the ambivalence of the ending, tells us that actually, there's no straightforward way of interpreting Beckett at all.

[Joe McElhaney] We never find out what Beckett's punishment will be.

[Melvyn Bragg] Iris, following the rise of the Nazis, Lang left Germany in 1933 and he said he met Goebels and decided that that was enough for him and he's gone home, packed a bag, caught a train to Paris and never came back. It wasn't quite as easy as that, was it?

24:24
[Iris Luppa] No, not at all. So we have got Lang's, if you like, kind of own film script, almost like a fictional account of how he had this meeting with Goebels and he was looking at the clock on the wall and he was just hoping he'd catch the last train to Paris. So that's not what happened. What we do know for sure is that in spring 1933, Goebels saw "The Testament of Dr Mabuse" and he decided that it should be banned so it couldn't premiere. And we also know, and it is quite possible that Lang was present when Goebels delivered his first speech to German filmmakers in early 1933. What Lang then does; he travels quite freely between Paris and Berlin quite a few times, but finally leaves Berlin for Paris in July of 1933, and then spends almost a year in Paris, where he makes a film for Erich Pommer and Fox Europa called Liliom. And at that point, he already starts making connections with David O. Selznick, who was a producer at MGM. And when Fritz Lang finally arrives in the United States in July 1934, he arrives with a contract from MGM in his pocket, which, of course, is a lot more than all the other exiles often had and could take with them.

[Melvyn Bragg] Iris, what did he feel about his relationship with Goebels? I mean, he didn't rush home and pack a bag and catch a train immediately. He hung around for quite a while, then he traveled to and from Paris for the next few weeks or even a few months. So what was he doing by doing that?

26:12
[Iris Luppa] I think you have to see it from the perspective of the emigree who's trying to score brownie points in Hollywood. The more Lang presents himself as being this kind-of anti-Nazi director who was offered the biggest position in the German film industry but turns his back on it because he doesn't agree with Nazi rule. That, of course, gives him brownie points. But it's interesting because Lang actually didn't have to do any of that because what is really striking about Lang's time in Hollywood, and which not much gets talked about, is his active engagement in humanitarian activities and causes in terms of helping out and supporting immigrants still stuck in Europe. Lang is instrumental in securing the financial means for Brecht to come to Hollywood. So he doesn't [just] kind-of show his anti-Nazi sentiment, not just on screen, but in physically getting involved in trying to get people out of Europe and into America, which was, of course, the safe haven at the time.

27:23
[Melvyn Bragg] Thank you. Joe McElhaney, how did Hollywood change Lang as a filmmaker?

[Joe McElhaney] Well, we could talk on the one hand of the production circumstances or conditions of these films. Lang, like so many European immigrant and refugee film artists in the 30s and 40s, had difficulties in adapting to Hollywood methods, to having such oversight from producers and studio executives. He was also much more autocratic than actors and crew members were used to. So he alienated a number of people when he first arrived in Hollywood. He also build up, though, some positive

professional relationships with certain collaborators. The producer Walter Wanger, also the actor Sylvia Sydney and Joan Bennett. He also had a very productive relationship with a number of screenwriters. Now, he was very prolific during his Hollywood period. Now, the Hollywood films are perhaps certainly for many people, not as formally audacious as some of his German films, but I think they're no less interesting or important than what he was doing in Germany. So we might be more productive to ask not whether his Hollywood films are as good as his German films, but what links we can draw between the German and Hollywood films while also being aware of differences. And I think the central obsession running throughout Lang's Hollywood work is how do these things we call reality and the truth become constructed, become a matter of appearances rather than being simple facts, [or] givens. And the world of appearances in Lang's American films takes place through the recurring use of things like audiovisual media, the world of fiction, of journalism through art, through cinema, through politics and through the criminal justice system. And they all construct their own versions of the truth, which is repeatedly shown by the films to be a construct, but which nevertheless completely entraps the protagonist. It's almost as though the protagonists of these films cannot fight against the overwhelming tide of false appearances that dominate American culture to the point where the protagonist often becomes the appearance, the image, which they and we know to be false.

[Melvyn Bragg] Stella, in Hollywood, you think Lang was struggling with the same dreams as he had in Germany, or as has been implied by Joe, he had to change quite a lot?

[Stella Bruzzi] M was the first of several trial [courtroom] films, [and was followed] most obviously [by] his first Hollywood movie, the Spencer Tracy film, "Fury", in which he has a more standard courtroom, and there you get the audio visual evidence in the form of a newsreel that Joe has described, right through to his last Hollywood film, "Beyond a Reasonable Doubt", from 1956, which is all about probing evidence, reality. So often in Lang's films, the official judicial systems are found to be wanting and not to be trusted. They're ineffectual, wayward, capricious. That's not how you get to the truth. How you get to the truth is through, for example, the randomness of luck - just a piece of ... just a fluke slip of the tongue, for example, just someone suddenly remembering something, putting two and two together, which leads to, for example, Anne Baxter's acquittal at the end of The Blue Gardenia. Right triumphing over wrong in Lang's films has very little to do with the competencies of the institutions of law and all of this goes back, I think, to what you see in M. And then he takes forward...there are vestiges of... the German films. I mean, there's the mob rule that you get in Fury, for example. I know that's an early film, but you get the kind-of arbitrariness, I think, touching on extending what Joe's talked about. The kind-of arbitrariness of the dividing line between good and evil is so often shown on the level of performance and on the level of lighting and on the level of style. So when, for example, Joe Wilson, the Spencer Tracy character in Fury, who's been presumed killed in the jailhouse fire as the lynch mob set the jailhouse on fire and is assumed to have died, he escapes and arrives at his brother's apartment. Tracey's, entire expression, his voice, his demeanor, are all altered from the cheery, happy-go-lucky Joe before, to this brooding noirish figure who actually has a kind of almost vampiric aversion to the light. He gets his brothers to turn the light off and you see the same in The Big Heat.

[Melvyn Bragg] Iris, how successful were Lang's Hollywood collaborations with Brecht and Weil? You've mentioned that he helped them.

32:04
[Iris Luppa] Lang will always say he was a lifelong admirer of Brecht, and they both started working on an outline for film called Hangman Also Die, depicting the assassination of Reinhardt Heidrich, the Deputy Reich's Protector for Bohemia and Moravia in May 1942. And it's as early as June, so literally just a month later that Brecht and Lang start collaborating on an outline for a story about the assassination and then the subsequent brutal retribution and revenge taken out on the Czech civilians by the Gestapo. And we know a lot about this collaboration due to Brecht's journal entries. And it's wonderful to hear Stella talk about those strokes of luck and flukes in Lang stories, because this is exactly what irritates Brecht about working with Lang, writing on a script where he says, you know, "Lang introduces these ridiculous plot twists like an injured resistance fighter hiding behind a curtain during the Gestapo house search and they don't find him". And he [Brecht] becomes so frustrated by that. And he says, "Lang just says the audience will accept it". And he finds it incredible that Lang just thinks, no, the audience will accept it. And Brecht also mentions that Lang seems to be more interested in surprise than creating suspense. Eventually, you know, Lang passes the rest of the script writing onto Brecht and a young American author, John Wexley, and they present him with a 208 page-long script which is twice the length of your average Hollywood script. So Lang cuts it down by half to fit in with the shooting schedule and that deeply, deeply upsets Brecht and humiliates him. What you could argue, despite all of Brecht's reservations about the collaboration, Hangmen Also Die is an incredibly hard-hitting topical of film. So despite the ludicrous plot twists and the inevitable love story, there are moments of real pathos when we see the sacrifices that were made by the by the Czech civilians to resist the Nazi occupation. And if anything, what we can take from Hangmen
Also Die is this clash between the playwright who will always prioritize the word, versus the film director, who believes in the power of the images and lets the image do the talking.

[Melvyn Bragg] Thank you. Joe, we mentioned The Big Heat. Do you want to tell us how you think it relates to Lang's other working quality?

[Joe McElhaney] I mean, it's a very interesting film in relation to what we've been talking about so far in terms of the Hollywood films *versus* the German films or the Hollywood films *and* the German films. But I think we have in The Big Heat one of Lang's most perfectly-achieved American works. And it's deceptively simple in style. So there's little of the interest in constructing the world of literal highs and lows from Metropolis and M. The film is mainly shot at eye level. The more heavily symbolic language of his German and early films in America is muted. What we have instead is a very remarkable, I think, tight causality, a compressed intensity. But as in M, everything in this film is connected to something else, but perhaps in a less emphatic manner than an M. But what you have, again connecting The Big Heat to M is this idea of the world of crime, the world of politics, the world of law and order, all being intimately connected with one another. And so, like M, it's a film about degradation, about garbage, the gutter filth, but where things look clean. So it's really about these facades of respectability. "I don't like gutter talk", says the gangster Mike Laguna. But what The Big Heat gives us that M does not is, you may call him, I guess, this figure,

the mediator, an in-between figure. And that's Dave Bannion, the Glenn Ford character of the police sergeant. He's a very moral individual, but his morality is so inflexible that it causes a number of violent, unfortunate events to occur because he doesn't think anything through. He simply acts on the basis of his immediate moral response to something. And this indirectly leads to the death of his wife, the murder of his wife - a bomb intended for him that she receives instead when she steps inside the car and turns it on. So what we have in this film is tight causality, creates an impression that every action performed has a dimension, a consequence. And revenge comes to dominate the second half of the film. And Dave in the second half, after the death of his wife, assumes a tragic dimension.

[Melvyn Bragg] Stella, is he breaking new ground here or is he reworking old ideas?

[Stella Bruzzi] What he has done is more, I think, honed his style and honed his interest. So you get Bannion (the Glenn Ford character) being as inflexible as Joe says, but you [also] get Lang, as he always has done through his career, using style to undercut that and to show the ambiguities there. So after his wife's murder, he goes from being kind of smiling and brightly lit to becoming far more ambivalent and emotionally complex - in a way, going to the dark side of the gangsters - transition that's marked in various scenes by him becoming characterized by the kind-of surrounded by the expressionist gloom and the destabilizing shadows that you see around Lee Marvin and that side of it. I mean, in terms of his style, Lang's films get gradually less stylized and less visually extravagant. So it isn't that I think Lang develops away from the German, he just refines it.

[Melvyn Bragg] Thank you. Iris, was he ever seen as tarnished by his Weimar films?

38:15
[Iris Luppa] The two things that perhaps could have tarnished the Weimar films is, (A) perhaps having a wife who is a member of the Nazi Party as your writing partner.

[Melvyn Bragg] His wife was and stayed on. She didn't leave with him and she rose in the Nazi hierarchy and got very good jobs there.

[Iris Luppa] Yes, Thea von Harbou. So Lang actually divorced von Harbou in early 1933. So in that year, literally, after everything happened, so he gets divorced from von Harbou, Testament of Mabuse's banned and he turns his back on Germany. So apart from perhaps whatever we might say, perhaps about his political leanings, I think the actions speak louder than words. The fact that he leaves Germany, leaves Thea von Harbou behind and becomes so actively involved in fighting the Nazis on screen and in all his voluntary help for organizations and emmigrants. The other thing that slightly tarnished a reputation was the publication of two books shortly after the end of the Second World War - one by Siegfried Kracauer called "From Caligari to Hitler" and Lotte Eisner's "The Haunted Screen". And in those books, particularly Siegfried Kracauer, makes the link between, if you like, Weimar film culture and political history. And what Kracauer argued was that Weimar cinema is littered with all these criminals, tyrants, mad scientists, hypnotists, magicians, and that in some way you can read the films of the Weimar period as almost a premonition of the rise of Nazism and Hitler. And, of course, the Lang films were amongst the ones that he singled out - Dr. Mabuse

and Metropolis - as these films which are already suffused with this kind of dark ideology that kind of rises to the fore in the 1930s.

[Melvyn Bragg] Thank you very much. Joe, finally, Who did Fritz Lang most influence?

40:30
[Joe McElhaney] The influence of Lang is very complicated and it's perhaps not as clear or straight forward as, for example, Hitchcock's is. I would say the film movement that perhaps embraced Lang most clearly, most strongly, would have been the French New Wave. There is, for example, Lang playing himself in Godard's 1963 film "Contempt", and then there's Jacques Rivette's first feature "Paris Belongs to Us" where a clip from Metropolis is shown. Claude Chabrol has also stated that Lang was actually a more important and influential figure for him than Hitchcock, even though Chabrol co-wrote, the first book-length study of Hitchcock's films. But I think perhaps for Hitchcock, Lang's influence was strong, but not one that Hitchcock wanted to embrace. And in fact, I'm sure Hitchcock felt that he whatever it was that he took from Lang, he also took that in a very different direction. And that direction he took it in, Hitchcock, I think also accounts for his much greater success, both at the time he was making films and in the years since. But I think more recently, perhaps, someone like Michael Mann has also certainly spoken of the importance of Lang's work. And The Big Heat is a particularly important film for Scorsese. And I think the ethics at work in a film like The Big Heat, this question of morality in relation to a flawed male protagonist is something Scorsese certainly responds to very strongly. You see this in a number of his films, even though I wouldn't call Scorsese's films particularly "Langian". But you can see the influence of M on David Fincher's film "Seven", I think, very strongly as well, this idea of marginalizing the serial murder and then creating a kind of allegorical space of corruption.

[Melvyn Bragg] Thank you very much, Joe McElhaney and Stella Bruzzi and Iris Luppa, and to our studio engineer, John Bowland.

And the In Our Time podcast gets some extra time now with a few minutes of bonus material from Melvin and his guests.

[Melvyn Bragg] Basically, this next bit is for you to say now what you thought you didn't have time to say in the program. Iris, can we stand with you?

42:52
[Iris Luppa] Yeah, I think there's a lot more like to say about M, but I'll limit it down perhaps to one point, which I think feeds both, Melvyn, what you had to say about the shop window sequence, and that, of course, is again, the link to Brecht. So I think perhaps what we should think about is the way in which Lang really aligns us with the criminals, because they're so witty, so wily, you-know they really get onto the case of how to capture this murderer. And Lng at the time cast even the parts of the small, petty criminals with very well known Weimar film and theatre actors such as Lotte Loebinger [?] and Rosa Valette, as the barmaid, [and] Paul Kemp. And what is interesting is that when we get to the kangaroo court and we realize how quick these friendly criminals turn into a lynch mob, perhaps we realize that Lang has tricked us,

you-know, he's done what he does always. He challenges us to really think about what we're seeing. Simultaneously in the representation of Beckert, Lang gives us a much more complex picture of the murderer then perhaps we first might think. So we start off, as Stella described beautifully, with the shadow on the advertising column, the idea of the murder as the monster, the man in black, the bogeyman from the children's rhyme. But as the film continues, Lang gives us this incredibly complex study of the murderer's struggle to suppress his urge to kill in the famous shop window sequence. What I'd like to say briefly about the shop window sequence is A) that it's fascinating that we never see the murderer and the child in a two shot, so we never see both characters standing next to each other in the frame. What we get instead is, again, something Stella referred to with the idea of reflections in shop windows. The murderer sees the girl's image which is reflected in a mirror, which is placed inside this wonderful display of crockery and knives in the shop window. So he's enticed by the image of this child. We then get a closeup of the most stunning moment of Peter Lorre using facial expression and gesture to represent to us the struggle, and then failing to resist the urge to follow this child. And we see this; he's been munching an apple and we see him take the apple to his mouth with one hand and then using the other hand to try and stop himself. We see the struggle, and then he drops both the hands and we see him turn from this kind of, if you like, innocent flaneur into this psychopathic stalker. What makes the scene so interesting is, of course, the connection to Brecht in a way that Peter Lorre, at the time of working on M, was also in a Brecht production. And we can say for sure that Peter Lorre was trained in Brecht in techniques of acting the so-called demonstrational acting, where you try to appeal to the audience's reason and understanding in presenting social processes.

[Melvyn Bragg] Would you like to come in, Joe?

[Joe McElhaney] What I would have liked to have talked about is something that really interests me in terms of the American work. But this also begins with M and the Testament of Dr. Mabuse, and that has to do with spoken or written language. And spoken language and written language in Lang's work is rarely the straight-forward vehicle for communication. It's meaning is always questioned and becomes another terrain for interpretation. And words often have a dual or multiple significance. So that in Fury, for example, Joe repeatedly confuses the word "memento" with "momentum", a seemingly innocent mistake, but that confusion over two words is germane to the entire project of Fury. And then, if I can back-track a bit or actually bring up The Big Heat again, the chief hangout for the gangsters in that film is a bar called The Retreat. And a character later in the film, a secretary at a wrecking company named Selma Parker, one of the many crucial women in the film, has trouble remembering the name of this bar, but she says it sounds like a monastery. "You know..", she says, "..a place where people go off to think". A crucial line and a crucial mistake, or a crucial blank that she draws in this film, where the act of thinking, of learning to think, is absolutely fundamental. Now revenge is central.

[Melvyn Bragg] Say something about revenge because it's so interesting.

[Joe McElhaney] Well, what's interesting about The Big Heat, because Dave Bannion feels like he's going to be the vengeful character, [but] what happens in The Big Heat is the ultimate acts or gestures of vengeance occur not by Dave, but actually by Debbie Marsh, the Gloria Grahame character. This is a film about thought, about thinking,

about thinking before you act and think through the consequences of what you're doing. Dave doesn't really do that. Debbie Marsh finally does, but only after her boyfriend, Vince Stone, another gangster, scars her face, scars it by throwing hot coffee on it. And so she goes into retreat in Dave's hotel room, and she says at one point that she has never thought before in her life until this moment. Now she's starting to think. And she actually exposes all the corruption in the city, makes it all come forward. I've never felt better in my life, she says. And she's about to kill the woman who is basically behind all, not behind the corruption, but behind hiding the corruption. And this finally, this big heat, this gangster film, seemingly male-dominated genre is finally, I would say, dominated and shaped by the women. And the women in the film are very strongly connected and contrasted with each other in this very powerful way. Again, culminating in the confrontation between Debbie Marsh, bad girl, who's really the good girl of the film, ultimately, and the widow of the policeman who commits suicide at the beginning of the film and holds a secret. But the widow is keeping these in her safe deposit box. They're both wearing mink coats, but she says, Debbie says to her, "We're sisters under the mink".

[Melvyn Bragg] Stella, do you want to come in? You needn't to follow that. It's just, is there anything that you [want to say].

[Stella Bruzzi] Yeah. No, I was just thinking, Melvyn, we've talked a lot about quite rightly about Fritz Lang as a great stylist, but there's also something very kind-of practical and schematic - there's a really practical and schematic dimension, I think, to his film making, to his plotting, to his love of procedure, as I mentioned earlier, to the way that he concludes his films. There's a lot of emergency exits, as his fellow emigrate Douglas Sirk might have put it, endings that either don't extend causally from what's transpired before or are the last minute results of some new information coming to light, or a sudden volte-face, as we get at the end of Fury, which Joe has just been talking about. And there's also a sense, thinking about that, he was a great stylist, but also he didn't perhaps quite know when to .. when to give up. And I always wish I liked his last film in Hollywood, "Beyond a Reasonable Doubt" [which] is his most schematic film. It's all about ... it's so schematic ... it's very paired down...it doesn't really breathe as a film. The acting is pretty wooden, I think, the film is pretty wooden because it's all just a ruse. It's sort of the central premise, which is overly schematic is writer Dana Andrews setting out to prove that an innocent man can be found guilty and executed by framing himself for a murder that he didn't commit, only he did commit it, but then he makes a little error at the end, the kind of "momento/momentum" type error [reference back to The Big Heat]. There's a little slip of the tongue which then proves he was guilty after all. And you can feel the cogs. You can feel and see sense the cogs working. And it's really I would have liked to have asked Fritz Lang why he wanted to make a film like that, which had all of his favorite [themes] around justice, around human nature, around slips, around chance, around luck - and do it so badly. But [...] I know there are some people who really love the film. I've watched it so many times. I wish I did. But there's a kind-of ...You can see, in a sense, it's the quintessential Fritz Lang film, but it has none of the style. And I think he was a deeply ambivalent figure, really, because of that. He was a great stylist, but he didn't always use it. And I just would have liked to have had the long conversations with him about when he made those choices, really.

[Joe McElhaney] I actually love "Beyond a Reasonable Doubt". I think it's an amazing film. So I'm in that camp...

[Stella Bruzzi] Do you? I wish I did, because I write about justice, I write about the law so many times, and I just ... I look at Joan Fontaine's performance and I just think, how could you get such a bad performance out of Joan Fontaine? I love Joan Fontaine.

[Joe McElhaney] Well, I think that's part of the allegorical impulse at work here. Just empty it of any kind of obvious human expression, because it's about something else, something larger, more important. It's a world, that's already dead....

[Iris Luppa] And I think it's interesting, Stella, what you touched on is something that critics of his Weimar films, Weimar film critics at the time, often acused Lang of. So with Metropolis, one critic said, "This is ridiculous. How can he make an ideological film without ideology?" In M, Lang was constantly accused of not taking sides, you-know, and they said, "Well, is he for the death penalty or is he against?" But one critic then literally pointed out that perhaps his fellow colleagues have what he calls "principles instead of eyes", because what he's saying is that actually, fundamentally, Fritz Lang's films are much more concerned, perhaps, with seeing and blindness, in the sense that, you know, the narratives are so powerful and Lang's mastery of cinematic techniques is so powerful that he can take us on a ride. You know, he takes us along with the criminals, you know, with Dr. Mabuse. We're charmed by Dr. Mabuse! We were completely complicit with the criminals in M until they turn into a lynch mob. And it's interesting, then, perhaps, to see how quickly they resort to violent retribution when actually the film's character, the murderer, really struggles with the impulse to curb his own violence. And I think perhaps that Lang is in many ways, it sounds bit glip, but he is a filmmaker's filmmaker. He's interested in a very self-reflexive way. He's interested in the power of film to mis-guide the audience, to make us think that we know everything that goes on, but only to reveal them to us, that we are partially sighted.

[Melvyn Bragg] Well, thanks very much. That was so good.

In Our Time with Melvin Bragg is produced by Simon Tillotson.