Nazis vs. the Rule of Law: Allegory and Narrative Structure in Fritz Lang's *M*

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I

Despite the voluminous amount of critical attention Fritz Lang's masterpiece *M* has received over the years, no consensus has been reached and no entirely convincing account has been given about the film's main concern. It is certainly not just the attempt to make money, for the movie simply does not belong to any of the genres associated with commercial success. On the surface, it might be seen as a whodunit: but while it deals with the identification and arrest of a serial killer, the audience learns too early on in the movie who the murderer is. Neither can the movie be called an exploitative, sensationalist crime flick: only one murder actually occurs in the film, and it is rendered with almost mannered understatement (a ball rolls into the frame and stops; a balloon floats skyward) and melancholy, almost tender symbolism (the ball represents the victim's body coming to rest on the earth; the balloon is her soul floating heavenward).

Nor can *M* be seen as a melodramatic crime movie: there is no doubt that the movie engages its audience on a deep emotional level, but it does not do so by exaggerating, embellishing, and sentimentalizing crime, it paradoxically achieves its emotional effect by presenting the murderous threat in the 'cold' film language of documentaries.[1] For example, a whole series of shots presents the methods of modern forensics by introducing us to such things as the analysis and filing of fingerprints or the systematic methods of canvassing a crime scene. Not only are these sequences visually marked as documentary in nature—the soundtrack contributes to the same effect: in the off, we hear the police chief's voice, sounding exactly like a narrator from a documentary, explaining to a government minister the reasons for the police's lack of success.[2] Similarly reminiscent of documentary filmmaking are shot sequences that outline the modern methods of criminals. We see a case full of lovingly arranged tools of the trade. When the camera pans the totality of objects confiscated during a round-up, we can spot—among other things—an electric drill, a tool which most definitely was state-of-the-art in 1930. We witness the artistic pretensions of a picklock and learn that criminals break into a room through the ceiling of the floor above it to avoid triggering an alarm system.[3]

As the wonderful and detailed readings by Anton Kaes and Tom Gunning have shown,[4] it makes much more sense to read the movie as a com-

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mentary on how big city life affects human existence, or, maybe better, on how what it means to be human has been transformed by social and economic modernity.[5] At every turn we are confronted with manifestations of the universal anonymity experienced by the inhabitants of big cities. Particularly when we are shown the elaborate technologies used to find the murderer—the round-ups, the filing systems, the detailed maps, the dragnets, the beggars' surveillance program—the murderer serves as the proverbial needle in a haystack and thus illustrates the stunning anonymity under which all citizens are conducting their lives. It is therefore most poignant that in the end the murderer's concealment is only removed with the help of seemingly accidental markers of identity: a brand of cigarettes puts the police on his track; a whistled tune tips off the balloon salesman. Apparently, only coincidences, not methodology, can lift the veil of anonymity.

The corollary of anonymity is loneliness, and the film is filled accordingly with images of strangers who pass each other without acknowledgment and communicate only during some economic exchange, be it Beckert's purchases of fruit, his ordering of some drink, or the come-on of a prostitute. When we contemplate the elements of Beckert's lonely life—rooming with an almost deaf landlady, walking aimlessly through city streets, experiencing no meaningful communication with other human beings—we might even be tempted to wonder if a socially more fulfilling life could have prevented him from the descent into his unspeakable crimes.

We learn much about the information dispersal in a big city and its effect on the population at large. Crowds gather around *Litfaßsäulen*, people pull *Extra-Ausgaben* out of the hands of paperboys, the murderer takes the opportunity to taunt the police by writing letters to the press, and *Stammtischbrüder* get into fights upon a newspaper analysis of the probable profile of the murderer. In short, we witness that instantaneous availability of information, far from giving people a sense of control over their lives, is instrumental in creating a veritable mass hysteria. In a similar fashion, we are shown how the city dweller lives under a constant barrage of annoying attention-getting devices: there is, for example, the constant honking of traffic—its noise sound-engineered to be artificially loud and nerve-racking—or the shop window displays with moving arrows and spirals, jerking *Hampelmänner*, and erratically moving toys that draw not only the eyes of passers-by away from Beckert's stalking, but also those of the cinema audience.[6] One is almost tempted to say that both mass media and advertisements are designed to create the one large collective distraction that the murderer needs to pursue his prey without raising suspicion.

But such aspects, as indisputable as they are, cannot be the movie's main concern. If this were the case, why would the bulk of the movie's time be taken up by cross-cutting between the two races to catch the murderer, one conducted by the police, the other by the criminals? Or, to make the point broader:

why would so many aspects of the film's language—narrative structure, cuts, use of sound, visual rhymes—be structured by the binary opposition police - underworld? And why would the narrative arc of the movie culminate in a long trial scene set in the claustrophobic basement of an abandoned building, so far removed from the big city's bustle?

Many scholars, without arguing for it explicitly, have focused not on the depiction of modernity, but on the serial killer's psyche and the causes of his murderous impulses as the movie's ultimate concern.[7] This approach, plausible in its own right, is particularly compelling when combined with the previous one. For insofar as the movie is indisputably concerned with the way the integrity of the self is under attack in modern city life—how it is driven into anonymity and loneliness, constantly assaulted by aural and visual stimuli, and swept up in media-generated mass frenzies—it seems particularly attractive to argue that the murderer is just the epitome of what modernity has wrought. The otherwise puzzling fact that people nod in empathy and recognition when Beckert describes his inner anguish to the court of criminals[8] could now find its explanation: everybody has experienced what Beckert has experienced, but the others have just not yet been driven to murder.

However, I would like to argue that the murderer's psyche is of no great interest to the film, for we are never really given the opportunity of understanding what makes him tick.[9] We are allowed to *see* him in action and witness how he is overcome by his desire to kill, how he struggles against it, and how he finally succumbs to his evil desires, but we are never made to *understand* where these desires are coming from. Even when we get a glimpse of his interiority as he stands before the criminals' kangaroo court and describes what has been driving him to kill, we learn little more than that he is suffering from some unspecified paranoid delusions. Some statements, such as the one that only a killing can silence the ghosts of the mothers and children who are after him, are even downright cryptic.

One does not have to look far to explain our ignorance: the movie offers very little information about the murderer. We never learn anything about his parents or childhood, his life during the war, his economic situation. (How, for example, does he make a living?) And we certainly learn nothing about his sexual history.[10] It is almost as if the murderer were intended to be a fearsome but incomprehensible cipher. Strangely, instead of satisfying our curiosity about the murderer, the movie chooses to focus on police procedure, criminal organizations, and the mechanics of the two chases.

Therefore, I would like to suggest that the murderer is just a plot device, albeit an indispensable one. One might even say that he is a perfect example of what Hitchcock, who very much admired Lang, called a MacGuffin. The murderer is there because he allows Fritz Lang to make important points about the three groups that make up the society of the movie: mothers, police, and criminals. He does this by investigating the way all three groups respond to

this grave challenge to social peace. We are not supposed to understand the murderer, I submit, but rather the society which he has brought to the point of disintegration. And since the solution to a social crisis must issue from the realm of politics, I would like to suggest that the movie should be read as a political allegory, not one as obvious as that of *Metropolis*, but as an allegory nevertheless.[11]

II

Two of the groups just mentioned, the criminals and the police, mainly relate to the murderer by hunting him. If my interpretive approach is correct, the main question therefore is: what does the hunt reveal about the hunters? I will first look at the criminals because they, as I will try to show, hunt the murderer for reasons other than what is commonly assumed.

When the criminals decide to go after the murderer themselves, they give three reasons for this,[12] but a close look will reveal that only one is truly valid. The first reason is a purely financial one: as long as the murderer is at large, the criminals claim, they are heading for bankruptcy. Since in their helplessness the police have started to arrest waves of petty criminals in raids of underworld hang-outs, the crime bosses are seeing the basis of their livelihoods evaporate. However, while this may be a good reason to start the hunt, it does not explain the actual behavior of the criminals while it is under way. At one point, the criminals have trapped Beckert in an office building to which they do not have access. What should they do? Tell his whereabouts to the police, one criminal proposes.[13] But this suggestion is immediately rejected and instead the much more cumbersome, and much more dangerous, route of burglarizing and searching the building is chosen. But does this make sense? If they get the murderer and kill him secretly, how will that stop the raids? After all, the police will not know that the murderer is no longer at large. And would business not return to normal as soon as the police had custody of the killer? These questions are even more pressing soon thereafter, when the criminals have narrowed down Beckert's location to the building's attic, but an alarm is triggered and the police are on their way. This time, the danger is much more imminent: it would be most prudent now to simply leave and tip off the police, thereby avoiding the possibility of arrest. However, they prefer to apprehend the murderer themselves.[14] Why?

Equally unsatisfying is the second reason for hunting down Beckert. The criminals claim injury to their reputation, since the indiscriminate nature of the police raids creates an intolerable erosion of the distinction—essential to their professional pride—between a crime boss and a serial killer. Again, the same objection offers itself: why do they risk arrest instead of simply betraying the murderer to the police? Sure, if everything goes well with their hunt, they themselves will be in a position to secretly kill Beckert. But precisely because of

this secrecy, they will fail to restore their reputation. If, on the other hand, they were to hand Beckert over to the police, this very act would surely raise their profile—and not just with the police, but with the general population as well.

Only the third reason given can properly explain the course of action taken by the gangsters. For suddenly, after having outlined the two reasons just mentioned, Schränker (the boss of bosses) raises his voice and, while the others nod in assent, bursts out: "Diese Bestie hat kein Recht zu existieren, die muß weg, die muß ausgerottet werden, vertilgt. Ohne Gnade, ohne Barmherzigkeit!"[15] What seems to be at work here is not financial self-interest or a sense of honor, but rather an emotionally charged, deep-seated conviction about who counts as human and who does not, and—more importantly—what should happen to the subhuman. Only this reason explains why the possibility of turning the murderer in is so quickly dismissed: since the police can hardly be expected to be involved in a campaign of *Ausrottung* and *Austilgung*, the criminals have to do the job themselves. If that is true, the degree of risk they are willing to take on is the proper measure of the depth of their eliminationist convictions.

Needless to say, Schränker's vocabulary is eerily reminiscent of Nazi rhetoric. This similarity becomes even more obvious during the proceedings of the kangaroo court when Schränker uses almost the same words: "Dieser Mensch [sc. Beckert] muss ausgelöscht werden wie ein Schadenfeuer, dieser Mensch muss ausgerottet werden, dieser Mensch muss weg."[16] The way he is delivering this statement—raising his voice in theatrical emotionality, punctuating his words with dramatic gestures—is strongly evocative of Hitler's or Goebbels' public speaking style, and even more, like these two, he is doing all this for the clear purpose of whipping a large audience into a frenzy. And he finds success, for soon his audience is appropriating his rhetoric and screams as if possessed: "Das ist kein Mensch!", "Abkillen, die Bestie!", "Schlagt ihn tot, den Hund!", "Bringt das Vieh um!"[17] When they subsequently rush the murderer with the obvious intent to kill him, one cannot shake the feeling that all along a pent-up exterminationist desire has been present among these people and is finally enjoying its ugly release.

Given the proximity of the movie's completion to the Nazi takeover, it has been common to read it as containing, in one form or another, a reflection on the gathering storm that was to sweep away Germany's first democracy. My attempt to link the criminals, and particularly Schränker, to the Nazis also goes in this direction. But does it help us to make sense of the movie as a whole? Certainly this reading would go against that of Siegfried Kracauer in *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947). Kracauer offers a grand interpretive scheme for reading Weimar cinema as a whole. For him, the films express two things: the inability of Germans to come to terms with the freedom that has fallen into their laps, and a desire to resubmit to some larger *Kaiser*-like authority. In this manner, Kracauer can sketch a quasi-teleological development from the somnambulist Cesare in *Das Kabinett des Dr. Caligari* (1920), who turns into

a murderer under the spell of the mastermind Caligari, to the Germans' willing submission to Hitler and their execution of his murderous designs. In his reading of *M*, Kracauer applies his interpretive scheme by taking Beckert to be a Cesare *redivivus* who, as the paranoia of his final monologue purportedly shows, has internalized a Caligari-like authority and is following its murderous commands.[18]

To me, this is implausible for a number of reasons. First, nothing in Beckert's description of what drives him to murder points to a voice of authority ordering him to kill; if there is someone doing so, it is, strangely, "die Gespenster der Mütter und Kinder."[19] Second, in two other Weimar movies Fritz Lang (who was involved in the making of *Das Kabinett des Dr. Caligari*) did in fact create his own version of a Caligari-esque criminal mastermind with the uncanny ability of manipulating others into murdering—namely, Dr. Mabuse. And surely, if there is a stand-in for Mabuse in *M,* it is Schränker; Beckert is no criminal mastermind, and whatever drives him to kill, it is not the desire for domination over an entire society exhibited by Schränker or Mabuse. It is therefore quite apt that in *Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse* (made right after *M* and immediately banned by the Nazis) Mabuse is clearly marked as representing Hitler. And a final argument: the Nazis' campaign against the Jews was based on an ideology, just as Schränker's campaign against Beckert is based on an ideology. In contrast, there is no ideological reason behind Beckert's killing spree: it is the result of a mental derangement.

When *M* was released in 1931, National Socialism was an established part of the political landscape of the Weimar Republic. Hitler's and Goebbels' rhetoric, ideology, and methods had become common knowledge. So when Schränker dresses in a black leather coat, contemporaries could make the visual connection to the coats so favored by Nazi grandees.[20] His exaggerated gestures and vocal inflections would have been familiar to anyone having seen Hitler and Goebbels before a mass audience, as would have been the habit of cruelly mocking helpless opponents.[21] The court scene would have evoked the careful staging of a mass rally for the sole purpose of transporting the audience into a form of hysteria. And finally, the careful observer would certainly have noticed both groups' similar exterminationist vocabulary. It does not seem farfetched to assume that Fritz Lang and Thea von Harbou had the Nazis in mind when conceiving of Schränker and his gang.

However, even if we grant the validity of identifying Schränker with Hitler, we must admit that this is not enough to construe the text as an allegory; only if other important elements of the narrative fit into a larger figurative scheme does such a claim make sense. It is therefore necessary to ask what the police—after all, the criminals' antagonists—stand for if the criminals are taken to represent the Nazis.

An important clue is given by the criminals during the trial scene. Twice they break into laughter, and it is odd that it happens both times when the

police are called the legitimate custodians of the murderer. We already know that the criminals have a deep-seated aversion to handing Beckert over to the police, but the reasons for this aversion are still somewhat murky. A closer look at the criminals' position on this issue should shed some further light. It is Beckert who first insists he be handed over to the police: "Aber ihr könnt doch nicht einen nackten Mord an mir begehen. Ich verlange, dass man mich der Polizei ausliefert. Ich verlange, dass man mich vor ein ordentliches Gericht stellt."[22] To be sure, the criminals' laughter certainly takes stock of the irony that a serial killer conveniently discovers the immorality of murder. But one also has to take into account that Beckert is phrasing a legal argument, as his vocabulary ("nackter Mord," "ausliefern," and "ordentliches Gericht") indicates. Much of the criminals' frivolity is caused by the fact that Beckert appeals to the legal principles that allow a citizen to expect the state to protect his life and to allow him the right to a legitimate court (an "ordentliches Gericht") which follows rule-governed procedures. That the criminals oppose precisely this concept of what we would call constitutional or human rights becomes readily apparent in Schränker's retort. When he peppers his speech with sarcastic expressions such as "Berufung auf § 51," "ein Leben lang auf Staatskosten verpflegt werden," or "wegen Unzurechnungsfähigkeit gesetzlich geschützt sein,"[23] it is clear that he considers the very concept of a criminal's protection by the law risible.

When laughter rings out a second time, it appears to be for the same reason. This time, the defense attorney invokes the authority of a universal human right: "Einen Menschen zu töten, der für seine Taten nicht verantwortlich zu machen ist, dazu hat niemand das Recht, auch nicht der Staat, und Sie schon gar nicht. Der Staat hat dafür zu sorgen, dass dieser Mensch unschädlich gemacht wird, dass er aufhört, für seine Mitmenschen eine Gefahr zu sein."[24] And he even repeats this appeal to human rights, not deterred by the mockery, more forceful than before: "Ich werde nicht dulden," he states although the audience's laughter has turned into jeers, "dass in meiner Gegenwart ein Mord begangen wird. Ich verlange, dass diesem Menschen [. . .] der Schutz des Gesetzes zuteil wird, auf den auch der Verbrecher einen Anspruch hat. Ich verlange, dass dieser Mann der Polizei übergeben wird."[25] But to no avail. First the underworld audience angrily denies the applicability of human rights by excluding Beckert from the circle of humanity: "Das ist kein Mensch!" someone interjects during the defense attorney's remarks. Then they simply rush Beckert with the clear intent of lynching him, thereby resorting to the most ostentatious way possible of expressing their disdain for proper judicial procedure.

It is worth noting that the film has found a cunning visual way to epitomize the concept of the rule of law to which the criminals as Nazis are so opposed. Whenever the defense attorney makes his point, he rests his one hand on a stack of law books, and when it is finally the turn of an "ordentliches Gericht" to sentence Beckert, the judges sit behind several dozen law tomes.

Clearly, they base their activities on codified rights and procedures, or, to make the obvious pun, they go by the book. The criminals, on the other hand, not only laugh at this attempt to uphold the rule of law—they mock it by virtue of the very fact that they stage a 'trial.' Certainly, they could have killed Beckert right away—*ohne viel Federlesens*, as the saying goes. But by creating their own 'court of law' they can offer a putative alternative way of administering 'justice'—one where the table before the 'judge' is covered not with books, but with a cane that is menacingly shaken at the defendant. In this court the defendant is only entitled to an attorney because Schränker magnanimously grants one,[26] and no procedural rules are necessary because judge, accuser, and executioner are one and the same.

The rule of law is there to insure fairness in the administration of justice and to make sure that the emotions and agendas of those driving the judicial process do not win the day. Even in a democracy, there is a need for a system of checks and balances that protects the people from their baser instincts. Again, the movie finds a visual way to convey this. When Beckert stands in front of Schränker, who occupies the position of the judge, the people sit right behind Schränker and he acts as their spokesperson. There is no possibility of a difference between popular will and judicial decision. But when Beckert is sentenced by the state court, the people are sitting in front of the judges, and although the chief judge proclaims that the judgment is rendered "im Namen des Volkes,"[27] they very well might be surprised at what it is. While the judgment might be rendered in their name, they themselves did not render the judgment.

All this points to one conclusion: if the criminals as Nazis are opposed to human rights and a state upholding them, the police, who, after all, are charged with guaranteeing these rights, would be the allegorical representation of the rule of law, or, as the Germans call it, the *Rechtsstaat*, which always has the concept of an invariable set of rights as its basis.[28] It is therefore proper that when the police finally take Beckert into custody, a hand is placed on Beckert's shoulder—with a surprising gentleness that is in marked contrast to the way Beckert was roughed up by the criminals minutes earlier—and a voice in the off proclaims, "im Namen des Gesetzes." We are meant to believe, it appears, that this is why the police were acting as they did all along and why they were racing the criminals for custody of the murderer: because they were charged by law to do so, and even to save his life.

III

As suggestive as the evidence for this allegorical scheme might be, the latter must make sense of the movie's narrative structure in order to be convincing.

The movie can be divided into three parts.[29] First, an exposition portrays a society in crisis. Children—the very future of the country—are being killed,

and the people are beside themselves: neighbors and *Stammtischbrüder* point fingers at each other, and innocents are wrongly accused on a daily basis. Since police investigations appear rather plodding and their lack of success even emboldens the murderer to write taunting letters to the press, the authorities are being attacked as incompetent from all sides. It would hardly be far-fetched to see this social chaos as a reflection of the final years of the Weimar Republic, when a sense of deep crisis was similarly accompanied by the perception of a fundamental failure of the authorities. In turn, it should be fair to say that the murderer, while not functioning as an allegory of any specific tendency in Weimar society,[30] is being set up as the plot device creating the deep crisis that the movie needs in order to evaluate the various responses to it. The second part of the movie starts with the parallel, brilliantly cross-cut brainstorming conferences of the state authorities and the crime bosses; continues through the race for the murderer; and ends with the criminal's aborted trial and the murderer's subsequent arrest by the police. Here a simple question is being posed: Who will catch the murderer? In other words, who has the wherewithal to save society? Will it take a new political paradigm (the Nazis)? Or will the authorities (the Weimar Republic, with its commitment to the rule of law and human rights) get their act together after all? The third part of the film comes after the police save the day for the law-governed state–but only by a hair's breadth. This part consists of a very short epilogue depicting a high state court rendering its verdict, followed by a tableau of grieving mothers. The epilogue appears to question whether the 'solution' offered by the *Rechtsstaat* is entirely adequate.

The competition between the criminal world and the police takes up the bulk of the movie, and therefore the proposed allegorical scheme has to account for its features. Far from treating the chase merely as a clever plot device meant to keep the audience members at the edge of their seats, my interpretation takes it to be a sophisticated tool that lets both political paradigms display the virtues and vices of their methods. As a result, the movie can comment on the legitimacy of each paradigm's claim to power.

If we approach the movie from this angle, it should be possible to make sense of some of the peculiar features of the film I discussed in the beginning. The conspicuous documentary dimension of the film, which quite often seems to have a digressional quality, can now be explained by the movie's need to explicate the methods of the two paradigms struggling for supremacy. It is, after all, the subtleties and limitations of police work, and the organizational abilities of the underworld, which are the subjects of the documentary sequences, and both are key factors in the race for legitimacy. And the elements of the movie which appear as investigations into the nature of modernity can be seen as deepening investigations into the crisis of society which both paradigms strive to overcome. Therefore, the two competing paradigms have to prove themselves not just vis-à-vis the problem of finding the murderer, but also vis-

à-vis the toxic fallout of modern big-city life, of which the murderer as well as the mass hysteria are salient examples.

So what are the virtues and vices of both paradigms? The criminals, without a doubt, excel in efficiency.[31] We learn that the police have been searching for the murderer for about eight months, but the criminals, once they set their mind to it, are able to apprehend him in a few days. The reasons for this efficiency fit neatly into the proposed allegorical scheme: the criminals simply disregard two rights granted by the law-governed state to its citizens: privacy and freedom from bodily harm.

Clearly, the criminals can identify Beckert so quickly because, due to their ability to mobilize a large number of people, they are able to establish a comprehensive system of surveillance. In effect, a large number of *Spitzel* takes away the privacy every passerby takes for granted when walking the streets, in effect placing him under constant observation. There is more than a whiff of totalitarianism to this *modus operandi*, and it is rather appropriate that in a famous shot Schränker, upon devising this surveillance plan, lets his black-gloved hand hover over the map of the city:[32] from now on, society is in the grip of a system of complete control.

The contrast to the police's excruciatingly slow efforts could not be greater. Unable to compromise their citizens' privacy, they can only try to find the needle in the haystack either by a calculus of probability (in effect, raiding all establishments where they suspect the murderer to be)[33] or by a quasi-scientific investigation that they hope will turn the minutest trace into a clue lifting the murderer's veil of anonymity while leaving untouched the lives of all others. To be sure, the police manage to respect the citizenry's privacy and find the murderer, but one has to acknowledge that despite their methodological approach, their success is largely predicated upon luck: if Lohmann at the right moment had not remembered a minor detail from a very old case—the brand of cigarettes found at the crime scene—Beckert would have slipped through their dragnet.

The second reason for the criminals' quick success can be found in their ruthless use of violence in the pursuit of their goals. When Schränker needs to extract essential information from a watchman about the office building in which Beckert is hiding, a short torture session does the trick. This is in sharp contrast to the police's treatment of Franz, who, as the only criminal they captured in the abandoned office building, is arguably more essential to the police than the watchman is to the criminals. But Franz is granted complete freedom from bodily harm, and the interrogation is entirely non-coercive: he is treated politely, with offers of cigarettes; he can try to outsmart the interrogator ("Die Tour verfängt bei mir nicht," he says at one point), and he can choose to be silent. The police are finally successful, but only when one of a series of failed psychological feints actually works, leaving him to believe that he will be charged as an accessory to murder.[34] Franz is tricked, not coerced, and as

a result the police need a rather long time to acquire the information they are after. As always, playing by the book slows one down.

On the other hand, what the police lack in efficiency, they possess in accuracy. After tracking the murderer down, they have compelling evidence to tie him to the murders: he has a previous conviction for a similar crime, his window sill displays the imprints from the letter he wrote to the police, and fragments of a red pencil with which the letter was written are still present. In this respect, the criminals are lacking: they do have the right man, but this time they are the lucky ones. It is, after all, a blind man who identifies Beckert. To be sure, he is characterized as having a special relation to music,[35] and the Grieg melody the murderer whistles will stick in anybody's mind, but how can he be sure he heard the tune on exactly the same day Elsie Beckmann was killed? And how can he be sure that the melody was whistled both times by the murderer, and not, say, by a father who on both days happened to buy a balloon for his daughter? And finally, how can he seriously claim, during the criminal's trial, that the same man who was whistling the tune is standing in front of him after doing nothing more than putting his hand on Beckert's shoulder? Clearly, this is not evidence that could stand up in a court of law—but then again, the blind balloon salesman does not have to testify in such a court.

So it seems that the proposed allegory can make sense of the narrative structure: the race of efficiency against accuracy and lawfulness represents the race of a totalitarian political paradigm against a rule-governed state. And since for the longest time the criminals—through their ruthlessness and panoptic surveillance—are way ahead in the race, they can claim to be the ones truly equipped with the tools necessary to rescue modern society from its crisis—and they behave accordingly. As if to assert that criminals like him should be in charge of the political process, and not a law-governed, modern democracy, Schränker wears, of all things, a policeman's uniform while directing the break-in of the office building. Judging by appearances alone, he has already taken over the state. And when the criminals 'try' the murderer in a spectacle which exhibits most of the trappings of a court, the mere impersonation of the state has transmogrified into something resembling a dress rehearsal for the actual usurpation of political power—an eerie foreshadowing of what happened in Germany shortly after the release of the film. That the police and human rights actually win the race against totalitarianism is of little comfort, since it only happens in the very nick of time and with a heavy dose of luck. As admirable as it may be in its values, democracy does not come across as a match for the rising specter of National Socialism.

IV

So if the movie is concerned with the advantages and disadvantages of two starkly different political paradigms, does it take sides? If yes, this would

mean that one side is presented as having the ability to overcome the failures of modernity; if no, this would mean that both sides are thought at best to be able to address the symptoms (i.e., apprehend the murderer), but unable to treat the disease.

The question is more difficult to answer than it appears. On the one hand, one can point out that Fritz Lang repeatedly declared the movie to be a statement against the death penalty. One can argue that the patient, resourceful, and humane conduct of the police is admirable and that Lohmann is meant to be sympathetic, in contrast to his antagonist Schränker. And one can point to the fact that, after recoiling from the murderer throughout most of the movie, the audience in the last minutes is taught to pity him when they witness his mistreatment at the hands of the criminals and the sudden revelations about his inner torment and helplessness. It might therefore be quite plausible to read the movie as a warning to all upright supporters of democracy to finally get their act together, solve the crisis of the Weimar Republic, and thereby pull the rug out from under the growing movement of Nazism.

But certainly this is not how every contemporary construed it. „Fabelhaft!" Goebbels wrote in his diary after watching the movie, "Gegen die Humanitätsduselei. Für Todesstrafe. Gut gemacht. Lang wird einmal unser Regisseur."[36] And indeed, it is well known that Thea von Harbou, who probably bears the most responsibility for the screenplay, was at the time already harboring the Nazi sympathies that during the Third Reich made her an important participant in Goebbels' propaganda machine. So is it not possible that we, in the face of the deep crisis gripping society, are expected to commend the criminals for their efficiency and thus to reject the murderer's appeal to our pity and the defense attorney's invocation of the human rights as precisely that, "Humanitätsduselei?" Is it not possible that human rights and the rule of law are meant to be seen as part of the problem, not as the solution?

When trying to think through this ambivalence,[37] it is useful to look at the use of the term *Volk* in the movie, for the race between both political paradigms is at its deepest level quite clearly a race for the heart of the people, for both democracy and charismatic totalitarianism claim to fulfill the will of the people.[38] It is, for example, rather conspicuous how disdainful of the *Volk* the democratic authorities are: they see the people as prone to mass hysteria and unable to help in any orderly investigation. Sometimes they seem to think that they are fighting the people as much as the murderer. Lohmann himself expresses this sentiment rather eloquently right after a colleague proposes that they seek better cooperation from the public: "Hörn Se mal bloß auf von der Mitarbeit des Publikums. Wenn ich bloß daran denke, krieg ich das kalte Kotzen. [. . .] Zum Deufel nochmal, was habn wir denn bis jetzt von der Mitarbeit des Publikums gehabt? Berge von Briefen mit den irrsinnigsten Verleumdungen. Alarmierung der Mordkommission, wenn en Schornsteinfeger über nen

Hof ging. Aber wenn man wirklich mal von den Leuten ne vernünftige Auskunft haben will, dann habn se plötzlich von nischt ne Ahnung, dann können se sich durchaus auf nischt mehr besinnen."[39] Maybe such a disillusioned attitude is necessary for doing good police work, but it certainly points toward a deep rift between the government and its people.

Another indication of the movie's concern with this distance between democratic state and its population can be found in the second-to-last shot. For when a high state court is proclaiming its judgment over Beckert by using the standard formula, "Im Namen des Volkes . . . ", the people in the courtroom are *not* shown, and the rather stuffy and aloof demeanor of the court does give the impression of an intentional rejection of the hyperemotionality with which the public has responded to Beckert throughout the entire film.[40] In addition, we do not even hear whether Beckert received the death penalty (the Weimar Republic had not abolished it[41]) or was shown mercy due to reasons of insanity; and we do not hear whether the public was satisfied with the judgment or not. Thus, despite its invocation of the people, the court's judgment appears strangely out of touch with them.

The court's deadpan "Im Namen des Volkes . . . " might ring particularly hollow when compared to the rough justice to which a group claiming to be the *Volk* tried to bring Beckert just seconds earlier in the movie. Surely Lang and Harbou did not mean for this riffraff—Schränker describes their incarceration as spanning "von sechs Wochen Tegel bis fuffzehn Jahre Brandenburg"[42]—to be truly representative of the people. But there are women who know about the loss of a child and big, burly men who can get weepy over dead children and feel a short pang of compassion for Beckert. We might very well take it to be an alternative *Volk*–one with which Schränker, through the force of his charisma, is able to establish a rapport that stands in distinct contrast to Kommissar Lohmann's relation to the citizens he serves. Instead of the bickering masses that Lohmann loathes, Schränker creates a unified whole which is not only in complete agreement with itself, but has shed even the appearance of disagreement between its leader and the people.

The movie's fundamental ambivalence now seems clearer. The movie does not really take sides, for each political paradigm has a flawed relation to the people. In the first, leaders and the people are so severely at odds with each other that the state is barely able to do its job. In the second paradigm leaders and people have fused to a degree that everything has become possible, even the outrageous violence of a lynching. The unpalatability of these two alternatives suggests that the movie is aiming at a third possibility. But what could it be? I believe that the very last shot gives us a clue. Here we see three mothers clad in black, all of them weeping, with Frau Beckmann in the middle saying with great emotion: "Davon werden unsere Kinder auch nicht wieder lebendig. Man muß eben noch besser auf die Kinder achtgeben. Ihr!" The fact that she is looking straight at the audience, even breaking through the fourth wall by

using the second person plural, must mean that a point is being made that is of particular importance for the film. And Fritz Lang himself has said that he made *M* "to warn mothers about neglecting their children."[43] Whatever one might think of Frau Beckmann's statement, it is conspicuous that her 'solution' does not rely on the state at all, but rather on common human solidarity. The anonymity of the big city, which makes such abductions and murders possible and which the movie has gone to great lengths to depict, must, for her, be canceled out by a renewed effort at taking responsibility for one's neighbor, for recreating a lost *Zwischenmenschlichkeit*. Interestingly, this is a position which one of the participants in the police strategy session has already voiced: "Der größte Teil des Publikums, der steht doch noch heute auf dem Standpunkt, was geht denn das mich an. Dass aber jeder einzelne Mensch vor seinem Gewissen dafür verantwortlich ist, was mit dem ärmsten und fremdesten Kind auf der Straße geschieht, Gott, das ist doch der großen Masse noch nicht im Entferntesten aufgegangen."[44]

One cannot help but feel that this proposed exit from the carefully crafted impasse of the movie's political allegory falls flat. That a change as radical as that wrought by social, political, and economic modernity could be overcome by turning the big city back, as it were, into a village where everybody knows everyone else and takes care of him must be taken as a piece of political romanticism which might not be as heavy-handed as the one emerging at the end of *Metropolis*, but which might strike us as even more naïve today.[45]

[1] At least twice Fritz Lang himself called the movie a documentary, once in his essay "'Mein Film *M*': In Tatsachenbericht," published in *Die Filmwoche*, vol. 9, May 20, 1931, as quoted in Anton Kaes, *M* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), 9, and once in an interview with Peter Bogdanovic, published in Peter Bogdanovic, *Who The Devil Made It* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 183. Not surprisingly, such perceptive readers as Lotte Eisner and Anton Kaes have spoken of the film's "documentary element" or "documentary dimension." (Lotte H. Eisner, *Fritz Lang* [New York: Oxford UP, 1977], 114, and Kaes, *M*, 52.)

[2] Apparently, Lang drew heavily on the articles by one of the main investigators of the almost contemporaneous Kürten serial killings, Ernst Gennat, in the *Kriminalistische Monatshefte*. (Kaes, *M*, 31–2.)

[3] This was the method used in the 1929 robbery of Berlin's Disconto Bank by the Saas Brothers. (Kaes, *M*, 51.)

[4] Kaes, *M*, and Tom Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Vision and Modernity* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), pp. 162–199.

[5] The following observations are to a large extent not taken from the readings of Kaes and Gunning. On the other hand, both critics go far beyond what I can offer here.

[6] The window display seen in 0h46m44s contains no less than six differently moving toys, the sight of which, giving no rest to the eye, is almost vertiginous. Time references to passages in the movie are given according to the latest restored version on DVD (Irvington, NY: The Criterion Collection, 2004).

[7] See, for example, Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1947): "The film's true center is the murderer himself" (220); Lotte Eisner, *Fritz Lang* (New York: Oxford U P, 1977), 111–128; Robert A. Armour, *Fritz Lang* (Boston: Twayne, 1977), 98–103.

[8] 1h42min07–40s.

[9] Like Gunning (*Fritz Lang*, 179), I find Maria Tatar's sophisticated analysis of the murderer's psyche ultimately unconvincing (Maria Tatar, *Lustmord: Sexual Murder in Weimar Germany* [Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995], 153–172). It could even be argued that Beckert's murders are not sexual in nature. On the one hand we learn from a list of his victims (0h04m28–45s) that he has killed a boy as well, and on the other hand Peter Kürten, the serial murderer who served as the major inspiration in the making of the film, killed for the sake of killing and chose his victims from both sexes and very different age groups.

[10] Kaes, *M*, 68f suggests that the killing spree is grounded in a World-War-I trauma, and although he shows convincingly throughout his book how somberly the Great War hovers in the background of the film, we receive no information about Beckert's involvement in the war and can therefore do no more than speculate about a possible connection.

[11] Interestingly, a 1931 review in the *London Mercury* takes what for me is the right perspective on the film: "The murders are actually no more important to the film than is the ring of a telephone bell an indication of any conversation that follows." (Quoted in Frederick W. Ott, *The Films of Fritz Lang* [New Jersey: The Citadel Press: Secaucus, 1979], 159.) When Kaes, *M*, 31 calls the film a representation of a mass murderer complex in society, he too moves away from an undue focus on the murderer, but I will try to show that the movie is about much more than modern society's curious obsessions with gruesome crimes and its irrational overreactions.

[12] 0h33m30s–0h34m53s.

[13] 1h09m01–04s.

[14] 1h18m56s–1h19m15s.

[15] 0h34m44–51s.

[16] 1h44m38–47s.

[17] 1h47m31–43s.

[18] Kracauer, *Caligari*, 222.

[19] 1h42m54–57s.

[20] This has already been noted by Kaes, *M*, 69.

[21] "Dir soll dein Recht werden," Schränker tells Beckert (who questions the legality of the kangaroo court) in what might be the best example of his mocking: "hier sitzen lauter Sachverständige in Rechtsfragen, von sechs Wochen Tegel bis fuffzehn Jahre Brandenburg" (01h38m28–35s).

[22] 1h39m44s–1h40m01s.

[23] 1h40m07–28s.

[24] 1h46m24–45s.

[25] 1h47m50s–1h48m13s.

[26] 1h44m58s.

[27] 1h48m46s–1h49m09s.

[28] Already Paul M. Jensen has said that "*M* really embodies the more general contrasts of disorganisation (the police in one sense, the mob in another) and order (the criminals and beggars), justice and revenge, Democracy and Fascism, even The Weimar Republic and the Nazi Third Reich." However, Jensen failed to work out his intuition, and of course I disagree with his next sentence: "All this, however, is subordinate to the film's quality as a semidocumentary crime melodrama." (Paul M. Jensen, *The Films of Fritz Lang* [New York: A.S. Barnes & Co.; London: A. Zwemmer, 1969], 96). Not as a result of a real analysis of the film, but more as an essayistic aperçu, Klaus Kreimeier has identified Schränker with the Nazis as well in his essay "Strukturen im Chaos: Wie Fritz Lang Ordnung in den Dschungel bringt" in: Irmbert Schenk (ed.), *Dschungel Großstadt: Kino und Modernisierung* (Marburg: Schüren Verlag, 1999), 57–66.

[29] I do not want to dispute the cogency and validity of the film's division into nine parts by one of the film's most masterful readers, Noël Burch. However, while I am interrogating the allegorical potential of narrative elements, Burch analyzes the movie in a structuralist fashion with the help of such categories as (dis)continuity and unveiling and is therefore coming to a different result. Noël Burch, "Fritz Lang: German Period," in: Richard Roud (ed.), *Cinema: A Critical Dictionary* (New York: The Viking Press, 1980), 583–599.

[30] The opacity of his motives, as I have discussed them, renders any attempt at assigning to Beckert some aspect of Weimar society as the corresponding element in the overall allegorical scheme futile.

[31] Compare Jensen, *Fritz Lang,* p. 96.

[32] 0h41m45s. Kaes, *M*, 46f has convincingly analyzed the movie's concern with the Foucaultian panopticon.

[33] As Jensen (*Fritz Lang*, 97) points out, it is not particularly efficient for the main investigators to check the identity papers of a ragtag assembly of petty criminals, particularly since they would not know how to tell the real murderer from a common pickpocket.

[34] Kaes, *M*, 53 says that the police break the law by trying to make Franz believe that a murder has occurred. I fail to see what law has been broken. Lying to a suspect during an interrogation is, and has been, standard police procedure. To my understanding, it is not a violation of any constitutional rights, in the U.S. or the Weimar Republic. If a suspect, in his stupidity, confesses to a crime after having been lied to, this does not invalidate the confession. Indeed, the Miranda warnings in this country are designed to protect those arrested from incriminating themselves under just such circumstances. No doubt the police and Lohmann are skirting the rules, but they never step over the line.

[35] He shows signs of physical distress when a hurdy-gurdy is played out of tune. 0h45m33–49s.

[36] May 21, 1931. Joseph Goebbels, *Die Tagebücher: Sämtliche Fragmente*, ed. by Elke Fröhlich (Munich, New York, London, Paris: K.G. Saur, 1987) Part I, vol. 2, 68.

[37] Tom Gunning, coming from a different angle, insists upon this ambivalence with equal forcefulness. Gunning, *Fritz Lang*, 197–8.

[38] Since earlier I identified three main groups in the movie, police, criminals, and mothers, it is legitimate to ask what the relationship of the mothers to the concept of *Volk* might be. For an outline of an answer, it is important to realize that whenever the *Volk*, i.e., people acting as a mass, appear in the movie, they are essentially a mob. Whether they crowd a newspaper boy for an *Extraausgabe*, or whether they rush an arrested thief, ready to pummel him, because they think that he is the murderer (and thereby foreshadow the criminals rushing Beckert in order to lynch him), they consistently appear as a thoughtless, hyperemotional mass with a short fuse and a proclivity to violence. As the rest of my article tries to show, *M* is not at all devoid of the crude political Romanticism dominant in films such as *Metropolis*, and I would suggest that in the framework of this Romanticism the mothers are meant to be representative of the ideal *Volk*. After all, when they are presented most thoroughly in the first minutes of the movie, they are characterized by features such as caring, solidarity, hard work, self-sacrifice, and unconditional love. Therefore, the depth of treacly sentimentality with which Elsie Beckmann's mother is presented while waiting for the return of her daughter is, for me at least, the measure of the cheapness of Lang's Romanticism.

[39] 0h37m09–46s.

[40] As indicated above, it is of course the purpose of procedural rules in a trial to banish emotions as much as possible in the quest for truth and justice. But precisely this quest for objectivity is what by necessity creates a rift between state institutions and the public at large.

[41] Quite informative in this context is the little book by Stephan Jankowski, *"Warte, warte nur ein Weilchen . . . ": Die Diskussion um die Todesstrafe in Fritz Langs Film "M"* (Wetzlar: Edition Kletzmeier, 1998).

[42] 1h38m33–5s.

[43] As quoted in Jensen, *Fritz Lang*, 96.

[44] 0h37m59–0h38m19.

[45] Never have I had to acknowledge so many debts as I do for this article. I am grateful to the audience members at the GSA 2006, where I presented an embryonic version of my argument: their many helpful comments helped me immensely to bring my ideas into focus and the overall positive response to my argument made me trust that I could work it out on a more sophisticated level. I am grateful to members of my department at the University of Nevada, Reno, who in a faculty colloquium helped me understand what I did not understand about the movie. I am grateful for the many perceptive comments by an anonymous reader for *Monatshefte*, many of which I have tried to address. And I am particularly grateful to my immediate colleague Valerie Weinstein, who kindly commented on an earlier version of the manuscript and saved me from one big mistake and a number of smaller ones.