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FILM REVIEW ESSAY

'M' (1931)¹

JANINE CHASSEGUET-SMIRGEL, PARIS

Director: Fritz Lang

Distributor: UFA

The premonitory character of the film *M* [*Mörder unter uns*] and its connection with the rise of Nazism has been indicated more than once. I would like to demonstrate the essential ambiguity in this linkage.

It is said that a masterpiece allows interpretations at multiple levels. According to Lang himself (though should we ever believe *auteurs*?), he just wanted to make a 'documentary' about a criminal and the process of police investigation. He tells us that he was inspired by *The Threepenny Opera* and by a news report about Berlin's organised crime mob searching for an unknown killer to get rid of the insistent presence of the police. To Lang then, the film is the hunt for a criminal and his subsequent judgement by the mob.

The Nazis themselves, already powerful enough in 1931 to dictate the law, forced Lang to change the original title of the film *Mörder unter uns* (Murderer[s] among us) to *M*, probably because they felt he was alluding to them! Rarely is a translated title better than the original, but the alliteration in *M le Maudit* (M the cursed)² makes this more stirring than the original German title.

Although there had been the case of Peter Kürten, 'The Vampire of Düsseldorf', Lang

and his wife, Thea von Harbou, co-authors of the screenplay, were inspired by the Grossman case in Berlin, as well as by other killers of children such as 'The Ogre of Hanover'.

The recurrence of this type of serial murder might be understood as a social symptom. Certainly, it is only in retrospect that these crimes, which appear to be isolated cases, make sense. In France the Weidman case is often brought to mind. Weidman killed at least seven people and was arrested on 9 December, 1938. He was born in Frankfurt and executed in Versailles on 17 June, 1939. This was the last public execution in France and it took place in the midst of unexpected agitation in the crowd, as if it were a premonitory event, heralding war, crime and the lawlessness of Nazism that would expand throughout Europe. This is a topic that Michel Tournier revisits in his 1970 novel *Le Roi des Aulnes* [The Erl-King].

Even a superficial reading of this film will focus on the individual psychology of the killer and the reactions of society, which is sufficient to keep one's interest. However, a second reading at least is called for. Even if we reject a purely socio-political reading of an oeuvre, the greatest creations cannot escape the context in which they were produced, just as dreams contain the day residues that contributed to their formation. We know that masterpieces are timeless, even if they draw their material from

¹ A paper concerning the same film was presented by the author at a colloquium organised in 1995 in Munich by Jochen Stork and published in 1998 (1: 61–9) in *Kinderanalyse*. The author is grateful to Jochen Stork for his permission to have this article reprinted in a modified version. This version was translated by Miguel A. Stamati.

² *M* also stands for *meurtrier* [murderer].

the context that gave them birth. We already find timelessness on a first reading of *M*: it is a fairy tale.

M THE OGRE—A FAIRY TALE

From the beginning, *M* immerses us in the world of infantile imagination. The film starts with a human shadow crossed by an *M*, accompanied by the music of *Peer Gynt* (an interminable fairy tale). This theme, the only music played in the film, is whistled by *M* throughout the film. Then a counting-out rhyme starts, with the screen still black:

Warte, warte nur ein Weilchen
bald kommt der schwarze Mann zu dir,
mit dem kleinen Hackebeilchen
macht er Schabelfleisch aus dir.
Du bist raus!³

It is the story of the Ogre, of Saint Nicolas, of Hansel and Gretel, of the *Erl-King*. Behind the anxiety of the mothers (Elsie Beckmann's mother and the pregnant laundress) one can see the excitement of the girls playing. The Ogre and the *Erl-King* are irresistible seducers.

Spheres and circles punctuate the entire film and always appear linked to the child and her relation with *M*: the sphere of the pregnant woman's abdomen, the circle of children playing, Elsie's dance towards the signpost where the shadow of *M* is projected over the warning notice that promises a reward of one million marks for the capture of the murderer, the balloon that *M* buys for Elsie, Elsie's ball bouncing on uneven terrain (a sign that the crime has just been committed), *M*'s fruit on his window-sill. Later we see the circles of the police compass over the map of the city, *M* again slicing an apple in front of the fruit stand with pineapples and grapefruits, *M* eating the same apple in front of the showcase of the cutlery where his face is reflected, together with the reflection of a new prey, the endless spiral that the little girl

looks into at the shop, next to the arrow that goes up and down, the knife-penis of the impotent murderer. The little girl is, this time, saved by the arrival of her mother. Then, again, another little girl, the most seductive of them all, for whom *M* will buy sweets in a store with the sign 'Obst und Südfrüchte' (regional and tropical fruits). *M* peels an orange with his pocket-knife after buying the girl a balloon like the one he bought for his first victim, sold by the same blind beggar, while whistling the same melody of *Peer Gynt*, where he fades out, singing 'in the castle of Halldu, king of the mountain ...'

When tales have a happy ending, the gnomes and the elves, the spirits of the forest or a good fairy come to rescue the child. Here, it is the Berlin mob that comes to the rescue. And the story doesn't end there: it is like the endless spiral, or the eternal return of a circle of children playing together. There will always be dark, dangerous men attempting to seduce children and children who will let themselves be seduced. It was said that Peter Lorre (who plays *M*) received hundreds of love letters after the film was shown.

In his *Le Roi des Aulnes* Michel Tournier, writes that a warning is directed to all mothers living in the regions of Gehlenburg, Sensburg, Lötzen and Lyck to beware the Ogre of Kaltenborn! The hero, Tiffauges (the name of one of the castles of Gilles de Rais)⁴ presents striking similarities with those he pretends to denounce. Ambiguity reigns.

M THE JEW

Another interpretation of the film is possible. When we see *M* today, our knowledge of history leads us to add meaning to the images. When we see the vertiginous staircase where Elsie's mother sees nothing to lessen her anxiety, we cannot help concluding that an intentional link is being made with the events still to come in

Germany. The vast, bare attic and the clothes-lines on which some pieces of lingerie are hanging prefigure the dead bodies of children. And the power lines where the flying doll-shaped balloon gets caught make one think of the barbed wires of the concentration camps, even though we are in 1931. Although we should be prudent with our assumptions, we could say that the matrix of events to come is already present in the intuition of an artist. It is as fascinating for a historian as it is for a psychoanalyst to find in German books, works of art and films from the post-WWI era the intuitions of their creators foretelling the advent of Nazism.

Klein discovered fantasies of poisoning with gas (flatus), attacks with explosive excrement and burns from urine, as described in *The Psychoanalysis of Children* (1932), when she was in Berlin (1921 to 1926) for her analysis with Abraham.

In 1931, the breach between Jews and Germans is completed. *M*'s trial by the mob takes place in the abandoned and tumbledown distillery *Kunz und Levi*, representing this breach, according to Ludwig Haessler (personal communication). It has often been said that the ranks of organised crime of Berlin, with its hierarchy, its laws, its courts (tribunals) already represented the Nazi party and its rise, a conclusion that is difficult to doubt. The boss, Schränker, played by Gustav Gründgens, with his leather trench-coat, his single black glove and his hat, reminds one irresistibly of the future members of the Gestapo, already present by then in the cadres of the Nazi party.

It is also difficult to separate what we know about Gründgens's⁵ destiny (Klaus Mann made him the protagonist of his *Mephisto, History of a Career under the Third Reich* [1987]) from the character of Schränker and his words when he says about *M*: 'He must be eliminated, he must disappear, without pity' with accents that are properly Hitlerian. Perhaps, even there, one must recognise Lang's sensitivity in choosing Gründgens for this role.

But isn't *M* himself the epitome of the murderer, since he is a murderer of children? Was the title 'A murderer among us' (*Mörder unter uns*) an allusion to the Nazis? And would *M* then be the Nazi? The response cannot but be ambiguous. The real identity of Peter Lorre may influence us (his real name was Löwenstein). We have other clues: when *M* denounces himself in front of the mob tribunal as a cursed one, the carrier of a fire that burns, of a torment, is he not the Jew who supposedly killed Jesus Christ and who then was accused, throughout time and even today, in Russia and other parts, of killing Christian infants, of ritual killing, of putting the blood of infants in the unleavened bread for Passover?

According to Gunnar Heinsohn in his book *What is Antisemitism?* (1978), the origin of anti-Semitism (or at least one of its roots) is in the prohibition in Judaism of the human sacrifice and of infant sacrifice in particular. ('You shall not sacrifice any infant of Moloch'. Thus God ended human sacrifices then commonly practised, replacing Isaac with a ram) He remarks that human sacrifice, especially infant sacrifice to the extent that Christ is equated with the infant-God, continues to be practised in the Christian religion, Catholic in particular, where the body and the blood of the Saviour are incorporated when there is belief in the 'real presence' during the Communion. In fact, there is a prohibition against incorporating blood in the Jewish ritual—the kosher diet prescribes that blood must be drained from meat and an egg that has been fertilised can't be eaten. One should underline the cannibalistic interdiction that these practices reflect. The Jew would then be an 'anti-Ogre', or, furthermore, the first one no doubt, to oppose these practices and ogresque representations in others and in himself. In fact, one can understand the projection of infanticide on to the Jew as connected with the need to accuse the very one whose commandments prohibit it of a crime for which one is responsible.

³ Just you wait a little while/the nasty man will come/with his little axe/he will chop you up/You are out!

⁴ Friend of Jeanne d'Arc and murderer of children.

⁵ Gründgens, a Nazi party member, became an actor-fetish of the Third Reich cinema.

If such is the case, *M would be the Jew on whom the secular accusation of infanticide is made*. And the film does nothing to withdraw this accusation. The theme of the circle, the sphere, the spiral, the ball, the balloon, which emerges throughout the film, is primarily a symbol of the foetus in the womb, as is the pregnant woman at the beginning of the film. *Avoir le ballon* is a colloquial French expression meaning 'to be pregnant'. At the same time, this sphere in the form of fruit that he eats is an illustration of M's ogre-like qualities.

Once the projection of the infanticide is made, the supposed murderer is marked by an *M* on the back, as the Jews will be marked by a yellow star, signalling the victim to be. However, even with the appeals of Schränker and the crowd ('We have to exterminate him, kill him like a dog'), there won't be an execution. The force will remain with the Law. The police will deliver M to Justice and a maternal voice off-camera will say towards the end: 'That won't give us our children back ... You'd better watch your children ...'.

How do we understand this ending? Ambiguity here multiplies. 'In the name of the Law', says the voice of the policeman whose hand appears on M's shoulder. But, if this Law does

not suffice to deliver us from the danger, is it then a matter of making use of another Law? If so, what Law then? Schränker's Law, perhaps, and the Law of the mob in general? Isn't this a call for emergency regulations that could get rid of M in a more efficient way than the one adopted by the impotent regime of the democratic Weimar Republic?

I can't help thinking that the *mise-en-scène* and the dialogues of this brilliant film have two authors, Fritz Lang and his wife at that time, Thea von Harbou. The former resisted Goebbels's offer to become the director of cinematography for the Third Reich and emigrated, on the very day of the invitation, to France and then to the US. Lang's wife, from whom he separated, later became a member of the Nazi Party. Perhaps the ambiguity of the film, especially of its ending, is a reflection in itself of these two divergent fates? Perhaps it is a reflection on the decaying Germany of the Weimar Republic? Perhaps the reflection of ourselves when we lack the courage to resist the ultimate vertigo of the irrational, when we have no father to protect us from the attraction of the *Erl-King* as we let ourselves fall under his fascinating and fatal dominion?

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END

BOOK REVIEWS

The Cast of Characters. By Paul Schwaber. New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press. 1999. Pp. 236 + xix.

There is now a fair consensus that James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) is the most important literary work of the twentieth century. It has spawned a vast critical literature, dedicated, among other things, to clarifying some of its presumed obscurities, elucidating its parallels with its Homeric model and mapping the geography and the populace of the novel against the actualities of Dublin on 'Bloomsday'—16 June, 1904.

Schwaber, a professor of English literature and a practising psychoanalyst, has chosen to address the novel through a study of the principal players in its unfolding drama—its 'cast of characters'. Through a meticulous textual study, he focuses a psychoanalytic eye on these figures—primarily Leopold Bloom, the protagonist; Stephen Dedalus, its Telemachus; Molly Bloom, the Penelope; and some of the lesser personalities, such as Gerty McDowell, the Nausicaa, and The Citizen, its Cyclops.

Joyce's connections with Freud and psychoanalysis have been topics of considerable controversy. Although his 'stream of consciousness' technique appears to be related to Freudian free association, Joyce vehemently denied this; he insisted that he derived it from Edmond Dujardin's novel *Les Lauriers Sont Coupés* (Ellmann, 1982, p. 126; Svevo, 1927). He expressed considerable disdain for Freud and his concern about 'the unconscious' (Ellmann, 1982, p. 436, p. 546), and Italo Svevo¹ maintains that when Joyce left Trieste in 1915 'he knew nothing about psychoanalysis' (1927, n. p.). But Ellmann notes that Joyce

had in his possession in Trieste three small pamphlets in German, Freud's Leonardo essay, Ernest Jones's *The Problem of Hamlet and the Oedipus Complex* and

Jung's *The Significance of the Father in the Destiny of the Individual*. They were all published in German between 1909 and 1911, and it seems likely that Joyce purchased them during that period. He probably heard about psychoanalysis from Ettore Schmitz² [i.e. Italo Svevo!] (p. 340 n.)

In any event, it is hard to imagine anyone in the intellectual world in Trieste or anywhere else in the Austro-Hungarian empire who by 1915 'knew nothing about psychoanalysis'.

Whatever the case, the richness of Joyce's character portraits, both in *Ulysses* and in earlier works such as *Dubliners* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, has often invited the attention of psychoanalysts and psychoanalytically orientated scholars. Schwaber is, however, unique in his ability to employ for his chosen tasks the full battery of expertise in both literary and psychoanalytic scholarship, and with them he achieves a critical synthesis that is at once profoundly illuminating and richly entertaining. His empathic immersion in the story, based on decades of study and teaching, permits him to elaborate on the inner lives and complex, conflicting motivations of Joyce's characters and on the literary devices that permit the reader to experience them as actual, breathing people.

Centre stage belongs, of course, to Leopold Bloom, the non-Jewish Jew who is at once Joyce's Odysseus and his Everyman. Schwaber makes fully credible the motives of this twice-converted son of a converted father and a Christian mother for identifying himself as a Jew and for defending this identity, at some risk to himself, against the anti-Semitic taunts of his bar-room acquaintances. Prominent among these motives is surely his impending cuckolding by Blazes Boylan, a dominant theme that emerges into his awareness

¹ Italo Svevo (Ettore Schmitz) was a friend of Dr Edoardo Weiss and was related by marriage to his family. One of Joyce's models for Leopold Bloom, he was also the author of the first 'psychoanalytic' novel, *The Confessions of Zeno* (1923).