FRITZ LANG: A “DARK MIRROR” TO GERMANY AND AMERICA

by

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(Under the direction of Dr. Christine Haase)

ABSTRACT

This thesis traces the transition of Fritz Lang from German cinema to American. The development of Lang’s style and techniques used to demonstrate social and political aspects of society both in post war Germany and post war America are being discussed. Furthermore this thesis shows, through the close study of two of Lang’s major films, the expressionistic tendencies that Lang later conveyed in his noir films.

INDEX WORDS: Expressionism, Film Noir, Fritz Lang, M, The Big Heat
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this to my husband, Derek, for the long hours and arduous nights he survived while I wrote this.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

No one could honestly declare that Fritz Lang’s German films outdo his American films, nor could one argue the opposite. Instead it makes more sense to maintain that Lang’s works have been consistent both in theme, style, technique, visuality and philosophy over time. While the subject of his films varied, there is always some basic connection between them all.

Lang largely produces films with a social commitment. He is able to seize the emotion of whatever society he is in and transfer that emotion onto the screen. Because the themes of his films are rarely directed toward a select few, he is capable to communicate with a widespread audience. Though Lang began his film career in Germany, he easily adjusted to the American film community bringing with him the style he formed in Berlin. He depicted the universal notions of paranoia and helplessness by incorporating his expressionistic tendencies in his noir films with a touch of his own personal style. From his views on displaying violence to his frequent use of mirrors and shadows to delve into the psyche, Lang had a style that remained consistent over time. Through examination of the styles for directing that he helped to define, his own style and two of his major films, I plan to illustrate the commonalities and the development of Lang’s films.

In order to understand Fritz Lang’s development as a director and his transition from on country to the other, I first present (in chapter two) a brief historical and stylistic background of post World War One Germany. This chapter explains the social and political causes of the rise of expressionism as a German art form. Chapter three
demonstrates the evolution of film noir out of post World War Two America, highlighting the consequences of war, McCarthyism, and film noir style. The personal history of Fritz Lang that I provide, supplies information of Lang’s upbringing, his rise as a director, and his individual stylistic techniques. Finally I analyze the style of Lang’s first “talkie,” *M*, and his noir film, *The Big Heat.*
Despite film noir’s reputation for being predominantly American, its framework is doubtlessly European. The stylistic features of Expressionism, common in German Cinema in the early 1900s, foreshadow film noir’s visual style and pessimistic mood prevailing in America after the Second World War. Moreover, in the comparison of films from the expressionistic period with those of film noir, their close ties to each other become even more apparent.

Confusion, social collapse, and uncertainty dominated the German way of life following the loss of the First World War. The Treaty of Versailles left the Germans humiliated and significantly weaker. The outcome of the treaty forced Germany to disarm almost completely, pay off all war debts, and give up land. They were restricted to their own land with virtually no way to defend it and paying a great deal of money for their involvement in the war, causing Germans to feel very confined and inferior. Starvation, inflation, and extensive unemployment plagued the country. (Spicer 21) The public also began to feel the pressure from the latest rise of industrialization and capitalism. The population was no longer secure in their jobs especially since many positions were being filled with machines. This meant that people not only had to compete with other people to keep a job, but they also had to compete with machinery and emerging technologies.
Struggling to make sense of the world after such a devastating loss, artists developed new techniques to portray the world around them. Expressionism became an outlet to display the struggle that most Germans were then faced with. The main goal of Expressionism was to portray emotion and an inner state of mind instead of reproduction of an object. Expressionists recognized the need to study the substance of things rather than their momentary forms. “The world is there for all to see; it would be absurd to reproduce it purely and simply as it is.” (Eisner 10) Seeking everlasting, permanent meaning of facts and objects, expressionists concerned themselves mostly with portraying inner feelings, state of mind, ideas, mood, dreams and visions. Expressionist filmmakers cultivated such experiences by distorting images to show the struggle within rather than to imitate life and nature.

Film was a particularly reliable mode to externalize the perplexity of inner life. Filmmakers could utilize techniques and tools that other artists did not have the luxury of using. Anton Kaes remarks that “Der Horror, den die eingebblendeten Textpassagen nur andeuten können, wird im Film sichtbar gemacht durch Beleuchtung, extreme Kamerawinkel, unerwartete Schnitte und Special Effekts.” He reiterates his point noting, “Kein anderes Medium radikalisiert die Frage nach dem Schein der Dinge stärker als der Film.” (52) One can only imagine the horror or the effects of horrible deeds in a book or even in a painting, but film brings these horrors closer to life.

One of the most apparent techniques used in displaying such emotion is chiaroscuro lighting, which is the use of intense light contrasting with dark shadows often creating harsh angles and foreboding shapes. (Morris) Many directors used
mirrors as a display of the dual sides of man. Normally the public recognizes the external being with little or no understanding of the inner demons that a person holds within. The mirror offers insight into what lies beneath the surface. Objects other than mirrors could also function as mirrors, such as windows, shiny table tops, varnished doors, and water.

Popular themes of German expressionistic film included madness and dangerous sexuality. Many protagonists of expressionist films are psychologically unstable or tormented by their own uncontrollable impulses. Beckert in M, for example, struggles with his own schizophrenia. To society he appears to be a somewhat reserved person, but his other personality, which is brought to life through his mirror images, has an unmanageable urge to kill little children.

His inability to control his desire to murder can be diagnosed as a dangerous outlet for sexual frustration. Although Beckert’s sexual obsession is never brought to screen, it is implied through sexual overtones in the film. His unthreatening appearance causes no one to suspect him, but he himself knows of the dangers of his sexuality, which is why in order to prevent further crimes, he sends a letter to the papers to inform them of his presence.

Expressionists were faced with the question of how to portray inner struggles. They employed stylized visuals to express psychological conditions, thereby reconstructing the outer world to display the inner world. Directors such as Lang, Lubitsch, Wiene, and Murnau used high contrast lighting, chiaroscuro, sharply distorted shadows and skewed camera angles to exaggerate the national widespread feeling of despair and uncertainty. Not a single object on the set was left without
particular meaning. Everything that filled the screen could contribute some insight into the inner psyche.

One particularly essential prop for expressionist directors was the staircase. (Eisner 21) With its sharp angles and confined space, the staircase provided viewers with a feeling of enclosure and being trapped, which exemplified the sentiment of claustrophobia felt by large parts of the public. Viewed from the appropriate camera angle the staircase also brought to life the sense of spiraling out of control. One can not see an end to the staircase in many expressionist films. It appears to be an infinite spiral to which no end can be reached.

Threatening shadows dominated the expressionist screen. Chiaroscuro lighting enabled directors to have dark looming, foreboding shadows contrast with the sheer brightness of the rest of the picture. Often expressionist directors used midnight streets lit by beaming street lamps or abnormally bright midday scenes with one large dark shadow forming from the object’s interference with the sun. No matter what time of day, these creepy shadows added extra anxiety to already tense films. These shadows develop into what becomes an unavoidable destiny.
CHAPTER 3
FILM IN AMERICA AFTER WWII:
A HISTORICAL AND STYLISTIC BACKGROUND OF FILM NOIR

Much like Expressionism, Film Noir arose out of the pandemonium of war. Film Noir developed and evolved in America following WWII. The end of the war and the development of the cold war between the US and the Soviet Union initiated a period marked by pessimism, paranoia, anxiety, and uncertainty. As Spicer explains in his book *Film Noir*, “There seemed to be a significant tension between an outward stability and prosperity and strong inner doubts and a sense of alienation.” While America came away from the war victorious, the war nevertheless caused citizens to question the inevitability of war, society’s stability, roles of men and women, and an increasingly modern and technologized urban world similar to the Germans after WWI.

The affects of the war within the film industry allowed Film Noir to emerge. Due to the draining costs of the war, other industries were forced to cut budgets. The restrictions on cost, along with new technological advancements and less prohibitive censorship permitted noir directors to experiment in areas that were frowned upon prior to that time. They felt free to delve into concepts of murder, crime and corruption and explored moods of entrapment and paranoia.

Rather than sugar coating the dominant forces of anxiety, pessimism and suspicion in American society at the time, as previous directors in the 30’s did, Film noir embraced them. Film noir directors chose to hold a mirror up to the face of society by capturing the overwhelming nature of ethical dilemma, financial disarray and
confinement rampant in American post war-mid nuclear threat society. Film noir made connections between urban violence, drugs, and nonconforming sexuality.

Modern scholars categorize film noir as containing certain significant elements. First of all, noir films should be shot in black and white, otherwise it is considered neo-noir. Not only did the films handle dark topics, but they employed the use of actual viewable darkness. Many scenes were shot at night and generally in a turbulent city. The major film companies producing “A” movies shot scenes on a set, spending large amounts of money to generate the feeling of night, or day, whatever the case may be. Noir directors carried their cameras outside because the often did not have sufficient funds like the “A” studios. This practice allowed directors to capture the authentic aura of being out at night in an immense urban area.

Usually a noir film involves a crime story containing a male protagonist entangled in some sort of moral dilemma or crime ring. The protagonist frequently becomes falsely imprisoned within the crime ring. Be it by chance or by personal decision the protagonist gets involved and is faced with the dilemma of either how to escape or to solve the crime. The protagonist in many instances becomes trapped within a system saturated with crime (a system that seems to be working against him) as he must struggle to find his way out. This battle to rid their world of corruption causes the protagonist to question who can be trusted, reflecting the American population’s paranoia and uncertainty of everything and everyone around.

Much of the anxiety for the need to rid the world of corruption, of which McCarthyism is a symptom, stemmed from a profound anti-Communism campaign to weed out the Communist threat to America. This predominately right- wing, conservative
campaign famously targeted the American left wing, liberal film community, charging actors and filmmakers with communist infiltration. While many of the members of the film community fled, others remained in America to make films criticizing America’s apparent obsession with capitalism and extreme paranoia dominating the country.

Specific gender roles also play a significant part in film noir. Males and females have two very different categories of filmic and narrative function into which they are divided. Males are either solving crimes or they are the criminals involved in further corruption. Those solving crimes are often innocent men and private detectives who are, confused, trapped, weak, framed for a crime they did not commit, or out to serve a personal vendetta. They become victims damaged by their society and themselves.

On the other end of the spectrum, criminals, gangsters, and psychopaths run the city. They do not feel the sense of being trapped that the rogue cop or the innocent prisoner endures. The criminals and gangsters often enjoy their lavishly furnished houses and apartments, believing that they are not just breaking but transcending the law. They are absorbed in the deceit and betrayal that causes the protagonist to have a sense of paranoia and a real threat.

Females also draw barriers between good and evil. A general component of film noir is the alluring, sexualized, desirable, threatening, sassy woman, known as the “femme fatal”. Never turning out to be what she seems, the femme fatal often poses as a deadly threat for the hero. She easily seduces the protagonist and leads him astray, initially keeping him a step further from solving his problem. Ultimately, however, they often facilitate his process of self-recognition.
The antithesis of the “femme fatal” is the homebuilder. The homebuilder lovingly supports her husband or boyfriend through whatever comes his way. She represents a stable family life. Usually she offers a safe haven away from the villainous city. Unlike the femme fatal, the nurturer is an ever faithful, steady pillar who offers security to the protagonist. She is innocent of all the monstrosities in the world.

Perhaps the most important requirement for a noir film is the lack of a happy ending. Typically, Hollywood films end with the hero succeeding in his quest to rid his world of evil and injustice, and his heterosexual man always gets the heterosexual girl. Noir films do not offer this sense of closure to the public. Instead the viewer is left uncertain and rattled. A happy ending only subtracts from the darkness of the noir film.

Hollywood traditionally focused on producing films that a wide audience could comprehend. Film noir chose to deviate from the norm. Directors did not use glamorous lighting, bright, cheerful day scenes, night scenes produced during the day, softened close-ups or happy endings. They adapted their own style to convey the feeling of a distorted, corrupt universe. For example, Hollywood films ideally used “high key” lighting with “fill” lights eliminating the harsh shadows caused by the artificial key light. These “fill” lights fill in shadows resulting in a focus on attractively lit faces. (Spicer) Noir directors instead intentionally chose to restrict and even eliminate the use of “fill” lights on their sets, producing deep dark shadows. Moreover they placed their key, fill and back lights in positions designed to create deeper and darker contrasts of light and dark. Shadows could be made larger and faces could become distorted simply by placing the key light below actors. This is similar to the creepy effect children get when placing a flashlight under their chin when telling a ghost story.
Because many noir directors came to America from Germany and Austria, it is only logical that some of their expressionist style seeped through in their American films. One of the principle techniques in German expressionism that carried over to film noir is the use of mirror images. Mirrors or other reflecting devices suggest, as they did in expressionism, a degree of duality and deceptiveness. The mirror allows the audience to view both sides of the character; the one that is continually displayed to the public and the other, hidden, secret inner-self.

Another method borrowed from expressionism that noir films employed was the use of stairwells, windows, and doorways as framing devices. These objects frame what the viewer is allowed to see. One cannot notice anything occurring outside the frame. By constricting what the audience is allowed to see, the director creates a confined, claustrophobic atmosphere, similar to the atmosphere many Americans perceived as dominating that era.

Camera angles also have the same affect of creating tension and an impression of confinement. Excessive close ups of the main character tend to frame a picture as well. Often the facial expression of a character can be the most significant aspect of the scene and other superfluous objects need not come into play. At that precise moment, it is important that the viewers see only that particular character’s face. By the same token noir films used wide-angle lenses to draw viewers into the picture as well. The viewer then acquires a sense of actually being in the middle of the action that is taking place.
FRITZ LANG: A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Fritz Lang was born in Vienna, Austria on December 5, 1890. Though his father was an architect, Lang did not foresee that career in his future. He instead wanted to be a painter. His father did not approve of such a profession, so Lang ran away from home, “something every decent young man should do,” as he put it. (Eisner 12) He traveled around the world experiencing and enjoying many cultures.

Paul Jensen believes that despite Lang’s refusal to enter the field of architecture, the early training he received in this field provided him with the “eye” to construct people, objects and stories. Jensen further argues that this scientific viewpoint allowed Lang to distance himself from the “subjective and emotional aims of expressionism.” (Jensen 10)

In Paris, Lang attended Marice Denis’s painting school and in his spare time he enjoyed the cinema. Film interested him because of its multidimensionality. He states in his autobiography, “When I painted or sketched, my subjects were, so to speak, un-animated. We sat, for example in front of a model and it did not move; but the cinema was really pictures in motion.” Thus, the seeds for a cinematic genius were planted.

The rise of the First World War forced Lang out of Paris. Back in Vienna, Lang served as an officer at the front and was wounded several times. While in the hospital, Lang wrote a couple of scripts (Die Hochzeit im Exzentriklub and Hilde Warren und der Tod) that he eventually sold to Joe May, a famous producer in Berlin.
Lang was not satisfied with May’s direction of his films, especially the fact that May cited himself as the author rather than Lang, and it was then that Lang decided to become a film director. He had a vision of how his films should appear on the screen and the only way for this vision to materialize, was for Lang to direct them himself. From 1919 through 1933 Lang wrote and directed films in Germany. In Berlin Lang worked as a script reader, writer and actor until he directed his first film *Halbblut*.

There is some controversy as to what the first film directed by Lang is. Some accept Der *müde Tod* as his first; Siegfried Kracauer in *From Caligari to Hitler* credits *Die Spinnen*, while Jensen cites *Halbblut* as Lang’s first film. In the autobiography that he sent to Lotte Eisner, Lang confirms that his first film was indeed *Halbblut*. *Die Spinnen* followed *Halbblut* in 1919, in which he became so engrossed that he was forced to turn down the offer to direct *Das Kabinett des Dr. Caligar*, which later became the prime example of expressionism. Nevertheless, Lang greatly contributed to the expressionist movements in his numerous films to follow, chiefly with his first sound film, *M*. Although he collaborated with Thea von Harbou on this film, its style can be said to be distinctly Lang’s.

As previously mentioned in my chapters on both Expressionism and film noir, a principle component of both styles is the use of obscure camera angles. Lang employed previously unheard of angles often in his films, particularly shooting scenes from above. He uses geometry that would be invisible if the scene were shot straight on. Stairwells act as inescapable mazes; circles of people illustrate the confinement of characters from society or their own inner demons.
Raymond Bellour finds that Lang “displays a disturbing ambiguity of characters.” (Bellour 31) Lang makes it almost impossible to determine the line between good and evil in his films. Those deemed “morally” just by society are given unethical tendencies and vice versa. Lang causes the audience to question the goodness or the decency of society. Those who are considered “evil” contain upright qualities just as those who are regarded “good” reveal themselves to have amoral qualities. Therefore it is often difficult to clearly distinguish between the two.

Lang did alter his style some in order to make his films more successful in America. One major difference in his American films and his German films is the use of either a consistently “good” or a consistently “evil” character. In his German films, it is difficult to decipher if any one person is purely “good” or “evil.” For example in M, each character has a mixture of moral and immoral qualities. Later in Lang’s American films, he chose to add characters that were either absolutely “good” or “evil” along with those who contained a blend of both traits. Lang brings in the character Katie Bannion in The Big Heat, who is the representation of all things honest and wholesome. Balancing out the scale of good and evil, he includes Vince Stone, a gangster, who does not display any form of decency in his personality throughout the film.

Acts of violence are typically not shown in Lang films. Instead Lang alludes to the violence by showing either the effects of violence or the expressions of those somehow involved in the act of violence. For example when Debbie, the gangster girlfriend in The Big Heat, is scalded by burning hot coffee, the audience does not witness the actual burning of her face, we instead are focused on the horror of Vince’s expression while he is committing the act. It is unnecessary to show the violence when so
much more is said by the grimace on Vince’s face. The same is true in *M* when Beckert, the child murderer, gets caught. Because it is needless, Lang does not supply the viewers with a shot of Beckert’s pursuers with Beckert as they find him. He alternatively shows only Beckert’s helpless expression. “He [Lang] creates tension in the viewer by forcing him almost sadistically, to observe the writhings of a helplessly trapped victim.” (Bellour 103) More can be concluded by the look on a person’s face than a total focus in the violent deed itself. The severity of the action is left up to one’s own imagination.

For most people, when they look into a mirror they see themselves staring back. For Lang, however, a look into the mirror is more than merely seeing yourself. Looking into the mirror provides not only a physical reflection, but also a psychological reflection of one’s inner self and one’s relation to the outside environment. In Lang’s films he plays on the duality of his characters. Bertha Duncan for example in *The Big Heat* prepares herself in front of a mirror before she allows Dave Bannion in to interrogate her. She makes certain that she appears to be a saddened troubled widow to others, but in her reflection a quite different character emerges, one ruled by deceit and extortion. Beckert the child murderer in *M* has a frightening confrontation with his mirror image. As he begins to gaze into the mirror, he appears to admire himself, but as he stares a bit longer he begins to contort his face to show a side of him that he does not allow the public to see, and maybe not even himself.

One of the most notable techniques Lang uses is his production of ghostly shadows inducing fear and uncertainty wherever they appear. Shadows can be a sign of imminent danger, such as with the dark shadow leaning over Elsie Beckmann somewhat
concealing this man’s own “Wanted” poster. Or they can also act, like mirrors do, to show the possibility of two-sided personalities of people.

Nazi Propaganda Minister Goebbels met with Lang in 1933 to discuss Lang making Nazi films. After watching Metropolis, Hitler had noticed the potential for Lang to be a good motivator. Lang left Germany for France almost immediately. While in France, Lang directed *Liliom*, a fantasy film in which the main character goes to Heaven. Lang only stayed less than one year in France; in 1943 he was offered the opportunity for make films for MGM in Hollywood. For a little over a year, Lang did not receive any directing jobs, until he was asked in 1936 to work on *Fury*, a controversial film of mob rule and lynching. Much to MGM’s surprise, the film became a rather large box-office success.

*Fury* gave Lang the reputation for being a determined artistic, technical perfectionist. Because of his achievement, he received numerous offers to direct more films. After *Fury*, Lang directed such films as, *You Only Live Once* (1937), *You and Me* (1938), *Hangmen also Die* (1943), *Ministry of Fear* (1944), *Cloak and Dagger* (1946), *Rancho Notorious* (1952), and *The Big Heat* (1953). Like many directors, Lang’s career in America had high and low points. For example *You and Me* was not received very well by the public and Lang has even mentioned his dislike for this film. (Bogdanovich 12) However, much of the American public approved of his films such as the popular western *Rancho Notorious* and the detective story *The Big Heat*.

In 1957 Lang returned to Germany to direct films there. He directed a two part series named *Das Indische Grabmal*. The first film of the series was called *Der Tiger von Eschnapur* about an architect’s experience in adventure and romance in India and the
second film, *Das Indische Grabmal*, concludes the story of this architect’s life. Then in 1960, Lang directed his last film Die tausend Augen des Dr. Mabuse, modeled after his previous film *Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse*. Lang later returned to Los Angeles where he died on August 2, 1976.
CHAPTER 5
M: OPENING SCENE ANALYSIS

Lang’s interest in newspaper stories generated many of his plots. One story that particularly caught his attention enough to make a movie was about a child-murderer known as “the Vampire of Düsseldorf.” M, perhaps Lang’s most admired film, followed along the story line of a child-murderer based on Peter Kürten, “the Vampire of Düsseldorf.” The film’s original title Mörder unter Uns caused some confusion, at first, as to whom Lang was referring. After reading about the film while Lang was still working on it, the Nazis became very offended. They believed the film to be about them. When they discovered their mistake, it was simply suggested that Lang change the name.

Rather than having one protagonist with whom audiences relate and sympathizes, M has a city full. While the character of the child murderer, Hans Beckert, is the driving force behind the movie, he is rarely seen except in his mysterious shadows, from behind, or in eerie reflections. In fact it is his absence that actually fuels the search for him on which the entire movie is based. In most popular movies the audience is given a protagonist to follow throughout the film; Lang, however, provides the audience with the same confusion, paranoia and absence that the city members encounter.

Lang even goes so far as to open the film with absence; the absence of a picture. This first sequence provides the audience with an orientation of the events that motivate the entire film as well as an introduction to the major devices of the film
altogether. When the movie opens the viewer sees only a black screen. Then we hear a
girl’s voice saying “warte. warte.,” telling us to wait a while. The camera slowly fades
into an aerial shot of children standing in a circle playing a rhyme game. The girl
continues:

Bald kommt der schwarze Mann zu dir.
Mit dem kleinen Hackebeilchen
macht er Schabefleisch aus dir.

This morbid rhyme not only provides an eerie feeling for the audience, but foreshadows
the actual events to occur in the film.

The camera then slowly moves away from the children to gaze upwards at a
woman attending to her laundry. She is annoyed by this depressing song and tells the
children to stop singing it. They do, briefly, but then resume singing as she leaves
through a doorway. It is here in this opening shot that the camera movement is
established. The camera never assumes the position of a specific person; instead it often
directs the viewer’s attention away from the action, forcing us to depend on our
imagination. (Gunning 166) The audience, through the direction of the camera, acts as
an observer and not as a participant in the events.

In the next shot the camera focuses on an empty stair well as we hear a woman’s
labored groans as she climbs the stairs. Each step she takes on her journey to the top is a
struggle due to the onerous laundry basket she is carrying. When she reaches her
destination, she is forced to ring the doorbell with her elbow because both hands are
occupied with her apparently very heavy basket. A woman opens the door and the first
woman hands her the basket. All of these events take place as if they were natural
everyday occurrences for these women, the daily struggle up the stairs and the exchange of laundry. Their actions are almost automatic and mechanical. As the first woman leaves, the second automatically goes back to her routine and begins to wash the clothes that were brought to her until she is interrupted by the chiming of the ornate cuckoo clock, signifying a break in the routine. The camera focuses on the clock, which displays 12 noon. She looks at her clock, smiles, and wipes the soap from her hands. Her cuckoo clock is then interrupted by the robust toll of the town clock and we cut to a scene of people waiting and staring at the doors of the Grundschule. We hear the cars honking as they drive past.

The camera cuts again to the woman in the apartment tasting the food that she has prepared. Suddenly the camera jumps outside again to focus on a little girl with a ball standing on the sidewalk next to a sign marked “Schule.” She almost steps off the curb into traffic when a car horn warns her of that danger. A policeman comes to help her across. Here Lang develops the association between the woman and the girl. He continuously shoots back and forth between the two of them for the next five shots. The next shot is of the woman (it is obvious by this point that she is the girl’s mother) methodically setting the table. Then we have another shot of the girl bouncing her ball down the crowded sidewalk until she stops to bounce it on an advertising pillar. As the camera gradually pans upward the audience notices that she is bouncing her ball on an announcement stating that there is a 10,000 DM reward for a child murderer. A dark looming shadow appears over the announcement remarking to the girl that she has a nice ball and asks her name. She answers “Elsie Beckmann.”
This menacing shadow materializing over Elsie Beckmann is a device Lang typically uses to portray a threat or danger. Shadows inspire many visions within the viewers’ imagination. Shadows are usually associated with the unknown and mysterious. Lang’s audience was embedded in a time defined by uncertainty, social and political uncertainty and paranoia. Therefore they could immediately recognize the danger that this shadow represents. It is also with this shadow that “der schwarze Mann,” which the children’s song from the very beginning alludes to, materializes.

The woman stirs her soup and notices that it has reached 12:20 with no sign of her daughter in the next shot. She rushes to the door when she hears children coming up the steps. She opens the door to find two children, neither of which are Elsie. She asks if they have seen her and they reply that they have not. Instantaneously the audience hears the whistling of “In the Hall of the Mountain King” from Grieg’s “Peer Gynt Suite”, which will become the musical leitmotif of the film, as the camera cuts again to an aerial view of Elsie. Now she is with a man buying her a balloon from a blind street vendor. They leave, but we continue to hear the whistling as they exit from sight.

Back at the apartment the woman hears the doorbell ring. Pleased, she answers the door, but is disappointed to find that it is only the mail. She asks the mailman if he has seen Elsie, to which he replies that he has not. The woman, now very worried, calls out Elsie’s name while the audience is provided with a view of a maze-like stairwell. She reenters the apartment and checks the clock. This time when the clock chimes at 1:15 it is not a reminder of a relief from the daily chores, now it is a reminder of Elsie’s absence. The camera cuts back to the woman nervously fiddling with her apron. The only sound heard is from someone speaking outside on the street. Frau Beckmann runs to the
window as if she will all of a sudden find Elsie there with whoever is yelling out on the street. She throws open the window and cries out, “Elsie! Elsie!”

Now instead of cutting back to Elsie as the previous shots have done, the camera presents the empty staircase again, the empty attic where the laundry is hanging, and then Elsie’s place at the table set by her mother and untouched by Elsie. All we hear throughout these shots are Frau Beckmann’s shrill cries of “Elsie! Elsie!” into this vacuousness. Lang does not humor the audience’s desire to see Elsie at this point and know where she has gone. Instead he supplies the audience with a view of where she is not, symbolic of her absence. Lang often uses stairwells to indicate a feeling of being trapped. For Frau Beckmann there is no escaping the terror, the dread, or the pit of emptiness in her heart. As we stare at the almost dizzying stairs we know that Elsie will never run up them again.

Lang affirms the audience’s conclusion in the next shot of a silent field. From above we witness Elsie’s ball roll out of the bushes. Then looking up toward the sky at the power lines we find the balloon that the mysterious man bought for her earlier. There is no need to show the act of her murder because the symbols make the point. In an interview with Peter Bogdanovich, Lang mentions that “by suggesting something, I [Lang] achieve a greater impression, a greater involvement than by showing it.” (Bogdanovich 86) By displaying the action the audience could only assume one thing, whatever they were shown. Leaving the act up to the imagination, forces the audience to consider a number of terrible possibilities of what happened to Elsie and that makes the event that much more appalling. While some may prefer to have the action appear right in front of their face, Lang declares, “I always found it much more interesting to show as in
a game of chess the moves of both partners, now in an interlocking logic one move
necessitates the next while occasionally on side seems to prefer the short cut of violence.”
(Eisner369) Lang almost never resorts to show violence of any sort in his films, he
always alludes to it by showing the affects afterward or terrified expressions of those
involved.

Often Lang incorporates repetition of objects and sounds to connect all parts of the
movie. In M he uses Beckert’s incessant whistling as a focal point for the audience.
Beckert whistles the Peer Gynt Suite in the opening scene directly before he takes Elsie
Beckmann away. From that point on, the audience equates the sound of this song with
danger. Like the blind street vendor who eventually identifies Beckert as the child
murderer, the audience does not see Beckert’s face and the song is the only association
that they have with the child murderer. And it is this song that ultimately leads to his
demise.

M proves to be a prime example of Lang’s fascination with the duality of his
characters. Beckert, a quiet, chubby, unassuming character, struggles with his inner desire
to kill. As done in many of his other films, Lang visualizes Beckert’s schizophrenia
through disturbing reflections. The first of which is the audience’s first direct encounter
with the murderer, when Beckert distorts his face as he gazes into his mirror. His
transformation signifies the double-sidedness of not only his characters, but of
individuals in general. The citizens on the search for the child murderer do not witness
this side of Beckert. They instead perceive him as an average person. Even when he is
spotted at various shops around town with the children he is about to murder, Beckert
appears almost as a father figure to them. People do not question his involvement with
the children because of this making his character even more eerie. Beckert’s private performance allows only the audience insight of his disturbing sickness.

The film’s original title *Mörder unter Uns*, (The murderer among us) illustrates the fact that the murderer could be any one of the city inhabitants. The murderer is among the ranks of every person in town, making it difficult to decipher who the murderer actually is. One cannot say that there is a truly good or bad person in this film. Beckert is not completely evil because his illness drives him to murder children. Likewise, the townspeople are not entirely noble. While searching for the murderer, they become so obsessed with getting revenge that they plot their own vicious hunt for Beckert. The public turns into the predator and Beckert turns into the prey.

Lang offers further cognition of Beckert’s psyche with his use of framing devices. The circle of children playing together in the opening scene symbolizes Beckert’s entrapment within his illness. With absolutely no control over his actions, he can neither escape his impulse to kill children nor escape capture. These geometric framing patterns represent Beckert’s struggle between his inner demons and his inescapable apprehension. Similarly Lang almost tortuously traps Beckert with a reflection from a store window of a frame of knives, demonstrating another impulse which he cannot control.

The concept of imitating that which you are struggling so hard against is reminiscent of several Lang films such as *M* and *The Big Heat*. In both films, there is an apparent focus on humans and human behavior. In *M*, Franz Beckert is a mentally ill man who kills little children. He is sick and cannot control his impulses. The town people however mimic his illness and desire to kill in their bloodthirsty hunt for him. They want him dead. They want him to pay for what he has done and to keep their children safe.
from harm. But in their attempt to do so, they become just as sick as he is, simply by following their protective instincts. The good in their endeavor mutates into mirror images of the evil thing they are fighting.
Fritz Lang in his Noir Film, *The Big Heat* brilliantly captures the feeling of anxiety and distrust emanating in 1950s America. He creates a tension between the seedy good life led by gangsters and that of those who choose to live an honest life of hardworking citizens. Dave Bannion, our hero, faces the moral dilemma of either ignoring the involvement of the mob in the crime he is to investigate, or solve the crime through a thorough investigation despite the repercussions he may face in his own life. He however, is not the highly educated man one may suspect is needed to expose the hidden corruption in their society. The grand endeavor of solving and dissolving an organized crime ring requires a certain amount of astuteness and perseverance that the average person does not posses. But Bannion is instead a regular guy with hopes of living in a just and civilized society. The use of a typical American man who eats steak and potatoes enables the movie going public to better relate to Dave, especially when his life is turned into turmoil by the mob.

To fully appreciate from where Bannion's dilemma stems, one must take a close look at the opening scene of the movie, which foreshadows the plot to come. From the beginning this black and white film makes the use of light and dark, a principle component of the film. The scene opens with a close-up of a gun lying on top of a gold embossed desk. A male hand wearing a gold ring picks up the gun. As he picks it up, the camera, from the perspective of the man, pans over the desk, revealing a police badge and a letter to the District Attorney. A shot is fired and the dead body of the man
flops over the desk. The audience does not need to see the man or witness the gun pointed to his head to understand that he has committed suicide. Lang instead alludes to violence by exhibiting the aftermath of the action. In this case the audience does not behold the actual event of the suicide, but they do hear the shot and notice the body flop on the desk. Often tension is created much more effectively by absence and by alluding to things, rather than by displaying them.

The camera, now from a separate point of view from the man, pans back to exhibit a woman running down the well lit stairwell, stopping briefly on the landing next to an expensive grandfather clock to survey the dark room. Although somewhat shocked, the woman does not indicate any signs of remorse or regret. Moving across the room toward the body, the camera crosses assuming the woman’s position. Lang uses a wide-angle lens to create a sense of being drawn into the picture. The audience assumes the woman’s perspective and notices exactly what she sees as she moves through the room. The woman then comes into view powerfully, peering down at the scene before her. Still very unemotional, she picks up the suicide letter and reads it. Just at that moment, a car passes by on the street and because she has something to hide, she closes the blinds, intensifying the aura of secrecy associated with the suicide. The woman picks up the phone and instead of calling the police, she calls Lagana to ensure she receives her “keep quiet money” and also beginning a cycle of telephone calls repeated throughout the film.(Gunning 412) It is only after she refers to herself as “Tom Duncan’s widow” that one would detect that she is the dead man’s wife.

While Tom Duncan’s death is clearly a suicide, it is not clear why he did it. According to Bertha Duncan’s excuse, Tom was extremely ill. The police are willing to
accept this rather logical explanation because for all they know there is no suicide letter and Mrs. Duncan is telling the truth. The viewer, nonetheless, suspects that there is more to his death than an illness, due to Bertha’s reluctance to have anyone see the suicide letter. Naïve detective Dave Bannion believes her justification for her husband’s death and proceeds to his happy home, where he lives an idyllic life with his ostensibly perfect wife and child. It isn’t until Bannion receives new information from a girlfriend of Tom’s, Lucy, that he begins to question Bertha’s trustworthiness, thus commencing his mission to rid the city of corruption.

The opening sequence not only uncovers the secrets, which motivate individuals throughout the movie, but also develops the importance of wealth and greed, which only result in ruin. Lang develops this through symbols triggering specific meanings to those who see them.

Opening with a view of a gun does in fact cause the viewer to immediately recognize the danger and the tragedy that is to follow, however the gold embossed desk on which the gun lays also plays a significant role. The desk is quite obviously fancy and expensive, and therefore cues the viewers to believe that someone with a fairly substantial income must own it. This image is reinforced by the gold ring on the man’s hand as he picks up the gun immediately followed by the camera moving back exposing the police badge. One is caused to pause and ponder what a policeman would be doing with such fanciful possessions. The question of how a policeman could own such elaborate belongings combined with the secrecy from Mrs. Duncan and the uncertainty of why a man would commit suicide develops the motive behind the entire movie. The officer obviously acquired his money from somewhere other than his job because as the
viewer later learns from Bannion and his wife, they can’t afford to have steak every night on his salary. This sets up the integral conflict between those who are good and just without much money and the rich, powerful and corrupt.

Lang acknowledges the epidemic of paranoia and uncertainty spreading over America during the post World War II era. Rather than gloss over the topics of the day, Lang instead offers his viewers a bit of social realism with a bit of exaggeration. He captures the feeling of uneasiness and suspicion felt by Americans, but has put it in a somewhat stylized story line. While Americans sympathize with Bannion’s struggle, they do not necessarily fear that this scenario will happen in their own lives. Thus he translates the social and political concerns of the country into the imaginary.

One characteristic of a Fritz Lang film is that he repeatedly uses symbols through which the object gains increasing importance. Communication through the telephone plays a vital role in *The Big Heat* beginning with Bertha Duncan’s decision to call crime boss Lagana to set up her pay-off instead of calling the police to report her husband’s suicide, after which Lagana immediately calls Vince Stone’s private line reaching Debbie, Vince’s girl. Debbie is instructed to put Vince on the phone. She replies that she would love to put Vince on the phone since she “likes to see him jump” signifying the power that Lagana has over others. Just as Debbie said, Vince springs from his chair leaving his poker game with the guys, including the police commissioner.

These phone calls symbolize the life and depth of the iniquitous gangster world. Every phone call in the film has some connection with the mob, from Bertha Duncan phoning Lagana to Lagana calling in Police Commissioner Higgens’s orders. The calls link together all participants as well as demonstrate the hierarchy of those involved with
the mob. They also represent the influence of industrialization as an infringement on one’s inner life and private sphere. This is especially true for the Bannion household. For them, the phone calls are an obvious intrusion into their personal lives, which later proves to be fatal. With the technology that overruns individual space, comes a presence of unseen forces which could burst and even be traumatic enough to make one “jump.”

Detective Bannion also partakes in these phone calls, the first of which occurs just after they sit down to dinner prepared by his perfect wife. Seconds after remarking “That’s good steak,” he and his wife are burdened with a call interrupting their idyllic household and informing Bannion to meet with Tom Duncan’s former girlfriend Lucy Chapman. Lucy insists that Bertha is lying about Duncan’s death. This call later proves to be deadly for Lucy once Lagana learns of their meeting. The second phone call interfering in their lives occurs shortly after Bannion explains to his wife, Katie, the dilemma he is faced with between doing what he knows is morally right and what is best for him to keep his job. Katie, the ever sensible and loving wife, insists that he do what is ethically right. Yet again their happy household is endangered when Katie receives a call where Bannion “can fill in the four letter words.” Bannion leaves the house to get to the bottom of things. He goes to the Retreat, the local gangster hangout, to speak to the bartender. Of course, the bartender is conveniently ignorant of what Bannion is talking about. Immediately after Bannion leaves the bartender, the bartender calls Lagana to inform him of Bannion’s visit, leading to the bomb being placed in Bannion’s car.

Above the phone in the Bannion house hangs a picture of policemen, perhaps Dave’s graduating class. By placing the picture above the phone, Lang establishes a visual connection between what causes the disturbance in their blissful home. It is
because of his job on the police force that Bannion and his wife receive these phone calls which ultimately leave their lives destroyed.

Although a hardworking and determined cop, his passion for the case is not truly sparked until his wife dies in a car bombing meant for him. It is the instant that Katie dies that Dave completely loses balance. After realizing that the mob not only controlled happenings in the city, but that they are also deeply embedded in the police force, he decides that he will not sit back any longer and let the corruption continue. Upon discovering the various levels of deceit flourishing in the system, Bannion feels trapped and alienated. He is no longer secure in knowing who can be trusted and who is associated with Lagana. Tired of struggling within the boundaries of his job, Bannion resorts to solving his wife’s murder case himself after an emotional explosion in Police Commissioner Higgens office. Knowing the case will never be solved unless he takes matters into his own hands, Bannion tells his boss, Wilks, “trot on down to your office and wait for him [Higgens] to call your orders. Oh he’ll phone you just as soon as he gets his orders from Mike Lagana.” Bannion recognizes the activity going on behind the scenes and makes it clear that he is aware of Wilks’ and Higgens’ involvement, demonstrating his transformation from a naïve, trusting cop to a determined, goal driven ex-cop.

When problems arise or when someone has said too much, Lagana has one of his henchmen make a call to get them out of the way. The call always results in death. For instance, the man responsible for the car bomb, Larry, tells Bannion everything about Lagana and his crew. Lagana gets word of this and has someone make a call and suddenly Larry is found dead.
The final link to solving the crime wave and all members responsible is made when Bannion traces a phone call from the auto mechanic who worked on the car bomb back to the Retreat, the gangster hangout. The secretary at the mechanics office notifies Bannion of a man wearing a fancy suit visiting the repair shop. He had left a message with the instructions to call the Retreat at 9:30. Bannion goes there at 9:30 finding Vince Stone and Debbie.

Debbie appears to be the typical sexual, narcissistic gangster girlfriend, who spends “six days a week shopping and on the seventh she sleeps.” It could be perceived as rather obvious that Debbie is self-absorbed through her constantly admiring herself in the various mirrors around the house. For example when Vince and Debbie gaze into a mirror together, he looks at her and holds her, and she looks at and holds herself. Even as she enters Bannion’s “early nothing” hotel room, she instantly drifts towards the mirror. This action could possibly signify her concern for only herself and no one else, not even Vince, or it could also express her compulsion to “reflect” on herself and consider her identity. Outwardly, she prefers the life of the gangster’s girlfriend as opposed to having no money and no fun. When Bannion questions her lifestyle, she responds, “I’ve been rich and I’ve been poor-believe me, rich is better.” However, like Dave Bannion, Debbie also undergoes a change in character. Tired of being beaten up and bossed around, not to mention having her face burned with scalding hot coffee, Debbie resolves to assist Bannion in his quest to purify the corrupt city. In doing so, Debbie reveals her tender caring side, altogether the opposite of the normal pushover gangster girlfriend. She understands Bannion's personal mission and will do anything to help. Bannion is aware that Bertha Duncan is hiding the suicide letter, which can resurface in the event of
Bertha’s death. Regardless of this knowledge, Bannion could not possibly kill her himself because that would be just as dirty and corrupt as the mobsters. Debbie kills Bertha, her “sister under the mink,” bringing the letter out into the open, preventing Bannion from doing anything he would regret. Subsequent to getting her own revenge by throwing hot coffee in Vince Stone’s face, she further aids Bannion in his shoot out with Vince, taking a bullet.

Mirrors are not only used in this film to demonstrate Debbie’s apparent narcissism, they are commonly used by Lang to reveal multiple sides of people. He exposes what they are and what others perceive them to be. A case in point is the episode in which Bannion first encounters Bertha Duncan. Before she allows him to enter her room, she arranges her face at her vanity mirror. To the public she is a sad, grieving widow, but in her mirror image she appears as a greedy, conniving crook. This technique reminds us of Lang’s work on M, in which he also exposes the two sides of the murderer as Becker stares into his mirror. Through the mirror, the viewer can actually see the extent of his mental illness, but as he walks around within the sphere of society his affliction is hidden under a mask of normalcy.

Many of the messages made in The Big Heat are brought about through symbols instead of direct statements or actions. Lang offers his viewers signs of actions rather than the actions themselves. One such instance is on the occasion of Dave’s car exploding with Katie in it. (Bogdanovich, 86) The audience does not really witness the blast. An eruption is heard and Bannion runs out to see the car in flames. He pulls his wife’s limp body out of the car, making it clear that she is dead, very much like the very first scene of the movie. There the audience sees a man’s hand holding a gun, hears a shot
and then sees the dead body flop over the desk. It is understood that the man is dead without the audience actually seeing the gun to his head and him pulling the trigger.

Facial expressions work as symbols as well. When Debbie and Vince argue over Debbie’s encounter with Bannion, the camera first cuts to the pot of coffee steaming on the burner. Once the argument gets seriously heated, Vince picks up the pot of scorching coffee and throws it on Debbie’s face, ruining her looks. Her actual burns are not shown at first. What is shown, however, is the look of pure evil on Vince’s face. “The evil of Marvin’s [Vince] face and lips, glistening and quivering in Lang’s close-up of him, that gives realistic horror to the scene.”(McGilligan, 405) The audience therefore interprets that Debbie’s face is badly burned and her looks are probably ruined, just by the sheer evil detectable on Vince’s face. After Vince scars her, she is left with her two dispositions visible on her face. Just like Debbie has two sides of her personality, she now has two sides of her appearance. One side depicts her tender, beautiful disposition and the other represents her ugly, scared gangster affiliation.

Debbie’s remark that she and Bertha are “sisters under the mink” symbolizes the world that they have both grown accustomed to. They both use their coats to cover themselves; in this case they cover what they truly are and where they really come from with luxurious fur coats. Bertha originally came from a working class family until her husband died, leaving her the chance to blackmail Lagana. Bertha’s new mink coat signifies the corruption from which she obtained her money as well as a cover for her own corruption. In the same manner, Debbie’s mink coat covers the corruption she implicitly supports by being a mobster’s girlfriend. On the outside they are rich and glamorous women, but under the mink they are shady and immoral. Debbie has grown
so used to the mink and it has become so much a part of her lifestyle that Bannion even supports her head and hides the scarred side of her face with her mink coat as she dies on the floor in Vince’s apartment. It also lets her resort to the fantasy of beauty as a final brief and false but comforting gesture.

Lang makes Bannion's transition from the happy regular family man to the alienated, revenge motivated ex-cop quite transparent. The introduction to Bannion’s home life is overflowing with happy images of loving banter, which is playful and even sexual at times, especially when he tells her she can be a “holy terror” at night. This is all accompanied with the perfect meal for an American man; steak and potatoes. He and his wife are perfectly content with their middle class accommodations and Bannion’s demanding job. As long as they have each other, they can live an honest law abiding life.

This is a complete contrast to the environment to which the gangsters are accustomed. Lang depicts the mobsters as wearing expensive suits in glamorous houses with lavish furnishings. Lagana lives the good life in his palace full of parties and his fireplace adorned with a picture of his late mother, while Vince Stone enjoys poker games in his lush apartment complete with a full bar. When giving the description of the man who came into the auto shop inquiring after a mechanic, the secretary describes him as a man in an expensive suit. But they all obtain their luxuries from their lewd crimes.

When the gangsters destroy Bannion’s domestic space by killing his wife with a car bomb, Bannion’s world is turned completely upside down. The next scene, taking place in the empty house following Katie’s death, clearly manifests the feeling in Bannion. The emptiness acts as a reflection of the void in his own life without his wife, as well as a reflection of his being stripped of his middle class existence and middle class
values. Although not quite psychotic, Bannion mutates from the happy, naïve, trusting good cop into a bitter vengeful widower who can no longer repress his anger.

An important aspect of Bannion’s alteration that cannot go without mention is that Bannion turns not only into a man saddened and empty following his wife’s death, but also into a dark uncaring man who treats others just as badly as the gangsters. Not only does Bannion’s family life change from a blissful, affectionate household to one filled with death, fear and anger. He is left as a widower to protect his daughter and to avenge his wife’s death. But his own personal values are compromised and his view of life and the world are completely altered by the destruction of his isolated comfortable world.

Before his deep involvement in the case of Tom Duncan’s death, Bannion was a sensitive, devoted husband and father. He shared everything with his wife from decisions about his cases to cigarettes and beer. It was the perfect marriage. All of which obviously changed, among a number of other things, with the absence of her presence. He begins as a man of principles who is concerned with justice and the law. He conducts his business from the start going through what he believes to be the appropriate people in the police force. Consulting with his boss on issues is always his only option and he would never even consider using people or working against the law. It is actually his passion for his work and concern for people that drives him to continue the case. Although still working toward the same goal of justice, Bannion alters his approach throughout the film. Characteristically of Lang, he blurs the line between right and wrong, causing one to question Bannion’s methods and motives. Instead of operating inside the legal realms
Bannion chooses to act ruthlessly. (Jensen 183) By sneaking around and using others, Bannion becomes more and more like Lagana and his entourage.

Lagana uses his network to find information or to “eliminate” apparent problems. He does not personally place the bomb in Katie’s car, instead he has Larry do it, and thereby being removed from the situation. He uses people as a means to an end sans any semblance of closeness or camaraderie amongst him and his contingent. The only glimpse of Lagana appearing human is in his home where he keeps a large portrait in his office, honoring his dead mother. However it is still questionable here if he was ever close to his mother, because he is not genuinely very close to his daughter though parading as a good father. He throws parties for his daughter and hangs pictures of his dead mother, but this is all part of his façade. He pretends to be an honest loving father, but in actuality all he really cares about is money, power and prestige. He demonstrates just how distant he is from his daughter when he mentions to Debbie, “She [Lagana’s daughter] was going out formal tonight. Can you imagine that? She wanted me to wait and put the final ok on her dress. But I told her what I thought didn’t matter. Just impress that football player.” He is not truly sensitive to his own daughter’s feelings instead her needs take a back seat to his “business.” Lagana ignores his responsibility as a father to boost his daughter’s morale on a night for which she is undoubtedly nervous. She is on the periphery for him. Plus he adds extra pressure to this occasion by telling her to make sure she impresses some football player. For Lagana, dazzling others is a more important virtue to instill in his daughter rather than morals.

However, like Beckert, Lagana cannot help the way he is. The picture he has of his dead mother, hanging in his office, offers some insight as to why he turns out as he
does. His mother’s picture gives the impression of being very stern and rigid. She does not appear to be a loving, caring, warm mother, which explains why Lagana could never be loving and caring either.

Much like Lagana, Bannion uses people almost to the point of being abusive. Bannion treats Debbie with the same lack of respect as Vince and Lagana. While the gangsters just use her for her pretty face, Bannion is solely interested in the information that she can give him. Only after Debbie points out that all he cares about is himself, does Bannion start to contemplate his motives and actions. However it is not until she returns with bandages covering her coffee-scalded face, that it dawns on him to show a little compassion. Nevertheless he does not modify his behavior toward others. Ms. Parker assists Bannion in getting into Larry’s room and he barely even acknowledges her presence. He just shoos her away before he himself knocks on Larry’s door. Also he obtains all the information that he requires from Larry. In doing so Bannion profits from this data and then abandons him to be handled by the “sharks” an action much like someone with little or no respect for the law. Bannion is human and acts upon his instincts in seeking revenge for his wife and protection for his daughter. He, like all people has faults. Bannion is a symbol of a natural person who is driven by emotion just as one would be in reality. Just as Lang said himself, „Das sei kein Gangsterfilm, hat Lang gesagt, weil es darin um »Leute« gehe und nicht um Gangster“ (Grafe, 130) The movie is not about good fighting evil, instead it is more concerned with actions and reactions and human nature. In the end though, Bannion’s efforts should be admired. He did save the day and bring down the “big heat.” Unfortunately remaining in step, though, with the cynical and distrustful views of film noir, as Bannion is getting settled in back at
the police force, he gets a call sending him out into the cruel world again, consequently perpetuating the vicious cycle of crime.
CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

As these two films illustrate, Lang did not compromise his style to conform to American forms and ideals; instead he incorporated his style into his films for the American public. He recognized the commonality between the atmospheres in the two countries and worked within and included their shared tensions. Whether his protagonist encounters a mob society or the underground mob, Lang displays a steady interest in individuals facing much larger organizations. Whatever the goal of the protagonist, it is always one step out of reach.

It is obvious from the study of both *M* and *The Big Heat* that there is a constant psychology in Lang’s films. He generally causes the audience to reflect on the society in which his characters are embedded and the motivational forces that drive them. Lang carried over the use of mirrors, framing devises, shadows and chiaroscuro lighting developed to portray the societal struggles of 1920’s Germany from *M* and incorporated them in the paranoia-fueled and pessimistic American environment of *The Big Heat*.

This thesis indicates the lengths to which Lang went in order to project these emotions onto the big screen. It also shows the tools and the themes Lang utilized to speak to a large general audience. “Lang will never leave a simple fingerprint, but an imprint which resembles the Mark on Beckert’s back a sign heavily mediated as it attempts to emerge from anonymity.” – Tom Gunning
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Directed by Fritz Lang


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