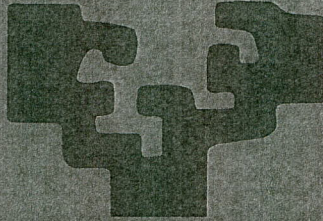


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**LANG'S M, INVESTIGATION, AND FASCISM: BATAILLE,
BENJAMIN, AND THE LIMITS OF POPULAR GENRE**

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*The original social content of the detective story
was the obliteration of the individual's traces in
the big-city crowd.*

Walter Benjamin

German film director Fritz Lang is credited with direction of some forty feature films in his career, from *Die Spinnen (The Spiders)* in 1919 to *Le Mépris (Contempt)* in 1963. He made the majority of his movies after his arrival in the US in the 30s, and in the US he is probably best known for his contributions to 40s and 50s *film noir*: *The Woman in the Window* (RKO, 1944); *Scarlet Street* (Diana/Universal, 1945); *House by the River* (Fidelity/Republic, 1949); *Rancho Notorious* (Fidelity/RKO, 1951); *The Blue Gardenia* (Blue-Gardenia/Warner, 1952); *The Big Heat* (Columbia, 1953); *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* (RKO, 1956); *While the City Sleeps* (Thor/RKO, 1956).

But even if Lang had not gone on to make a number of successful US films, he would be remembered and studied for the *Dr. Mabuse* films, for *Metropolis*, and for *M*.¹ The film *M*, first shown in Berlin in 1931, is the topic of this paper.² I intend to make several points about the ideological significance of its use of an investigative-thriller plot, with the thesis that *M*, in script and direction, is stunningly precise, thorough, and prophetic in portraying the dynamics of investigation and fascism as described by Walter Benjamin and Georges Bataille within a few years after the film's release, and by T. W. Adorno somewhat later. As a result, *M* stands as a *rara avis*: as a culturally-specific transformation of a popular formula (one usually thought to affirm conservative values) into a work with the capacity to criticize an increasingly powerful political structure. Though the next film made by Lang (*Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse/The Last Will of Dr. Mabuse*, 1933) was banned by the Nazis, the film's reception then and now has apparently failed to pinpoint *M*'s subtle yet consistent transformation of the investigative thriller into a critique of a particular cultural moment.³

Some of the more obvious specifics of the film's use of the genre have been pointed out by other critics (though without indicating their ideological significance). For example, the killer is cast against type,⁴ and crowds are shown in the grip of generalized terror, and then are shown as a threat themselves. At this level I would add that, as if in *avant-la-lettre* depiction of Benjamin's observations on the urban origins of the detective story, the city appears as both shelte-

ring asylum and trapping enclosure, accomplished through high angle shots to frame space and to de-emphasize faces. All of those features serve to update the investigative thriller (and more specifically, of the sub-genre of police procedurals) to post-WWI conceptions of urban reality, and to cinematic possibility. All, in other words, reflect a general shift of that period in the investigative-thriller tradition.⁵

My approach here is to extend the now well-developed explication of ideology in investigative thrillers (elaborated below under the caption Crime Fiction, Ideology, and Characteristics of Fascism) to the specifically cinematic presentation (rather than merely script or plot) of detection in *M*. (An acquaintance with the film is assumed, but not necessary. A plot synopsis is included here as a note.⁶) In brief, these are the points I intend to demonstrate with details of the film. Visual clues from the first moments of the film establish associations (fear, threat, or safety) with group and individual action, as a result of which it may be determined that:

1) opposition between acting investigators (both criminals and police) and transgressor is not based on moral standing, but is best understood through Bataille's political concepts of homogeneity and heterogeneity, as defined in "The Psychological Structure of Fascism". Bataille's homogeneity also links the cops and run-of-the-mill criminals as similar social structures, and helps clarify that the friendly rivalry and similarity of police and criminals as social groups are not (as is frequently claimed) offset by a difference in moral, humanitarian, or altruistic motivation.

2) In lieu of the individual Great Detective, *M* demonstrates the effects of investigations conducted by groups, a variation of the police procedural. But in each investigative group a normally-hidden gray eminence directs each group to act (the Minister, in a phone call to the Chief of Police; the leader of the criminals, Schränker,⁷ in a private meeting with the criminal bosses) to maintain their own authority, power, and legitimacy. Moreover it suggests a duality between the killer M (Hans Beckert) and Schränker. Like M, Schränker is a murderer-at-large, sought by the police, but he uses the disruption caused by the child-murderer to bolster his own authority. While the child-murderer is driven by irrational desire, and Schränker by a will to power, their similarity is suggested by their position outside of homogeneous society. Schränker's multiple links to fascist psychology of control and the body (clothing, accouterments, language, manipulation of lower classes), emphasized in camera angle and *mise-en-scene*, and his effectiveness in channeling public forces show him to be a controlled and controlling psychopath: another Lang madman in power, this time more realistically drawn.

3) Even with the capture of the killer, the resolution typical to the genre is faulty, and the social dynamics revealed are more threatening than the lone killer, the ostensible source of disruption. The result is a serious challenge to

Porter's representative claim: "On the level of reaffirmation of national mythical values and of fixed cultural quantities, as well as on the level of an asserted narrative order, the detective story functions as a literature of reassurance and conformism" (Porter 220). As a generic transformation into a culturally-specific, non-indigenous setting, *M*'s incapacity to contain or resolve certain issues raised demonstrates the disjunction between the generic form's ideological origins and this film's historical moment, a disjunction which shows the form's capacity to emphasize a "foreign" or "hostile" environment.

I do not claim that these are particularly complex points; they are not. Yet despite Lang's explicit political stance soon after making *M* (popularly exemplified by his actions more than his films⁸), and despite the attention his films have received, I have not found many of these points made in the existing criticism. In fact, both the contemporary reaction to and current reception of the film indicate that the film's ideological implications are frequently, if not entirely, overlooked; perhaps one can explain this phenomenon as a result of its decidedly popular-realist form, frequently assumed to be divorced from intellectual moments.⁹ To give one example of such a reading to which I hope to offer an overdue corrective, consider that even a critic such as Parker Tyler, who generally seems cognizant of the political and ideological readings of German films of this era, is utterly oblivious to any such reading of *M*:

It was Germany where the Expressionist style originated; that is, where the psychic realities of crime and guilt found their ideal expressive means in art. But we must recall that the first great film incarnating this theatrical style was *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, whose thesis (later evolved elaborately in other films) is that crime is primarily the product of crazed minds, a psychopathological force; this, precisely, is the theme of a whole book on the German cinema, Kracauer's *From Caligari to Hitler*. [With *M*,] Lang, however, simply wanted to make an unusually gripping movie. With the help of Peter Lorre as the child-murderer, he succeeded. (70-73, emphasis added)

Such a response is not atypical,¹⁰ and seems to assume a complete cleavage between a popular work ("simply a gripping movie") and serious social criticism. Relevant here is the distinction between autonomous and popular production, so hotly debated in Germany in the years following *M*'s release. But if *M*'s resolution is inadequate, is this a problem of generic limitation, of critical expectation (= near-neglect because popular), or a reflection of an audience response limited by the formula?

An almost equally narrow reading results from an insistence on *M* as "simply" a dramatic depiction of historical events. It is often pointed out that at the time *M*'s script was developed there were widely-reported, sensationalist murders in Berlin, as well as some violent mob reactions; but Lang downplayed

the importance of particular murderers as models. In fact, the two most often mentioned, Haarmann and Kürten, had not yet been convicted when the film was made.

To understand how *M* is able to use the ideology of the form to criticize social dynamics of the day, and to try to address the questions above, requires first some fleshing out of the correlation between crime fiction and ideology, and second, an analysis of *M*'s visual style. I will address these two in order, and then conclude with some points about the film's anti-fascist use of the genre.

Crime Fiction, Ideology, and Characteristics of Fascism

Recent years have seen a remarkable development in the analysis of the social function of crime literature. Some of these have focused on particular authors or subgenres, while others have taken a more historical approach.¹¹ In the section that follows I give a brief account of the ideology of crime fiction, with special attention to the issues raised by the film *M*.

In the initial section of *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault gives a now well-known history of state-imposed judicial punishments, from pain to restricted rights. The chapter ends by describing a parallel shift in crime literature, and how in the nineteenth century one form of crime literature is replaced by another. Paraphrasing Foucault, the shift is from accounts of the life and misdeeds of the criminal, in which the criminal admits his crimes and describes subsequent tortures culminating in the written confession, to a crime literature focusing on the slow process of discovery, from the execution to the investigation. This shift amounts to "a whole aesthetic rewriting of crime, which is also the appropriation of criminality in acceptable forms" (40). Not surprisingly in light of the thesis of his book, Foucault sees in this shift a particular reinforcement of class structures of power and privilege. Stories of crimes and their punishments function in circulation to restrict the domains of both criminal behavior, and its discipline and punishment.

A somewhat similar account of the historical factors shaping crime fiction (but emphasizing the new importance on the gathering of evidence, and the resulting figure of the detective) is given by Ernest Bloch in his article, "A Philosophical View of the Detective Novel." Like Foucault, Bloch sees a certain type of crime fiction made possible by a shift in post-Enlightenment attitudes toward crime, but he emphasizes investigation and proof:

Because the *trial by evidence demanded* that evidence be sufficient for both the initial arrest warrant and the trial, criminal investigators arose with the detective in the foreground. Signs of all kinds ... have now become as important as the old, often too-sweeping, *cui bono*. ... Since then [the Enlightenment], evidence is necessary and must be produced; it is the basis for proof before judge and jury in most cases. (This applies at least outside

the colonies and to non-fascist jurisprudence at home.) (246, my underlining)

Thompson summarizes Bloch's argument: "sociojuridical evolution made possible that evolution [detective fiction] in fiction." For that reason Thompson's analysis of crime fiction "assumes the existence of societies at least nominally guided by Enlightenment values and judicial procedures" (3), and for that reason Bloch adds the parenthetical exclusion at the end of the passage cited above, a caveat that I believe is remarkably appropriate for *M*. If traditional detective fiction is made possible by liberal values, what changes will the form undergo in a country on the path to fascism? Or could the form be used with little change, as an unsettling palimpsest, a foreground whose foundational background has shifted? These questions will be picked up again in connection with the German tradition of crime fiction.

While Foucault, writing in the late 60s, described a shift in the early nineteenth century, in the 30s Walter Benjamin described a later, and more specific shift, in the detective story. In the essay, "The *Flâneur*", Benjamin makes a brief but insightful argument about social behavior in the city, styles of detection, and their literary manifestations. In brief, Benjamin describes the detective story as part of that literature concerned "with the disquieting and threatening aspects of urban life.... This literature ... cared little about the definition of types.... Here the masses appear as the asylum that shields an asocial person from his persecutors." For Benjamin this changing conception of the city is seen first in the immense popularity and then rapid disappearance of the "soothing little remedies" called physiologies, published descriptions of types of people which had the effect of assuring "people that everyone was, unencumbered by any factual knowledge, able to make out the profession, the character, the background, and the life-style of passers-by." With the fading confidence in one's cognitive capacities to "know" strangers by such clues as clothing and physical characteristics, modern detection was born. One result of this changing conception of one's role in the city is that "In times of terror, when everyone is something of a conspirator, everybody will be in a situation where he has to play detective."

While Anglo-American criticism has tended to emphasize the individualistic hero in the figure of the detective (one of the reasons why in this approach I rely more on writings by Lang's compatriots), locating origins of the form in Poe's Monsieur Dupin stories, Benjamin looks instead to the anonymity in Poe's "The Man of the Crowd":

The original social content of the detective story was the obliteration of the individual's traces in the big-city crowd.

To Poe the *flâneur* was, above all, someone who does not feel comfortable in his own company. That is why he seeks out the crowd; the reason why he hides in it is probably close at hand. Poe purposely blurs the diffe-

rence between the asocial person and the *flâneur*. The harder a man is to find, the more suspicious he becomes. (*Charles Baudelaire* 43, 48)

Benjamin did not simply accept this blurring, but noted it as evidence of the diminishing place for such figures in the society of mass consumption, and the new understanding of social and asocial definition. "The man of the crowd is no *flâneur*. In him, composure has given way to manic behavior. Hence he exemplifies, rather, what had to become of the *flâneur* once he was deprived of the milieu to which he belonged" (*Charles Baudelaire* 128-29). The new milieu is one in which anonymity is possible because of the urban masses, a condition which gives rise to detective fiction:

... the literature which concerned itself with the disquieting and threatening aspects of urban life was to have a great future. This literature ... investigated the functions which are peculiar to the masses in a big city. One of these claimed particular attention; it had been emphasized by a police report as early as the turn of the nineteenth century. 'It is almost impossible,' wrote a Parisian secret agent in 1798, 'to maintain good behaviour in a thickly populated area where an individual is, so to speak, unknown to all others and thus does not have to blush in front on anyone.' Here the masses appear as the asylum that shields an asocial person from his persecutors. Of all the menacing aspects of the masses, this one became apparent first. It is at the origin of the detective story. (*Charles Baudelaire* 40)

* * *

The marginalized yet anonymous-and-hidden figure present at the origin of the detective story: asocial person, or displaced, degraded *flâneur*? (Benjamin thought that even in Baudelaire's day the *flâneur* in the big city who boasted of his knowledge of human nature was in fact stating his knowledge of others' interests, i.e., was already defining his position in terms of function of the marketplace.¹²) Poe blurred the difference, but the bifurcation gives us the stereotypical villains of early detective fiction, still alive and well today: the composed, elegant criminal master-mind, and the manic, psychopathic, disturbed, or irrational force. They provided Poe with extremes for Dupin (the Minister D__, and the inhuman brute of the Rue Morgue), as well as for Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes (Moriarty, and the beastly Dr. Grimesby Roylott of "The Adventure of the Speckled Band").

How are we to read the significance of their descendants in this century's popular works? Many critics (e.g., Adorno, Kracauer, Foucault, and recently Thompson on Sherlock Holmes) have tended to see in popular productions the affirmation, sometimes concealed, of the dominant ideology. (Adorno and others made the division between popular and autonomous art, the former term restricted to confirming the status quo within which it is produced.) According to this

line of inquiry, the detective tradition at the time *M* was produced was an effective affirmation of the function of law and its representatives in the society. Delving a bit deeper, the tradition of investigative fiction affirms not merely the efficacy of those who contain lawlessness (or chaos or evil or social disturbance); it affirms the containment, or rather “containability” of that lawlessness by presenting its embodiment in discrete, finite figures. To cite one recent observation, “Golden Age detective fiction,” which is usually considered to have been most golden in the 20s and early 30s, “is constituted so as to manage the most troubling anxieties of its readership by proposing the illusion of control through the agency of the Great Detective” (Winston & Mellerski 3). Thus it is relatively easy to support Thompson’s claim that “many critics — whether New Critics, New Historicists, Marxists, or post-structuralists — have tended to read mass culture as mere commodified versions of dominant ideologies” (Thompson 6). More recently critics have somewhat amended that basic model, tending to see in individual productions a problematic attempt at resolving or reappropriating those contradictions endemic to the dominant ideology.¹³

Others have sought means to define individualistic variations within the generic limitations, sometimes even seeing willful, pointed commentary on the generic limitations themselves. This is particularly true with the *auteur* approaches in film studies. To give one example relevant generically and chronologically, Geoff Brown, film critic of *The Times* [London], has this to say about Alfred Hitchcock’s comedy-thriller, *Number Seventeen* (1932): “Hitchcock, reportedly, had not wished to make it, and took revenge on the studio by spoofing his material.”¹⁴ (The result, incidentally, is a smart, entertaining movie, arguably as much an affirmation of the narrative efficacy of the conventional devices of the genre as a criticism of them.¹⁵)

But most theorists, if not all, seem satisfied that there is some organic relationship between the form and the social organization in which it springs, even if that relationship is sometimes construed as adversarial. Surprisingly few have explored the use of one form in another society, or the changes visible in the form when precisely those conditions which gave rise to it undergo rapid change or disintegration. Just such an opportunity is presented with the film *M*. How was the form used in Germany at that time?

George Bernard Shaw declared, “The Germans lack talent for two things: revolution and crime novels.” Without concerning ourselves with the accuracy of that statement in its day, we can readily demonstrate the subsequent German interest in crime stories, and show how that interest is reflected in German detective films from as early as 1913. As Jürgen Roland points out, “In the early days of the silent films, the German film industry (like other countries) quickly took up stories dealing with the ‘pursuit of the criminal’ and the ‘terrifying’ confrontation between good and evil (Roland 5). But one qualitative difference in national productions in this genre in this early period cannot be denied. It was

not that the Germans didn't make crime films; they made many. It wasn't that they weren't good; many were, and the Stuart Webbs films, for example, were also quite popular. But

these films were themselves hybrids of British understatement grafted onto the German urban milieu of Berlin or Munich ... German popular culture had never had a full-fledged tradition of the crime novel genre. Instead, much was imitated and parroted, adopted from successful foreign serials. Sherlock Holmes, of course, is the model for Stuart Webbs ... in essence, the detective was an invention of European culture, enhanced by French and English influences and to a lesser extent by American ones ... (Roland 9)

Speaking about the emergence of detective films in Germany in 1913, Kra-cauer's perspective is clearly in accord with Roland's, and just as clearly (albeit somewhat formulaically) ties the form to specific national political ideologies:

It is noteworthy that, while the French and Americans succeeded in creating a national counterpart of Conan Doyle's archetype, the Germans always conceived of the great detective as an English character. This may be explained by the dependence of the classic detective upon liberal democracy. He, the single-handed sleuth who makes reason destroy the spider webs of irrational powers and decency triumph over dark instincts, is the predestined hero of a civilized world which believes in the blessings of enlightenment and individual freedom. It is not accidental that the sovereign detective is disappearing today [circa 1950] in films and novels alike, giving way to the tough 'private investigator': the potentialities of liberalism seem, temporarily exhausted. Since [before 1919] the Germans had never developed a democratic regime, they were not in a position to engender a native version of Sherlock Holmes. Their deep-founded susceptibilities to life abroad enabled them, nevertheless, to enjoy the lovely myth of the English detective. (19-20)

Given the time period, then, it is not surprising that despite the centrality of its search for the identity of a devious murderer, *M* is not a classic British detective story, is not in the tradition of the Great Detective, a tradition of individual empowerment over government bureaucracy that in Kra-cauer's analysis is linked to liberal democracy. Yet its particular negotiation of possibilities, as will be shown, is more complex than the either/or of lone detective, police procedural, or crime story without focus on investigation.

* * *

Collective Investigators, Social Blame

That “lovely myth” of the Great Detective represented by Sherlock Holmes had as its appeal not only the charismatic, powerful, individual who could restore order in chaos, and not only a judicial system that was trusted enough to be largely ignored as a component in that restoration. In addition, part of its appeal too was the restriction of the social disruption to a single individual or at least finite group of individuals. A popular alternative to this myth came about in the US with the new style of detective thrillers appearing in the pages of *Black Mask* magazine in the late 20s. In those stories crime was an ever-present urban phenomena, no longer the exception: it was what the canny sharp-eyed observer inevitably found beneath the surface of social interaction. The generic result was a diminished (but for that more vulnerable, real, and sympathetic) detective-hero: the hard-boiled dick. To take one seminal example from roughly the same period as *M*, consider Dashiell Hammett’s 1929 novel *Red Harvest*, originally published as four stories in *Black Mask* (November 1927 to February 1928). In an urban version of a Western pattern, an outsider arrives in a small Western town in which gangster forces, tied to mining concerns, are no longer restrained by a corrupt police force. The loner or outsider in *Red Harvest* is not the psychopath who kills without the “normal” social motivation (greed, jealousy, hatred), but rather the detective, the private eye (the Continental Op) who untangles the complex situation. With a cast of villains numbering some two dozen, even after their violent demise or removal from power, the tellingly-nameless Op cynically declares the city “all nice and clean and ready to go to the dogs again.” In the hard-boiled world the effects of the individual (or in the case of *Red Harvest*, of finally three detectives from the Continental Operatives Agency) are extremely limited, rarely appreciated, and sometimes counter-productive. But it has the effect of altering the locus of evil, of managing to satisfy the new need of the period: “the problem is no longer to affix the deed to the doer but the blame to society” (Aisenberg paraphrasing George Orwell, *A Common Spring* 30). On the whole from the late 20s through the 30s the US solution to the perceived inadequacy of the lovely myth of the English detective was to show the limited but worthwhile efforts of one individual in a world of generalized corruption.

At the time Thea von Harbou and Fritz Lang created the film *M*, such a dynamics of investigation (in a recognizably German cultural setting) would have been even more unlikely than the Sherlock Holmes-type.¹⁶ Instead, another means of filling the roles of investigator, transgressor, and urban background is found. The source of the chaos may still be an individual, but the nature of the city, with its capacities for asylum and anonymity, require the resources of more than one detective: hence the police procedural, with a somewhat different ideological function. As Winston and Mellerski point out,

According to [Fredric] Jameson’s analysis of the function of mass culture, one of the most effective ‘containment structures’ ought to be that sub-

genre of detective fiction known as the police procedural. It allows its readership to experience vicariously the 'pleasures' of criminal 'attacks' on a repressive society even as it assures its audience that they are not guilty of criminal behavior themselves. Furthermore, it arouses in readers their fears of the technological elites and state apparatuses which seek to control their behavior while positing a police bureaucracy composed of 'ordinary' citizens intent only on ensuring the preservation of 'social harmony' from the depredations of society's 'outsiders.' (2)

While there are a number of problems with trying to restrict the movie *M* with this Procrustean bed, the points above are still relevant. While the "normal" police procedural is noted for foregrounding the police, *M* complicates matters by contrasting cops with an organization put together in the criminal underworld, and presents a crime thriller with a search for killer by both criminals and police. While US hard-boiled detective fiction generalized crime and corruption and created a tough hero to oppose it, *M* splits the outsider element into leader and hunted, and resists putting all the evil or crime into one or the other. Meanwhile the "police bureaucracy composed of 'ordinary' citizens" mentioned above is there as well, but ill-equipped to cope with either, particularly the criminal leadership. Maintenance of cohesion or power is more noticeable than the preservation of social harmony, and the conservative bent of the form is made explicit by making its goals indistinguishable from those of a dangerous power-seeker. At this point I will begin an examination of the film's construction of oppositions and dynamics relating to these issues. [For transcription of dialogue and description of action in this work I have relied on the script published in the Classic Film Scripts series by Simon and Schuster. All page numbers refer to it, and it is listed in the bibliography by name of the principal author, Thea von Harbou.]

The opening scene gives us, visually and sonically, a group setting. A circle of children shot from above, sing a song about the murderer. Then a pan up to the balcony, where a woman, as she drops off laundry for Mrs. Beckmann to wash, complains that the grisly song upsets her ("I'm always telling those kids to stop singing that terrible murderer's song..."). Mrs. Beckmann points out that as long as she can hear the children she knows they're safe. In the first moments the film equates a group with sound and safety, an equation reinforced multiple times in the first minutes. Mrs. Beckmann is shown alone, unsmilingly washing clothes; a shot of a cuckoo clock ringing twelve o'clock; cut to Mrs. Beckmann looking up (in apparent response to clock) and smiling at thought of Elsie's expected arrival, her presence already felt.

The next shot is the façade of a public school, its pillars repeating the camera frame with solid stability, accompanied by the sound of a large bell tolling the hour. An unbudging group of people wait for the children to emerge, their steadiness contrasting with the automobiles in the foreground. As Elsie begins to

step off the curb, a horn sounds and a policeman shows up to ensure her safe crossing. (The same horn sound is later used as background noise later as a subliminal danger signal). After a quick take of Mrs. Beckmann in her kitchen to assure the connection, a dolly camera moves follows Elsie moving alone from the group, bouncing a ball on the sidewalk. Pedestrians are in foreground and background as she moves, but she is utterly alone just before and while she stops to bounce the ball off of a poster warning of the child-murderer. A man's shadow moves over the poster from the right, and a voice addresses the girl. Part of the ominous nature of the exchange is the disembodiment of the killer's voice, which not only maintains the mystery of the identity of the killer (of little importance in this variation on the murder mystery), but keeps Elsie visually alone and isolated in this moment of danger. Here as in the first minute of the film, the juxtaposition is clear: sound and image associate safety and stability with people in a group.¹⁷

The contrast and association has been set up, and the film profits from and extends the contrast, emphasizing the tension and counterpoint of social/asocial. In a well-known sequence, Mrs. Beckmann's fear, and Elsie's fate, are both signaled by frames devoid of people: an empty staircase, an attic, Elsie's vacant chair, all accompanied by Mrs. Beckmann's anguished voice calling Elsie's name. The sequence ends with Elsie's ball rolling to a stop, and her lifeless toy balloon caught on phone wires and then blown out of the frame. The social contrast is underlined by the next two shots: after an establishing street shot, a high-angle shot of a crowded, bustling group on the street, frantically buying the special edition newspaper that announces Elsie's death (and so gives public confirmation). Here Lang's direction shows the public, in its eagerness to partake of the news in its commodity form, turned into a faceless, shoving mob.

That contrast, with similar associations, is immediately repeated. We watch the killer writing at a desk (later we learn it is a window sill), and hear him whistling the now-familiar tune; and cut to a poster asking, "10,000 Marks Reward. WHO IS THE MURDERER?" As the camera tracks back slowly from the poster, a restless, shifting crowd of backs, shoulders, and hats grows in the bottom of the frame. All are looking to the poster, listening to one man who reads the poster that few can actually see — a detail which emphasizes a common experience in their fear.

Less than a minute later in the film, a man reads from a newspaper: "What is he like? Where is he hiding? No one knows. And, yet, he is one of us. Your neighbour could be the murderer." He accuses one of several men at his table, and the next scene is a police search of a home. The search in turn is justified by the policeman with the declaration that "Any man in the street ... could be the guilty man." Before that sentence is finished, the film translates the words to a small lone man, harmless and innocent, who is then subjected to a frightening mob scene (though less violent than the next), all stemming from a few words to a girl.

These well-paced transitions, feebly described here, have a subtle but persuasive logic, moving swiftly from representations of danger from a loner or outsider, and safety in numbers, to the danger to a loner at the hands of a mob — a mob, I might add with irony, “composed of ‘ordinary’ citizens intent only on ensuring the preservation of ‘social harmony’ from the depredations of society’s ‘outsiders,’” to apply Winston and Mellerski’s observation to a distinctly un-reassuring context. Suspicion is rampant, and the phrase from Benjamin applies accurately: terror becomes general; everyone is a detective.

* * *

I have proposed that *M* is a particular kind of detective story, a twist on the police procedural. As one would expect, the first active investigators are the police (in the already-mentioned search scene). But there is no driven police chief here vowing to rid the world of this danger. Instead a phone conversation between the Chief of Police (apparently a police commissioner for the whole city) and the Minister indicates that months have gone by without success, and that now the Minister (apparently an elected official) demands results because “It’s an unheard-of scandal ... What a deplorable effect this will have on public opinion, Inspector. It is a serious error, very serious” (29). In short, they renew their efforts not for any moral imperative but because continued failure reflects badly on them.

In their phone conversation the Chief of Police does not seem particularly involved as he gives the Minister a litany of man-hours spent on the search. After eight months of searching (a span mentioned by the criminals), only pressure from the Minister and concern for reputation cause the Chief of Police to consider alternatives to a failed practice of repeatedly investigating social groups (e.g., checking IDs in doss-houses and raiding underworld hangouts). There is no expression of concern for the populace, and so little to distinguish their participation from that of the criminals, who are driven to the search by pressure from the police as it adversely affects their pursuit of profit and reputation, as will be shown.

The work carried out by the police detectives is almost entirely shown (in images accompanying the Chief of Police’s exasperated explanation to the Minister) as group activity. In fact, before the oft-cited crosscuts that parallel the police and criminal groups, there are numerous depictions of both police and criminal work as essentially social activities. The images appearing during the phone conversation between the Chief of Police and the Minister, the Chief’s voice-off (“We have searched the scene of every crime. We found, for instance, behind a hedge a little paper bag.”) are first a shot of five policeman in the station, then a longer high angle shot of half a dozen men in various searching activities. Shots of individual policemen could equally support the Chief’s state-

ments, but are rare throughout the film. Compare the “lonely stake-out” that becomes a cliché in US detective fiction and film.¹⁸

The same point can be made more emphatically about the criminals, but the sociality extends even to interaction between cops and criminals. In the raid on the Crocodile Club, the criminals taunt the local police chief by name, and in fact by nickname (“Fatty Lohmann,” a moniker more than substantiated by a later camera angle). If anything the crooks are given a more sympathetic introduction than are the enforcers of the law. That they are “just regular folks” could hardly be more emphatic. A review at the time of the film’s release noted the “jovial hostility between police and criminals, who are homey, bourgeois types” (Kaplan’s summary; Kaplan 1981, 162). They are the ones who ask Lohmann why the police don’t catch the child murderer, in apparent moral indignation. A woman who operates the Crocodile Club bar tells a bored and uninterested policeman that

...the fellow you’re looking for isn’t here. You can’t imagine how furious everyone is about this guy who’s causing a raid every night. Especially the girls ... okay, they walk the streets ... but, believe me, each one is a little bit of a mother. (38-39)

The Sergeant is shown from below, surrounded by cigarette smoke, looking distant, bored, and condescending. She continues, “I know a lot of crooks ... who grow quite tender when they see kids playing.” Though the Sergeant seems to hear nothing, there is nothing to contradict the woman’s testimony, and it seems that family values and sentiments are the norm among the criminal underground.

On the other hand, a sharp contrast is made when Schränker, the leader of the criminals, is presented. The criminals who await him reaffirm the points already made: they are an amusing bunch, skilled but harmless, impatient but clearly in awe of their leader. Even before we see Schränker, the dialogue sets him apart. Ott records this pertinent observation on the making of the film:

Lang and von Harbou rewrote the part, making Schraenker (sic) an ‘international type’ in marked contrast to his associates, a host of burglars, pickpockets and con men. Lang remembered:

‘Apart from his dominating presence and his elegant appearance, his black gloves immediately awakened in the spectator a thought association that this man would never leave a fingerprint behind. Only one sentence was necessary to distinguish him from the other criminal types. The sentence that came to me and which I added to the original dialogue was ‘The best man between Berlin and Frisco.’ (Ott 156, my underlining)

Their dialogue informs us of other points as well, including the reason for Schränker’s secrecy:

CON-MAN: What's keeping Schränker?

PICK-POCKET: Maybe he's been caught.

BURGLAR *laughing*: Not him. *He rejoins the others*. He did a bank job in London and Scotland Yard set a trap for him ... there he was, hands up, back to the wall, millions of cops all around ... and two seconds later there were two bodies on the ground and he'd scarpered!

(...)

SAFE-BREAKER *with respect*: The best man between Berlin and San Francisco.

BURGLAR: They've been looking for him for six years and they haven't caught him. (45)

Schränker is wanted for murder, and is harder to find than the child-murderer. When their hero Schränker arrives, the criminals are relieved, even saying "God be praised!" and "At last!" Schränker enters authoritatively rather than socially (his first words are "Are you mad? Close the curtains."), and a number of points set him apart:

Schrenke (sic), the accepted and respected head of this group, is a new version of the old master criminal. With his bowler hat, cane, gloves, and leather coat, he has a distinctive air of authority. ... he inhabits an ivory tower: he makes the decisions, and leaves others to answer the phone and do the talking (except at the concluding trial). His past is vague, and he maintains this anonymity in the present by avoiding contact with others, symbolised by the gloves he constantly wears. (Jensen 96)

What Jensen could not have pointed out when he wrote those lines is that Schränker's ever-present body armor, extending even to his fingertips, are all a pattern of conscious protection and integration identified in subsequent years by Klaus Theweleit as the fascist conception of the male body. (Time and space do not permit a detailed explication of these points here, but interested or skeptical readers are advised to peruse especially *Male Fantasies* v. 2, Chapter 2, "Male Bodies and the 'White Terror'".) I assert that Schränker is not only part of heterogeneous society (in Bataille's terms), but that he functions here as a fascist leader, and that it is the latter which determines the former: "the fascist leaders are incontestably part of heterogeneous existence" (Bataille 143).

* * *

Bataille's Psychology of Fascism

We have seen how the opening of *M* establishes an opposition of social and asocial, and develops associations with each of those categories. We have also seen how the leader of the criminals is introduced as utterly apart, alone, and different from the otherwise social group of criminals; and that the written record

of production supports that as a conscious choice by the director. To explain the ideological significance of these dynamics presented visually in *M*, we must turn to George Bataille's essay, "The Psychological Structure of Fascism" (first published in *La Critique Sociale* in 1933). There Bataille is working toward a "psychological description of society," and he begins with the "most accessible to understanding — and apparently the most fundamental segment — whose significant trait is tendential homogeneity" (137). With this concept Bataille refers to certain features of society, to wit: "human relations are sustained by a reduction to fixed rules based on the consciousness of the possible identity of delineable persons and situations; in principle, all violence is excluded from this course of existence" (137-38). Recall Benjamin's observations about urban anonymity and the problem of identification, and it becomes clear that the modern detective story, with its emphasis on the identification of persons and situations, usually violent, is a narrative of heterogeneity contained, homogeneity restored. When one considers the correlation of otherness with sex and violence in most investigative fiction, the connection with Bataille is fairly clear in Dean's description:

Bataille's interest in fascism was thus most fundamentally an interest in how the other was embedded in so-called civilized cultures. ... the order of the day was how to consider violence and ecstasy IN society and political formations.' Fascism rendered this kind of analysis all the more urgent. (Dean 225)

As I read Bataille's psychology of fascism and correlate it to investigative fiction, his observations are more or less consistent with the function of crime fiction as described by Foucault, Bloch, and Thompson above, but permits a more relevant reading of the transformation involved in *M*.

What establishes this distinction in the first place? "Production is the basis of a social homogeneity. Homogeneous society is productive society, namely, useful society. Every useless part is excluded, not from all of society, but from its homogeneous part" (138). But this distinction is not a stable one, and as the next citation indicates, one could read investigative fiction as the predictable narrative of the ongoing struggle to define and separate the two in order to maintain the homogeneous part:

As a rule, social homogeneity is a precarious form, at the mercy of violence and even of internal dissent. ... [it] must constantly be protected from the various unruly elements ... the protection of homogeneity lies in its recourse to imperative elements that are capable of obliterating the various unruly forces or bringing them under the control of order. (139)

Among the manifestations of the heterogeneous world are "the numerous elements or social forms that homogeneous society is powerless to assimilate:

mobs, the warrior, aristocratic and impoverished classes, different types of violent individuals or at least those who refuse the rule (madmen, leaders, poets, etc.)” (142). Bataille identifies a pattern here in the heterogeneous world, a pattern he describes as

an identity of opposites between glory and dejection, between exalted and imperative (higher) forms and impoverished (lower) forms. This opposition splits the whole of the heterogeneous world and joins the already defined characteristics of heterogeneity as a fundamental element. ... analysis of the internal heterogeneous social structure is almost entirely reduced to that of the opposition between two contrary terms. (144-45)

Here too Bataille’s principle has a clear analogue in detective fiction. We have already seen that split in the heterogeneous worlds of Poe and Doyle; in the case of *M*, we see that opposition within the heterogeneous elements of Berlin: the psychopathic child-murderer on one hand, and the powerful leader Schränker on the other.¹⁹

Bataille’s analysis is most original, interesting, and useful when he explains how fascist leadership, while necessarily heterogeneous, is an imperative form that requires certain conditions and mechanisms in order to maintain its authority, such as the exclusion of other heterogeneous elements. In the remaining analysis I will use Bataille’s descriptions to explicate the implications of the investigation in *M*.

* * *

One of *M*’s more famous sequences occurs after Schränker’s entry. With careful and witty cross-cutting, the direction stresses that the criminals and police are rivals with the same goal. At each point, however, the pattern is one of exposition-repetition, with the criminals leading at every step. Thus, though criminals and cops are paralleled as social groups with similar motivations regarding the search for the child-murderer, their differences become apparent in the speed and means of deducing features of the murderer. One point which does distinguish criminal motivation, the pursuit of profit, is also the key to their recognition that the murderer is not an ordinary criminal. In the criminals’ view, the murderer is not engaged in “normal” criminal activity (which is to say socially organized, and profit-oriented), but rather for pleasure (perverse or otherwise), and so cannot be one of them.²⁰ Almost the first words uttered by Schränker assert that “We all know why we are here. Someone who is not a member of the Union is messing up our affairs” (emphasis added). Schränker, introduced as heterogenous element, uses *M*’s heterogeneity to justify his actions. His later actions will make perfect sense in light of Adorno’s reading of Freud on one of fascist leadership techniques, namely the “standard ‘unity trick.’” They emphasize their being different from the outsider but play down such diffe-

rences within their own group and tend to level out distinctive qualities among themselves with the exception of the hierarchical one" (Adorno 131). It would seem to be enough for Schränker to portray M as a threat to their livelihood, but he does not stop there.

SCHRÄNKER: ... we are not on the same level as this man they're looking for now.

(...)

SAFE-BREAKER: Exactly.

SCHRÄNKER: There is an abyss between him and us.

BURGLAR: Of course.

PICK-POCKET *at the same time*: No comparison.

SCHRÄNKER *off*: We are doing our job ... *Close-up of him* ... because we have a living to make. But this monster has no right to live. He must die ... app ... ear. He must be exterminated, without pity ... without scruples. (47)

Another point about the cross-cut sequence is that while comparison is made, the results are not equal.

SAFE-BREAKER: The police have been looking for this murderer for eight months now. Now it's got to the point where they'll only catch him by luck.

BURGLAR: We can't wait for that ...

CON-MAN: We'll be ruined before then.

SAFE-BREAKER: What are we going to do then?

Cut back to a high group shot of the police meeting. The room is misty with thick clouds of smoke. The meeting has come to a full stop and some of the officers have got up and are pacing around the room.

Camera cuts again to the same high group shot of the underworld meeting, where the PICK-POCKET has made a huge question mark with the shells of his nuts on the table. The SAFE-BREAKER and the BURGLAR both pace relentlessly up and down.

Cut back to a high shot from above of the police conference table. We can see that most people have left their places and are wandering around the room.

Cut back to the underworld meeting, only the PICK-POCKET and SCHRÄNKER are seated. The con-man stands by the table, and the safe-breaker has moved into the background by the window.

SCHRÄNKER *decisively*: We'll have to catch him ourselves.

The others gather round him.

ALL: Yes ... we must. This is what we must do.

LOHMANN'S *voice is heard over as the camera cuts back to show*

abandoned chairs round the conference table with most of the delegates wandering up and down. But gradually their attention is drawn by what LOHMANN is saying, and one or two nod their heads in agreement.

LOHMANN off: There is still one possible way. (...) We'll have to make enquiries about everyone who has been freed as harmless but who has the same pathological condition as the killer.

Camera cuts to a close-up, followed by an extreme close-up to SCHRÄNKER's black-gloved hand placed over a map of the town. (50-51)

In contrast to the decision expressed in the musing, disembodied voice-off of Lohmann, which is dramatically too late (*"the meeting has come to a full stop"*), Schränker's decisiveness is emphasized by the timing of his obviously-planned proposition, the unity of voice and image, and by other visual cues: "for the moment he is completely in power (an idea represented by a shot of his hand placed on a map of the city..." (Jensen 96). Again by comparison, the police are much slower in recognizing what distinguishes the killer, only managing it (again, after eight months have elapsed in the search) after an Inspector points out: "The difficulty of solving this type of crime is increased by the fact that wrongdoer and the victim are only connected by a chance meeting. An instantaneous impulse is the killer's only motive" (50). In other words direction as well as script support a sort of trains-run-on-time ruthless efficiency on the part of the criminals, or rather on the part of the criminals under Schränker.

Having arrived at similar conclusions about the killer by different means, the police and criminals differ crucially in the subsequent means of detection and solution. The Inspector's insight precedes exposition of police distrust of the public. Though no longer investigating the public at large, Lohmann is no closer to trusting them as he declares, "Don't talk to me about help from the general public. It disgusts me just to hear them talk" (48-49). Lohmann's solution is a natural result of thinking as a bureaucratic, social institution of repression, for it consists of looking for someone with a record in "every clinic, every prison, every asylum."²¹

In contrast, the criminals bypass entirely any suspicions of social groups, and any solutions through public institutions (unless one is willing to extend that term to cover the beggar's union). The solution devised by Schränker might be said to come from thinking as the criminal would think and act. It is dependent as well on observation of pathology or behavior, rather than profession, appearance, or archival information. Finally, Schränker's solution makes use of the lowest class of the masses: the beggars, who are enlisted to watch the children in order to catch the murderer.

Fascism's close ties with the impoverished classes profoundly distinguish this formation from classical royal society ... But ... the fascist unification is not simply a uniting of powers from different origins and a symbo-

lic uniting of classes: it is also the accomplished uniting of the heterogeneous elements with the homogeneous elements ... (Bataille 154-55)

By trusting and working with a segment of the public, the criminals are more linked to the public than are the police, and that link helps explain the effectiveness (via audience identification) of the tribunal scene.²² At this point I would like to move rather abruptly to the underworld trial scene at the close of the film.

* * *

Schränker's Exercise of Control

After the remarkably effective cornering of M by Schränker's impromptu force, the beggars call the criminal leaders to inform them of the situation. The safe-breaker puts down the phone and says to the others, "It looks as if the guy is really cornered now. I think we'd better tell the police straight away." The con-man, the burglar, and the pick-pocket all agree. Schränker's reaction is controlled but strong:

SCHRÄNKER *violently grabs the receiver from him.*

SCHRÄNKER *into telephone:* Hello. Just a moment ... What ... Okay ... and ring straight back. *He hangs up. Medium close-up of SCHRÄNKER between the BURGLAR and the SAFE-BREAKER.*

SAFE-BREAKER: What is it? What's got into you?

SCHRÄNKER *grimly:* Are you mad or something?

SAFE-BREAKER: Why?

SCHRÄNKER: The police? No ... we're going to get the guy ourselves ... Listen ... now, the time is ...

There is a slight pause as each man is waiting for someone else to make the first move. Clumsily, the CON-MAN fumbles for his watch. Group shot of them all round the table.

CON-MAN: Eight o'clock.

SCHRÄNKER *in medium close-up:* Good ... Then, at ... nine ... ten ... eleven o'clock! (73-74)

The contrast with the criminals emphasizes, physically and otherwise, Schränker's decisiveness, and that it is his intent that unquestioningly carries the day over the other criminals. Though the police solution would take care of all the problems mentioned by Schränker at the meeting, that would not be enough for Schränker; we must ask why it matters to Schränker that he deal with it, and why no reason is given. Again the insight is provided by Bataille: Schränker must rein in and use the heterogeneous forces unleashed by M. The child-murderer, we must remember, has had a tremendous social effect: middle-class burg-

hers on the street have turned into heterogeneous mobs, out of the control of either the homogeneous police force or the higher heterogeneous forces (Schränker).

it is precisely the aim of the agitator to transform the ... people into 'rabble,' i.e., crowds bent to violent action without any sensible political aim, and to create the atmosphere of the pogrom.

It is one of the basic tenets of fascist leadership to keep primary libidinal energy on an unconscious level so as to divert its manifestations in a way suitable to political ends. (Adorno 119, 123)

Schränker is thus determined not only to see the child-murderer put out of the way (which the police solution would accomplish), but to direct those heterogeneous drives, releasing them under his control and thus reappropriating them as the homogeneous forces that support him:

Thus, while the fascist leader taps into emotions that bourgeois culture consigns to the pathological and the irrational, he nevertheless establishes his 'strict authority'" (Dean, in a gloss on Bataille's essay, 227)

He does this by defining an Other, a heterogeneous element which is then forcefully expelled (here I consciously echo the impersonal language used by Schränker in the trial), and so fulfills what Adorno called Freud's "prophecy of fascist destructiveness, the drive to eliminate the outgroup" (Adorno 129).

If the heterogeneous nature of the slave is akin to that of the filth in which his material situation condemns him to live, that of the master is formed by an act excluding all filth: an act pure in direction but sadistic in form. (Bataille 146)

M is captured and dragged, kicking and screaming, to the trial/criminal mob. A stunning POV shot, a slow pan of the huge group marks the first real reminder of the likely outcome of the forces at play: a real human being is in serious danger of being lynched. That the outcome of the "trial" is determined is made immediately clear:

SCHRÄNKER *in close-up*: We just want to render you harmless. (...) but you'll only be harmless when you're dead. (102)

Schränker is of course not only interested in the outcome, but in the process which keeps him in control of the spectacle. There must be a semblance of order, and he must maintain it and control it before unleashing the crowd's forces.

PROSTITUTE *screaming fanatically*: Right? Someone like you doesn't have any rights. Roaring. Kill him!

A MAN *next to her, rising*: Yes, kill him!

PROSTITUTE: We must put him down like a mad dog!

There is a general view of the crowd, now very animated.

A VOICE: Crush him.

SCHRÄNKER *turning impatiently to the crowd*: Quiet!

A VOICE: Kill him! ... Kill him!

SCHRÄNKER *shouting*: Shut up!

The crowd is calmed by an imperious gesture from SCHRÄNKER. When the noise dies down completely, he turns towards the MURDERER.

SCHRÄNKER: You talk of rights ... You will get your rights. (...) *Close-up of SCHRÄNKER. (...) Ironically.* Everything will be done according to the rule of law.

Schränker must insist on an orderly lynching, because there are three real and distinguishable threats to his effective manipulation of the crowd. Two are explicit tactics taken by the defense lawyer, while the third surfaces during M's impassioned speech. (One could also call all three variations on the breakdown of Other-ness as Schränker constitutes it in the murderer.) The first threat is the recognition of Schränker's duality with M, a parallel which arises with mention that Schränker is also wanted for the police for multiple murders. Not surprisingly, it is quickly dismissed by Schränker himself:

SCHRÄNKER *off*: The defence lawyer will speak.

LAWYER *ironically*: Our very honourable President ... He rubs his hands together. There is a quick shot of SCHRÄNKER who has just sat down

LAWYER *off*: ... who is, I believe, wanted by the police for three murders ...

SCHRÄNKER *very angry*: That's got nothing to do with it! (105)

Though it is not picked up again, the lawyer's objection reminds the viewers of the parallel, and the stakes involved for Schränker in keeping the borders sealed between himself and M.

The second threat to Schränker's control is the recognition that lynching M is tantamount to murder. Because of the film's connection between the behavior of the "trial" audience and the people on the street, it makes some sense to talk about Lang's film as one challenging the use of the death penalty (which is how most critics characterize the "message" of the film). Certainly remarks and other artistic efforts by Fritz Lang bear out a concern for the ethical dilemma posed by the death penalty. Only the lone defense lawyer, in the face of the angry mob, delivers any opposition:

LAWYER, *shot of him*: No one has the right to kill a man who is not responsible for his actions. Not the state, and certainly not you. The state must take care that this man becomes harmless and ceases to be a danger to his fellow citizens. (106)

Note that Schränker has already countered it (which is to say that he rallies crowd hostility against it) by invoking a cynical distrust in the judicial system. Of course M wants to be turned over to the police, he says, where he can plead mental illness,

SCHRÄNKER: ... And spend the rest of your life in an institution at the state's expense ... And then you'd escape ... or else there'd be a pardon and there you are, free as air, with a pass, protected by the law because of mental illness. *Laughter*. Off again chasing little girls. A pause. No, no. *Very dry*. We're not going to let that happen.

A VOICE *echoing*: No, no, no.

SCHRÄNKER: We must make you powerless. You must disappear. (102-103)

The reversion to a pre-Enlightenment attitude toward crime and punishment (recall here the points made by Bloch, Foucault, and Thompson) has its day in an investigative thriller gone awry. (Years later Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer as well as the Clint Eastwood character Dirty Harry will invoke a similar rationale for vigilante justice. But while those uphold individual actions outside the law, in *M* it is brought up as a principle of social organization, Schränker's versus that of the police!)

The third threat is the most interesting, in part because film direction clearly supports this threat. We see how Schränker begins to "lose the crowd" during Hans Beckert's plea, because shots of M are intercut with medium shots of individuals in the audience who actually nod in empathy. (and for the viewer, the earlier POV shot). There is something of a fascination with the killer when he speaks. a potential breakdown of Otherness in M's motivation, the recognition of points of similarity. Bataille noted the instability of reactions to heterogeneous elements: "any object of repulsion can become an object of attraction and vice versa" (Bataille 142). Even as Schränker tries to capitalize on the murderer's admission, members of the audience react more viscerally:

MURDERER *agonised*: Always ... always, there's this evil force inside me ... It's there all the time, driving me out to wander through the streets ... following me... silently, but I can feel it there ... It's me, pursuing myself, because ...

SCHRÄNKER: You mean to say you have to murder?

Medium close-up of an old man in the crowd, nodding thoughtfully, moved by the MURDERER'S genuine anguish

MURDERER *off*: I want to escape ... to escape from myself!

Camera cuts to two other crooks. One of them seems very moved. (103-104)

Such reactions of empathy run completely counter to Schränker's imperative, which must culminate in a ritual sacrifice, an anachronistic spectacle of the

scaffold to define and expel an Other. But this threat, as well as the first two are overcome by the mob fever, and all Schränker has to do is let it take its course. At the height, "*Everyone shouts, whistles and screams at the same time. From every side, crooks and prostitutes throw themselves towards the MURDERER ...*" (108), the police suddenly arrive, and the film ends almost immediately thereafter.

The resolution remains necessarily problematic at best, and I think it not too harsh to say that *M* is an utter failure (intentionally) in the terms Knight describes a best-selling crime story, which "has to embody in the detective a set of values which the audience finds convincing, forces which they can believe will work to contain the disorders of crime" (Knight 55). The indisputable effectiveness of the underworld's "police work" has caused some discussion of the political connotations of the film. I think it is clear that while Schränker's capacity as procedural detective is convincing, he will work to contain the disorders of certain crimes by propagating a larger social disorder. While the police prevail in the end, they do so largely through a series of chances: a guard was able to trip an alarm because of carelessness on the part of the criminals; by chance the police arrived in time to catch an unaware burglar, who mostly by chance lets it slip that the murderer was captured (to Lohmann's astonishment); by chance the police arrive seconds before *M* is lynched. The timely arrival of the police does nothing to alter the instabilities that permit a Schränker to marshal heterogeneous and homogeneous forces against an outgroup, nor does it correct the capability of a Schränker to remain active while in hiding for six years. The reassuring end marked by the arrival of the police seems to be a battle won in a losing war. What I have called threats to Schränker's goals might as well be called potential anti-fascist routes because they would prevent Schränker from taking a course designed to empower him. That all of these routes are rejected by the crowd is a warning unmitigated by the ending.

In the preceding pages I have made the argument that, though firmly situated as a popular investigative thriller, in script and direction the 1931 film *M* displays an overwhelming coincidence with later analyses of fascist psychology. To a large extent I have made that argument by focusing on the character of Schränker, though a longer study could include detailed analysis of the psychopath Hans Beckert (as degraded flâneur, for example, the manic descendant of Poe's manic man who is driven to the crowd to escape from himself²³), or others. At the same time, if my argument is convincing or even obviously true (more than one film scholar remarked to me that my reading of Schränker as prototypically fascist seemed a rather indisputable one, almost banal and unnecessary), one must attempt to explain why it has not seemed so to most critics. At this point the only solution I can offer is that of a reception, popular and critical, extremely limited in its social reading of popular genres. Perhaps recent work in popular culture studies could be applied to examples such as *M* in order to develop a res-

ponse to the aesthetic theories of Adorno, Peter Bürger, and more recently Fredric Jameson, in order to understand the capacities and limits of popular genres.

It is all the more important to reconsider such a work (and such arguments) now, because a great deal of ink has been spilled about the constructive re-writing of the detective tradition against its ideological origins. For the most part such transformations involve switches of character and function, somewhat similar to what is done in *M*. Clearly this is an international phenomenon, as in Spain one can point to works by Lourdes Ortiz, Eduardo Mendoza, and María Antonia Oliver, just to name a few, while in the US there has been a veritable explosion of detective fiction with protagonists who are feminist, black, native American, gay, and so on. Yet few, if any, are more drastic than *M* with its successful detection by protofascists; and most maintain unchallenged the heroic nature of the successful investigator — while replacing the often misogynist WASP. Given what I believe is the overwhelming evidence that *M* is a powerful, culturally-specific transformation of the genre, in light of its nearly apolitical reception one must wonder, regardless of how well done such re-writings are, whether they can have any social effect.

I believe that *M* is best seen not as a criticism of the genre, but rather as an explicit use of reactionary tendencies of the genre in order to criticize social dynamics of the day. *M* shows that the goals pursued within investigative fiction can be uncomfortably close to those of extreme right-wing groups, and that as a basis for social organization combined with hero-worship, it can lead to and support the most reprehensible results. *M* deserves study as an important example of the ideological limits of the genre, which would seem to be much more flexible than is usually granted, and of the limits of reception, which on the other hand seem much more rigid or recuperative than is commonly supposed.

NOTES

¹ The relative merits of Lang's work in Germany and the US remains a topic of contention in some circles. Lötte Eisner mentions the debate (mostly to dismiss it as trivial) in *Fritz Lang*, 380.

² Upon its original release, the film ran for almost two hours. I have relied exclusively on the version most commonly seen in the US, which runs 89 minutes, more than 20 minutes less than the original release version. As far as I have been able to determine, most of the discarded material is taken from still-present takes, merely shortening them in the interest of pacing without substantial changes. The exception to that, from the accounts I have located, is a substantial deletion at the very end of the film, with the US version ending rather abruptly after the arrival of the police. In the version I am working with, all that follows that scene is a voice-off, saying, "We, too, must watch over our children."

³ There is a genuine irony here. An oft-told story about the making of *M* reminds us of the political climate of the day:

"This film was originally to have been called *Mörder unter uns* (*Murderers among us*). When Lang tried to hire [a particular building] the Staaken Zeppelinhalle, which had been converted to a film studio, to shoot his crowd scenes, he was unexpectedly turned down: Lang himself ought to know the reason why, said the studio manager. Astonished, Lang asked why he should not make a film about a sex murderer?"

Ah well, if it was a film about a sex murderer, Lang could have the studio, came the answer. Lang understood this when, in the heat of negotiations he seized the manager's lapel and discovered the Nazi badge on its reverse. The Nazis had taken the original title to refer to them." (Eisner 1986, 111)

The irony of the story (recounted by Kracauer, Lang, and others) is that the Nazis were right in thinking that the movie could refer to them, but they were wrong to think that because it dealt with a sex murderer, it was politically neutral toward them.

⁴ "In casting the role of Franz Becker (sic) the murderer, Lang sought to avoid the stereotype criminal, a brutish type with bushy eyebrows" (Ott 156). The point here is that Lang's choice reflects the erosion of confidence in one's capacities to know strangers by physiognomy, a point made by Benjamin and referred to in this essay.

⁵ I use the term "investigative thriller" to include those works which focus on the discovery and/or apprehension of authors of specific crimes. The term applies whether that investigative agency is a professional or amateur individual, or group (e.g., a police force). Lang was well aware of the possibilities of the murder mystery genre, as one of his letters indicates:

There are two kinds of detective novels or better, to use the English expression, 'Whodunnits' (sic). There is the type *I never liked* in which the reader is made to solve riddles and where in the end after long and boring chapters the action is finally explained and the identity of the culprit revealed.

Or the second kind: *showing both sides*, that of the criminal as well as that of the people who oppose him, I always found it much more interesting to show, *as in a game of chess, the moves of both partners*, how in an interlocking logic one move *necessitates* the next while occasionally one side seems to prefer the short cut of violence." (Eisner 1986, 369)

⁶ Plot synopsis of the film *M*:

As film begins, a group of children are singing a song about a child-murderer. In an exchange between Mrs. Beckmann and a neighbor it is made clear that the same murderer is causing general fear. On her way home from school Mrs. Beckmann's daughter Elsie is addressed by a figure shown only in shadow, and clues indicate that he is the man sought. Mrs. Beckmann worries as her daughter Elsie fails to arrive for lunch. The murder of Elsie is confirmed in a newspaper. The police are pressured by a politician to catch the murderer, who has been a public problem for months. The police conduct searches and raids throughout the underworld, and as a result the leader of the criminals calls a meeting. The leader, Schränker, points out that these raids are making it difficult to carry out their normal criminal activities, and proposes a solution: with the help of the beggars, the

criminals will catch the criminal by watching for his next advance upon a little girl.

Meanwhile the police too meet, and plan to search institutional records for some sign of the killer's past, in effect carrying out a police-procedural style search for clues from the past they assume must be traceable. While the police close in on the identity of the killer by checking the living quarters of suspect after suspect (even stepping into the killer's room seconds after he has left), the ad hoc alliance of beggars and criminals spot the killer with a potential victim. He is marked, chased, and trapped in a building. He is dragged away moments before the police arrive, and the police catch only one burglar in what they assume is a routine burglary. The criminal is taken to a "trial" conducted by Schränker. Just when it seems the killer will be lynched by the observing mob of thieves, the police arrive, having been tipped off by the burglar.

⁷ Spelling of the name of the leader of the criminals varies from text to text, sometimes appearing as Shranker, Schränker, Schränker, or even Schrenke. For character names and titles, as well as for dialogue, I am relying on the script published in the Classic Film Scripts series by Simon and Schuster (Harbou 1968).

⁸ The story of Lang's flight is a marvelous one, only slightly marred by recent revelations that certain points were exaggerated for dramatic effect. As Lang tells it,

"After the Nazis had come to power, my anti-Nazi film, *The Last Will of Dr. Mabuse*, in which I put Nazi slogans into the mouth of a pathological criminal, was banned of course. I was called to see Goebbels [the propaganda minister, who in Lang's account said], 'The Führer saw your film *Metropolis* and announced, 'That's the man to make national socialist film ...!'" Lang has written (and it is often repeated) that he left Germany immediately, which is not quite accurate. But he did leave that year for France, made a film, and was offered a contract to work for MGM (by David Selznick). Without casting doubt on Lang's account of the motives or political stakes involved, Gösta Werner has shown that the urgency and haste in Lang's version are contradicted by passport and visa records.

⁹ For reviews contemporaneous with the film's release, I am relying largely on Kaplan's useful resource, *Fritz Lang: A Guide to References and Resources*, 162-64. To give some idea of the reception in the terms of my argument, she paraphrases a review from Berliner Börsen-Courier, saying that the author "thinks that ultimately the narrative fails because it lacks proper connection to social reality," and cites another review from 1931 which maintains that "despite all the talk of good moral intentions, the film panders to the sensation-seeking of the masses by portraying the case of psychotic sex-murderer." Another reviewer of the same year, in Kaplan's words, "complains that Lang did not use the details of the Kurten case as he could have done, but chose instead to make a horror film, playing on people's anxieties and avoiding all moral and ideological analysis. All the sympathy goes to the police and the criminals; it is no wonder that the censor passed the film, since the ending consists in a warning to parents to take care of their children." As is the case with later reception, little or no attention is paid to the implications of the criminals' efficient work with the beggars, or of the role of Schränker.

¹⁰ Kracauer's work, still often used and cited (though gradually being replaced by more recent works by Eisner, Petro, Elsaesser, and others), would seem to be an obvious place to look for an ideological reading of *M* (he is sometimes faulted for being too forcible in seeing predictions of fascism in films of this era). Yet he is particularly unhelpful, perhaps for a reason well articulated by Kaplan: "he [Kracauer] largely sees Lang's films as reproducing rather than commenting upon the irrationalist and asocial tendencies of the period, which created a climate hospitable to the rise of fascism" (Kaplan 1983, 399). To that I would add that central to Kracauer's thesis is the correlation of crime and madness, while in *M* crime (at least petty, 'normal' crime) is not the product of a crazed mind; craziness and crime are absolutely distinct. Thus Kracauer focuses only on the figure of the killer, and overlooks the characterization and dynamics of both sets of investigators.

¹¹ In addition to the works cited elsewhere in this study, these texts may serve as a sample from the last decade or so:

DENNING, MICHAEL (1987) *Cover Stories: Narrative and Ideology in the British Spy Thriller*. London: Routledge & K. Paul.

KNIGHT, STEPHEN (1980) *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*. London: Macmillan, 1980.

MANDEL, ERNEST (1984) *Delightful Murder. A Social History of the Crime Story*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

OGDON, BETHANY (1992) "Hard-Boiled Ideology." *Critical Quarterly* 34,1: 71-87.

PORTER, DENNIS (1981) *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

STOWE, WILLIAM W. (1989) "Critical Investigations: Convention and Ideology in Detective Fiction." *TSSL* 31: 570-91.

¹² For an informed history of Benjamin's view of the decline of the *flâneur*, see Buck-Morss 1986, and Buck-Morss 1989, especially 293-346. If this conflation of *flâneur* and fascist seems gratuitous, recall that "Benjamin mentions as the 'true salaried flâneur' and 'sandwichman' Henri Beraud, protofascist journalist for Gringoire ..." (Buck-Morss 1989, 307).

¹³ As an example of this type of mass culture criticism in a relevant film genre I would offer Frank Krutnik's 1991 *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity* (London: Routledge), with its thesis that film noir productions try to resolve "'problematised' — eroded or unstable— masculinity." Krutnik notes that "the 'tough' thrillers continually institute a discrepancy between, on the one hand, the licit possibilities of masculine identity and desire required by the patriarchal cultural order, and, on the other hand, the psychosexual make-up of the male subject-hero. (...) these are all unified by what can be seen as an obsession with the non-correspondence between the desires of the individual male subject and the cultural regime of 'masculine identification'." (85)

¹⁴ Geoff Brown, "Early Hitchcock" in an unpaginated catalog by the Champagne Piper-Heidsieck Classic Film Collection and the British Film Institute to accompany their film series *Early Hitchcock*.

¹⁵ In my opinion all formulaic fiction is already so close to spoof and parody that it is particularly resistant to it. Consider that in the years immediately following publication of the first Sherlock Holmes stories, parodies and caricatures flourished, some the products of talented writers such as O. Henry. Yet these send-ups of the mannerisms of the character and patterns of the story, seemingly devastating in their accuracy, did nothing to subtract from and may indeed have added to their popular reception.

¹⁶ Unfortunately I have not had the opportunity to view another 1931 German film whose parallels with *M* are fairly clear. In *Emil und die Detektive*, a group of children successfully pursue a thief.

¹⁷ In this sense the last line of the film ("We, too, should keep a closer watch on our children") is more integral and consistent with the film as a whole than is usually granted, and supports Mrs. Beckmann's comment that the fact of the children's singing outweighs its gruesome content.

¹⁸ I should point out that among those few images of solitary policeman at work are some emphasizing the police procedural approach. For example, one sees a detective studying an enormous annotated projected image of a fingerprint, probably one of the facets of real police procedures that Lang is reported to have learned and incorporated after gaining access to files of the Berlin Police Department. Lang did devote a great deal of time to accuracy of certain points, such as the beggars' exchange market, and the records and procedures of psychiatrists and psychoanalysts of the day.

¹⁹ Bataille was not the first to articulate a theory predicting this relation. As Adorno pointed out, Freud's theory anticipated "Even the fascist leader's ... resemblance to ham actors and asocial psychopaths" (Adorno 127).

²⁰ In his surprisingly moving speech in the tribunal, the murderer turns this logic around, and argues that while the criminals have a choice: "You wouldn't need to do all that [criminal activity] if you had learnt a proper trade ... or if you worked. If you weren't a bunch of lazy bastards... But I ... I can't help myself!"

²¹ To emphasize the role chance plays in the police investigation, Jensen points out the limitations of even this directed approach: "It is decided to obtain from prisons, sanatoriums, and mental

institutions the names of those recently released as harmless, yet capable of murder (a seemingly contradictory phrase). The result is a giant list of the mentally ill who have been freed, during the past five years, from private and state institutions. Obviously, the murderer might have been released more than five years before or he might never have been committed at all" (Jensen 97).

22 The gap between public and police is clearer when we realize that no police appear to intercede (literally or chronologically in the film) between the private misfortune of Mrs. Beckmann and the public pronouncement of her daughter's death in the newspapers.

23 I will resist the temptation to focus on the killer M, and will simply point out that a recent book by Paul Coates makes observations about him which are consistent with the analysis underlying Bataille's, as it points to him as a heterogeneous non-consumer whose desire is linked with this status. Immediately following the often-reproduced shot of M eating an apple, staring at display window of knives and framed by their reflection, M sees a young girl, gets both excited and disturbed, and is doubled by his reflection in the shop window. In Coates' view, "the shop-window reflection of the child murderer in *M* (*M, Mörder unter Uns*) famously embodies his unacknowledged desires — it is because it places the doppelgänger of expressionism under the aegis of the New Objectivity, postinflation alienation expressing itself in the inability to buy." (Coates 97)

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