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The Ambiguous Critique of Lynch Law: Fritz Lang and Hollywood's Representation of Injustice

In 1933, Fritz Lang, one of Weimar Cinema's most prestigious directors, joined the growing number of intellectuals and artists who were being forced to leave Germany. He emigrated to Paris and eventually arrived in Los Angeles as an employee of MGM. In the course of his subsequent career, Lang directed a number of acclaimed and successful films. However, in historical assessments of his oeuvre, the early Weimar period was frequently pitted against his Hollywood years as an exemplary case of artistic decline due to the detrimental effects of an industrialized production system.¹ In this article, I want to take a closer look at Lang's early American films in order to reassess their contribution to Hollywood's cinema of social critique of the 1930s – what I will refer to as social melodrama. In his first MGM production *Fury* (1936) the subject of lynch law introduced forms of filmic reflexivity that helped to define a new *civic role* for the cinema. Thus, in order to appreciate Lang's directorial work, we must recontextualize his early American films against the background of American culture in the 1930s. I will begin by looking briefly at his first transatlantic encounter ten years earlier.

¹ For an elaborate discussion of crucial issues regarding Lang's life and work cf. Gunning, Tom. *The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Vision and Modernity*. London: BFI Publishing, 2000.

"Was ich in Amerika sah": Lang's Travel Writings, 1924

Arriving in the United States in 1934, Fritz Lang returned to a country whose film industry he had been watching closely throughout the 1920s. Ten years earlier, in 1924, having just finished *Die Nibelungen*, he had visited New York City and Los Angeles. Back in Germany, he presented his views of American society and film in a series of *Film-Kurier*-articles.² Revealing popular inclinations, Lang confessed his love of stories involving "Cowboys, Indians and Gangsters," which promised to free his mind of a certain sense of Europeanness and left him feeling refreshed.³ He also voiced his admiration for the contemporaneity of the American cinema and the topicality of films involving "die Geschichte einer Broadway-Tänzerin, eines Bowery-Boxers" ('the story of a Broadway-dancer, a Bowery-boxer').⁴

At the same time, his observations were consistent with general tendencies of German travel writing describing the United States in the 1920s.⁵ As the fear of an Americanization of German society had been growing steadily since the end of World War I, American society was seen simultaneously as a threat to European culture and as the most advanced outpost of modernization, a model to be emulated in many respects. Lang admired the "limitless possibilities" that film directors in Hollywood enjoyed (he was particularly impressed by the studio lots in Los Angeles). Yet he also noticed a lack of dedication on their part to strive for the

² Lang, Fritz. "Was ich in Amerika sah." *Film-Kurier* 6 (11, 13, 17 December 1924). Reprinted in Fred Gehler and Ullrich Kasten. *Fritz Lang. Die Stimme von Metropolis*. Berlin: Henschel Verlag, 1990. 207-222.

³ "Ich sitze im Kino, lasse mir anderthalb Stunden lang durch eine herrliche Räubergeschichte alles Europäisch-allzu-Europäische aus dem Kopf blasen und bin hinterher vergnügt und guter Dinge und irgendwie erfrischt." Translation by author: 'Sitting in the cinema for one and a half hours, I let everything European be blown from my mind by a marvellous gangster story. Afterwards, I feel entertained, in a good mood, and somehow refreshed.' Lang, "Was ich in Amerika sah" 212.

⁴ *Ibid.* 213.

⁵ See for example Rundt, Arthur. *Amerika ist anders*. Berlin: Wegweiser Verlag, 1926.

utmost in terms of quality and artistic value. Worse still, the American cinema epitomized what the Frankfurt School would later call a new form of "culture industry": an industrialized mode of production geared to turn out a steady stream of products to satisfy the voracious "hunger" for films, devoured by the thousands without ever satisfying their demand. As Lang complained: "Dieser Hunger des ungeheuren Landes ist nur durch Massenspeisung mit einer fabrikmäßig hergestellten Ware zu stillen." Emphatically he added: "Amerika arbeitet nicht nach Manuskripten, es arbeitet nach Rezepten!!"⁶

Lang himself, therefore, introduced many of the themes by which his oeuvre would be judged in later years. On the whole, however, the picture he painted of American society and the cinema was one of promise and opportunity. He criticized the lack of historical depth in American films and the difficulties of trying to "make it" in Hollywood. But these drawbacks were more than counterbalanced by his observations on the advanced state of production facilities and the sense of modernity – the contemporary feel – of the stories and actors.⁷ Using not just their faces but (in these days of silent film) also their bodies to the full, American actors, according to Lang, contributed to a "Sichtbarmachung des Alltäglichen" ('making visible of the ordinary').⁸ The success of the American cinema was thus not only due to its technical advancement, but also to its ability to capture most convincingly the *zeitgeist* of modern life in the early 20th century.

As a result, the futuristic city of *Metropolis* was inspired by American examples such as New York City. Yet it is important to remember that, in the 1920s, modernization as represented by American society also signified the attempt to reconcile the ideals

⁶ Translation: 'The hunger of this vast country can only be satisfied by the mass feeding of factory-produced commodities.' 'America doesn't work according to manuscripts [i.e. film scripts], it follows formulae.' Lang, "Was ich in Amerika sah" 213.

⁷ Cf. Lang, Fritz. "Zwischen Bohrtürmen und Palmen – Ein kalifornischer Reisebericht – von Fritz Lang." *Filmland* 3 (Januar 1925). Reprinted in Gehler/Kasten, *Fritz Lang* 223-227.

⁸ Lang, "Was ich in Amerika sah" 221.

of a democratic culture with the demands of mass society. Lang's comments on the differing body language of American and German actors therefore were not only intended to reinvigorate German cinema with a new acting style, they seemed to be striving for a cultural spirit he had found at work in North America. Coming to the country in 1934, Lang still seemed to be preoccupied by these impressions, investigating the validity of his mid-1920s observations in the narrative space of his early American projects. They displayed ambiguous findings, both in terms of film aesthetics and social analysis. Yet his focus on contemporary settings and ordinary characters was clearly an attempt to combine his post-*M*-period with those aspects of the American cinema he had praised so emphatically in 1924.

Auteurism Revisited

The critical debate over Lang's status as an auteur and the value of his American work has been revived by Tom Gunning's recent study of Lang's *œuvre*.⁹ Quite rightly he points out that, considering the vast differences between the production systems, Lang's Hollywood period should not be seen as inferior compared with his years in Germany.¹⁰ Gunning's detailed and perceptive readings demonstrate the continuity of certain themes, visual motifs, and narrative patterns in Lang's work. Yet despite his agenda of theoretical innovation, the framework of his study follows rather traditional lines of auteurism. What these interpretations seem to be lacking is a more thorough contextualization of Lang's films within American culture and, more importantly, within the respective generic traditions they drew upon.¹¹

⁹ Cf. Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang*.

¹⁰ Ibid. 204. Lang's attempts to establish himself as an independent producer/director are chronicled by Matthew Bernstein, "Fritz Lang, Incorporated." *The Velvet Light Trap* 22 (1986): 33-52.

¹¹ In the introduction to his theoretical framework, Gunning claims "that Fritz Lang as author in some sense merged with his films." Unfortunately though,

Another case in point regarding this lack of contextualization is Nick Smedley's article "Fritz Lang's Trilogy: the Rise and Fall of a European Social Commentator." Summarizing his analysis of *Fury* (1936), *You Only Live Once* (1937), and *You and Me* (1938) the author writes: "The proclamation of American liberal values which formed the substance of Hollywood's New Deal films was challenged by Lang's penetrating social criticism and his complex moral didacticism."¹² Though not altogether wrong, two claims implicit in this assessment tend to obscure Fritz Lang's contribution to Hollywood's cinema of social critique. On the one hand, Smedley argues that the New Deal era was, as he says, a period of "ethical certainty" and "calm self-confidence," a time whose spirit was celebrated by the American cinema. On the other hand, he implies that Fritz Lang was *singular* in dissecting this idealized version of the American Dream.

Both claims primarily serve to give credence to the well-worn story of a socially conscious European film director who went to

the qualifier 'in some sense' isn't made convincingly explicit. The author is seen to be "poised on the threshold of the work, evident in the film itself, but also standing outside it, absent except in the imprint left behind." Yet this recurring metaphor of presence and absence seems to be begging the question how, precisely, the basic tension between the individuality of personal style and the conventionality of genre formulae can be theorized in novel ways. This becomes particularly pressing as Gunning moves into the Hollywood period where he claims that Lang's feeling of insecurity as a refugee began to shape his new mode of filmmaking. Gunning assumes that an 'authored' film shows the signs of the director's struggle to assert authorship. But does this mean that only deviations from the norm (i.e. from narrative conventions) count as signs of authorship? Among Lang's early American productions, Gunning regards *You and Me* as the most experimental film. Presumably this would mean that signs of struggle against narrative conventions are most clearly visible and therefore the film is most 'Langian' in Gunning's definition. Curiously, though, it is usually considered to be artistically uneven, if not, in Lang's own estimation, a downright flop. Gunning's study thus provides ample material concerning recurring Langian themes and motifs. Key problems of the auteurist framework, however, remain unsolved. Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang* 5, 8.

¹² Smedley, Nick. "Fritz Lang's Trilogy: the Rise and Fall of a European Social Commentator." *Film History* 5 (1993): 1-21. 17.

Hollywood to experience a slow but steady "downfall." However, as Gunning points out, politics tended to play a greater role in Lang's American films than in his German productions.¹³ Furthermore, even a brief look at his first three films in the United States may illustrate how deeply entrenched his stories were within contemporary genre conventions: *Fury* centres on two Joe Doe characters, one of whom is victimized by a prejudiced lynch mob. *You Only Live Once* pairs ex-convict and compassionate female companion, while *You and Me* has two ex-convicts – one male, one female – as the lead characters. In all three cases Lang's leading lady was Sylvia Sydney, an actress who played similar roles in films such as *Street Scene* (1931), directed by King Vidor, or *Dead End* (1937), directed by William Wyler. Thus Fritz Lang's trilogy, far from representing a singular strain of critique, belonged to a well-established American tradition of social analysis and criticism – a tradition that can most fruitfully be understood as a particular form of social melodrama.

Historicizing the Social Melodrama

In the early 1930s, Darryl Zanuck and Hal B. Wallis had established Warner Brothers as a prominent "socially conscious" studio, but as Kevin Brownlow has shown, the peculiar strategy of combining intensely dramatic material with an exploration of social problems was invoked from the earliest silent productions onward.¹⁴ These films were variously called topicals, exposé films,

¹³ Ibid. 203-234.

¹⁴ Brownlow, Kevin. *Behind the Mask of Innocence: Films of Social Conscience in the Silent Era*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1990. The cinema of social consciousness of the 1930s is investigated by Tino Balio. *Grand Design. Hollywood as a Modern Enterprise, 1930-1939*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1993; Roffman, Peter and Jim Purdy. *The Hollywood Social Problem Film. Madness, Despair, and Politics from the Depression to the Fifties*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981; Roddick, Nick. *New Deal in Entertainment. Warner Brothers in the 1930s*. London: British Film Institute, 1983.

or social consciousness films, but basically they all belonged to a melodramatic mode of storytelling – a mode whose complexities have increasingly been acknowledged in recent years.

In the context of this debate, melodrama is understood not as a specific genre nor as a deviation from the classical realist narrative. Rather, in the words of Linda Williams, it is seen as a "peculiarly democratic and American form that seeks dramatic revelation of moral and emotional truths through a dialectic of pathos and action."¹⁵ Thus, it represents a basic narrative category shaping not only textual features but also cultural functions of the narrative that are pivotal to American democracy. Contextualized in this way, the *social* melodrama can be characterized by a significant degree of topicality and realism of the *mise-en-scène*, but the action, the conception of the social, and the characters are determined by the melodramatic logic of making moral and emotional truths "legible" in an act of public scrutiny.¹⁶

In the history of the American cinema, this quest for moral legibility contributed to the emergence of numerous genres addressing social problems in highly charged emotional terms. Often they relied on clear-cut divisions between good and evil, simplified notions of innocence and guilt, or sensational storylines. But as an integral part of American cultural democracy they also opened up new ways of presenting issues of victimization or of establishing a politics of compassion. As Williams puts it: "Virtuous suffering is a pathetic weapon against injustice, but we need to recognize how frequently it has been the melodramatic weapon of choice of American popular culture."¹⁷

Thus, as Fritz Lang made his MGM-debut with *Fury* in 1936, he contributed to an established critical discourse which had been revitalized in the early decade by prison or chain-gang films and

¹⁵ Williams, Linda. "Melodrama Revised." *Refiguring American Film Genres. History and Theory*. Ed. Nick Browne. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1998. 42-88. 42.

¹⁶ The concept of "moral legibility" is adapted from Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination. Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*. New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1976.

¹⁷ Williams, "Melodrama Revised" 80.

stories about fallen women or notorious gangster figures – in short, by genres revolving around questions of crime, sexuality, the body, and injustice. Deciding on the subject of lynch law for *Fury*, though daring at the time, was not a singular choice. Archie Mayo directed *Black Legion* for Warner Brothers in the same year, while Mervyn LeRoy followed up with *They Won't Forget* for the studio in 1937. Since topicality was aimed for by all the major studios, newspaper reports were frequently translated into film scripts.

Nick Smedley's conclusion that Fritz Lang's films "ventured into places normally avoided by Hollywood's traditional celebration of the spirit of the New Deal"¹⁸ therefore tends to overlook similar productions of other studios and, furthermore, fails to acknowledge the high degree of continuity between the films Lang directed and the "American" genre conventions they were modeled upon – particularly in the case of his ex-convict-characters. In the case of Fritz Lang, traditional auteur criticism has tended to overestimate his individual contribution to the cinema of social critique or, conversely, has underestimated similar indigenous productions.¹⁹

To be sure, Lang frequently managed to create a particular form of narrative reflexivity, which, at its best, encouraged reflection of thematic and formal elements. Yet this artistic predilection must ultimately be contextualized as a phenomenon of the 1930s in which a number of individuals and Hollywood studios were involved. In other words, Lang's particular style was a singular achievement but ultimately contributed to an ongoing critical discourse which was being shaped by a number of "cultural fronts."²⁰ Still, *Fury* did manage to convey a sense of innovation, and I would argue that we have to look at the broader cultural context of the 1930s in order to appreciate the film's multiple layers of reflexivity.

¹⁸ Smedley, "Fritz Lang's Trilogy" 17.

¹⁹ For a scathing though not altogether convincing critique of Fritz Lang's status as an auteur see Knops, Tilo R. "Kino des Übergangs. Fritz Langs auktorialer Stil." *Merkur* 9-10 (1991): 839-853.

²⁰ For a detailed discussion of the different groups participating in this process see Denning, Michael. *The Cultural Front. The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*. London, New York: Verso, 1998.

Fury and the Issue of Reflexivity

Mixing court-room drama, mob violence, romantic love, and an appeal to the basic values of American democracy, *Fury* is a good example of the social exposé-tradition flourishing in the 1930s. The story revolves around a young couple, Joe and Katherine, played by Spencer Tracy and Sylvia Sydney, who plan to get married but for economic reasons have to separate for a year. Joe eventually sets out to meet Katherine but he is arrested and suspected of having participated in a kidnapping – although he is, of course, innocent. As the people of the small town learn of the arrest, men and women gather outside the jail and slowly turn into a vicious lynch mob setting fire to the building. Katherine arrives on the scene only to see Joe in his burning cell fighting for his life. She believes him dead, as does the district attorney, but the audience learns that he has managed to escape at the last minute.

Hiding and longing for revenge, he follows the ensuing trial over the radio, hoping that the main suspects will be sentenced to death. A Newsreel report, introduced as a new form of legal evidence, establishes the guilt of the defendants. Yet, when Katherine learns that Joe has in fact *not* died, she convinces him to make a public appearance in court. In the final scene, the two are reunited as he gives up his quest for revenge, and reaffirms their relationship.

Working from a script he had co-written with Bartlett Cormack, Fritz Lang managed to give certain innovative twists to the underlying formula of wronged innocence, which was a staple of the 1930s social melodrama. Firstly, with regard to questions of innocence and guilt, Lang demonstrated a high degree of *generic reflexivity*. The first half of the film establishes beyond doubt that morally and legally the lynch mob is guilty, while Joe, who is wrongly accused, represents the proto-typical innocent victim. Yet the second half complicates questions of innocence and guilt. As Joe explains to his brothers, he wants to "see the defendants squirm." He relishes in their suffering and by so doing partially displays character traits that earlier in the narrative had fuelled *their* murderous instincts.

As François Velde points out, after Wilson's transformation following the attempted lynching,

justice can be meted out, vengeance fulfilled, and the monsters not go unpunished: what viewer could deny rejoicing in this precise instant, and empathetically thirsting for revenge? Fritz Lang's trap has snapped shut: we are prisoners of our own passion, and ready to approve of an injustice all the more injurious in that it assumes the guise of justice itself.²¹

Since Joe is alive, his legal case has lost its basis of a lawbreaking act. Joe may pursue a moral crusade but, as *Fury* indicates, this is on the verge of turning into a case of personal vengeance. With regard to audience identification, Lang thus introduces a case of complicated emotional involvement where pity for the victim may turn into approval and support of his vengeful spirit. Since the audience has witnessed how Joe was victimized, it is liable to sympathize with his plight and may share in his subject position of a sadistic, morally self-righteous perpetrator.

Contrary to films like *I Was A Fugitive From A Chain Gang* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1932) from the early decade, the fundamental innocence of the major character is therefore not untainted but shown to be fragile and in danger of being overwhelmed by more powerful psychic instincts. Remarkably, this metamorphosis of the main character is also a major element of emotional involvement on the part of the audience. Though in its conclusion *Fury* reverts to the melodramatic logic of clear cut moral and emotional truths, its narrative has stressed the radical ambiguities of passionate behavior and the tenuous civilizing restraints that social values seem to pose.

Secondly, with regard to the question of visualizing the act of lynching, *Fury* is characterized by *representational reflexivity*. In 1935 two anti-lynching art exhibitions took place in New York City, highlighting the representational dilemma that both painting and film shared: How could the act and experience of lynching be

²¹ Velde, François R. "On Fritz Lang's *Fury* (1936)." *Stanford French Review* 16.1 (1992): 87-94. 91.

represented visually without idealizing or degrading the victims? The first show called *An Art Commentary on Lynching* was organized by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and supported by the liberal establishment of New York. The second show titled *The Struggle for Negro Rights* was sponsored by organizations such as the John Reed Club and basically followed the line of the American Communist Party.²² Both shows were intended to gain publicity for various legal anti-lynching activities. Though in retrospect they were fighting for similar ends, at the time they were caught in the radical spirit of confrontation and seen to be competing in the aesthetic sphere. Still, they openly addressed what Hollywood was unable to show in the 1930s: that more than two-thirds of the victims of lynchings had been African Americans. Artists from different traditions and backgrounds contributed drawings or paintings, among them John Steuart Curry, Samuel Brown, Harry Sternberg, Paul Cadmus, Reginald Marsh, Hale Woodruff, Julius Bloch, and others. According to Helen Langa, they were faced with two related issues:

How could they literally portray torture, violent abuse, or murder so as to make evident both the horror of these acts *and* their condemnation? And in what other, more metaphorical ways could they convey the impact of such terrible events without emphasizing the vulnerability of their targeted figures?²³

Most images tended to depict *explicit* scenes of lynch violence, such as mutilated bodies hanging from trees, or the harassment of victims. Artists who did not follow a realistic mode submitted images of grieving, religious analogies, or attempts at idealizing

²² For an extended discussion of the exhibitions see Park, Marlene. "Lynching and Antilynching: Art and Politics in the 1930s." *Prospects: An Annual of American Cultural Studies*. Ed. Jack Salzman. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993. 311-365; Langa, Helen. "Two Antilynching Art Exhibitions: Politicized Viewpoints, Racial Perspectives, Gendered Constraints." *American Art* 13.1 (Spring 1999): 11-39.

²³ Langa, "Two Antilynching Art Exhibitions" 17, 18.

the male body. Yet the basic dilemma in the visualization of lynchings remained: Images deemed too explicit and gruesome were called sensationalist, while alternative forms of depicting the violent acts were usually borrowed from established and thus more conventionalized iconographic traditions such as the Crucifixion of Jesus.

In a related debate over visual representation, Hollywood had in the early decade also come under attack for its portrayal of violence, particularly in the case of gangster films. Production Code guidelines subsequently required that violent acts be not shown explicitly but rather only hinted at.²⁴ This was one reason why later in the decade the studios on the whole preferred metaphorical renderings of lynchings. *Black Legion* included powerful yet very brief scenes of floggings by hooded clansmen. *They Won't Forget* showed a lynch mob awaiting its victim but ended with a shot of a mail bag dangling from a gallows-like wooden pole (fig. 1). *Fury* introduced the pitiful sight of panic-stricken Joe caught in his cell. But Fritz Lang was ultimately more interested in the reactions of the audience than the actual scene of death struggle, as the close-up of Katherine's horrified face indicates (figs. 2 and 3).

To underscore this point, one shot in *Fury* seems to be modeled directly upon a lynching picture by Reginald Marsh, which had been published in *The New Yorker* in 1934, sarcastically titled "This Is Her First Lynching." Significantly, it showed a young girl being held up high to get a better look at the spectacle, while the actual lynching takes place off-screen and is *not* depicted directly. Among the bystanders looking at the jail Lang included a similar scene, stressing the idea that the audience is enjoying the "show" (fig. 4). While establishing a sense of representational reflexivity, the actual depiction of the lynching contributed more to a reflection

²⁴ On the issue of censorship see Black, Gregory D. *Hollywood Censored: Morality Codes, Catholics, and the Movies*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994; Jacobs, Lea. "Industry Self-Regulation and the Problem of Textual Determination." *Velvet Light Trap* 23 (Spring 1989): 4-15; Maltby, Richard. "The Production Code and the Hays Office." *Grand Design*. 37-72.

upon audience desire and the ambivalence of vicarious experience than to new or more realistic ways of showing the crime.

What may to some extent have been dictated by Production Code requirements is thereby transformed into a major aspect of the film's critical discourse. Lang's representation of the lynching emphasizes that public spectacles require an audience willing to participate and eager to be "entertained." Whatever immoral or criminal act happens must ultimately be referred back to the complicity of the onlookers. Needless to say, *Fury* included so many references to cinema audiences that the film's conception of mob psychology applied not only to the public spectacle of lynching but by implication also to the relatively new phenomenon of mass media consumption.²⁵

Thirdly, by introducing Newsreel-shots of the attempted lynching as legal evidence in court, Lang practiced a sophisticated form of *media reflexivity*, which can in fact be seen as a culmination of both generic and representational forms of reflexivity. In the film, the district attorney decides to use the material in order to establish that the defendants were present at the burning of the jail, and actively took part in it. In more general terms, though, he draws upon truth claims related to the film medium itself by introducing a new "documentary" function of the cinema which radically changes its position vis-à-vis the depiction of violence.

One example of the Newsreel sequence may serve as a case in point. As the defendants watch the scenes and some of them are freeze-framed by the district attorney, a woman experiences a shock of recognition. In one shot she is seen joyfully hurling a torch, in the reaction shot at the trial she expresses pity and humility (figs. 5 and 6). The juxtaposition of these narrative snippets once more puts the blame for violent acts on the gullibility of audiences and mobs, but at the same time it serves to redefine

²⁵ As Gunning points out, the most important reference occurs as Joe describes to his brothers how the Newsreel audiences had received an extra kick out of seeing him seemingly burning to death. Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang* 226, 227.

the role of the cinema in the depiction of these acts. At first the narrative of *Fury* seems to thrive upon the sensational material of the attempted lynching; later it is used intra-diegetically for didactic ends, and serves as a means for combating and controlling emotional states of fanaticism.

While the victimization of Joe Wilson - the punishment of an innocent character - follows a melodramatic logic that triggers the film's social critique, the depiction of violence is thereby used reflexively to address problems of representation and sensationalism. Wilson's double conversion, firstly into a traumatized, vengeful victim after the attempted lynching, and secondly into a forgiving but disillusioned citizen at the film's end, is mirrored by two potentially disruptive functions of the cinematic spectacle. Sensational material of violence and destruction may serve to incite passions of repressed feelings and vicarious thrill, or it may create a sobering shock of recognition. Ultimately, the district attorney's didactical use of the film medium is presented as the new civil function of the cinema. By freeze-framing the defendants, he turns into a master manipulator of images and to a certain extent takes on the role of the film director's alter ego. Making use of Newsreel footage in a battle for justice thus helps to redefine the cinema's role in its production of fascinating, seemingly infectious images. Less prone to a sensationalist rendering of events, it appears to be capable of addressing both social problems *and* the ambiguous impact of their visual representation.

Conclusion

In the 1930s, the conflict over the explicitness of sensational, politically charged material was raging in various domains of visual culture. It contributed to the emergence of new aesthetic forms and was an important factor in the cinema's larger struggle for legitimacy and cultural acceptance. Fritz Lang's first American project adapted the strategy of legitimizing sensational depictions of current events by turning to issues that had also helped the

NAACP and the American Communist Party in their respective political crusades. Just as these organizations had initiated art exhibitions in order to attract national attention and political support, Lang contributed to a new form of social cinema that was aimed at two related goals: Firstly, the politicization of Hollywood narratives in a more sophisticated form and, secondly, the redefinition of Hollywood's role as a cultural institution involved in the dissemination of ambiguous and "dangerous" images.

Partly to avoid being castigated for depictions of violence deemed too explicit and shocking, Hollywood began to shift its focus to questions of audience desire as a central aspect of public spectacles. Indeed, the year 1936 can be seen as a marker introducing a social cinema oscillating between earlier forms of sensationalism, and the new role as civil educator. By merging the figure of the district attorney fighting for justice with the implicit figure of the film director freeze-framing the film material, Lang established a new role for the cinema as defender of freedom and democracy. This role was echoed in numerous productions of the time and represented an attempt to re-position the American film industry in the public sphere after the turbulent battles over self-regulation in the early decade.

Fritz Lang was not singular in this reflexive turn. Yet his American debut helped to forge a new role for the cinema by addressing questions of representation and violence that had surfaced in contemporary political and aesthetic avant-garde movements. He did *not* manage, however, to extend this redefinition to another major issue of the decade: the pervasive feeling of an excessive form of materialism. As the artistic and financial failure of his 1938 film *You and Me* suggests, Lang's work was most effective as long as he managed to integrate elements from his Weimar period or Brechtian devices into established "American" forms of storytelling. His success as an auteur, it seems, was not just a matter of subverting narrative conventions. It also depended on the skill to adopt them convincingly.

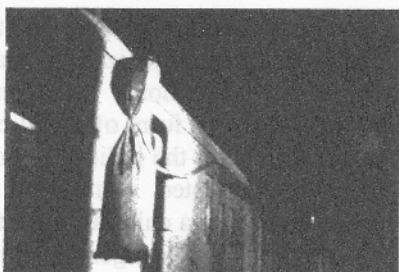


Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

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