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...the mob is the most ruthless of tyrants[.]

H. L. Mencken, “Introduction” to Nietzsche’s *The Anti-Christ*

A mob’s always made up of people, no matter what.

Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*

- 1 Rumor has it that Fritz Lang’s personal political awakening can be pinpointed to one single moment: In *From Caligari to Hitler*, his momentous and disputed study of the cinema of the Weimar Republic, first published in 1947, Siegfried Kracauer recounts a little anecdote regarding the pre-production of Lang’s first sound film *M—Eine Stadt sucht einen Mörder* (1931): “Fritz Lang told me that in 1930, before *M* went into production, a short notice appeared in the press, announcing the tentative title of his new film, *Mörder unter uns* (*Murderer Among Us*). Soon he received numerous threatening letters and, still worse, was bluntly refused permission to use the Staaken studio for his film” (218-219). The director was, as he told Kracauer, flabbergasted by the amount of hostility and resistance to a film project inspired by the case of the serial killer Peter Kürten and some other sex crimes which had been widely publicized by German media in the late 1920s (cf. Lang 186). The revelation came during a dispute with a studio official during which Lang disclosed the thematic specifics of the film that he had kept a secret up to this point. That brought about a change in the situation: “‘Ach, I see,’ the manager said. He beamed with relief and immediately surrendered the keys of Staaken. Lang, too, understood; while arguing with the man, he had seized his lapel and caught a glimpse of the Nazi insignia on its reverse. ‘Murderer among us’: the Party feared to be compromised. On that day, Lang added, he came of age politically” (Kracauer 219).

- 2 Given Lang's notorious habit of publicity-conscious self-fashioning, the trustworthiness of this anecdote is certainly disputable (and has indeed been disputed by many commentators), but one can certainly agree with Patrick McGilligan's statement that "it made a good tale and provided an early point in chronology for Lang to polish his political credentials" (153) after he had come to America in 1934. In any case, I would agree that *M*, Lang's first 'talkie', marks a significant turning point in the implicit politics of his cinema.
- 3 One subtle indicator for this development is the way the film addresses the topic of rumor. In the following essay I will argue that the shift from silent to sound film constitutes not only a fundamental technological and aesthetic revolution but also coincided with a new political focus in Lang's oeuvre. While his earlier silent films of the Weimar era have been accused of either being (at least aesthetically) proto-fascist (most notably by Siegfried Kracauer) or deemed as predominantly apolitical (most notably by Lang himself), some of his early sound films, produced immediately before and after his escape from Nazi Germany (via France) to the United States, can be read as cautionary tales, equally warning of and reflecting on the precarity of liberal democracy when facing the threat of a populist undermining by means of rumor, gossip, and character assassination.
- 4 "Liberalism," "liberal democracy" and "populism" are, of course, notoriously contested terms and it is impossible to recapitulate the complex debates regarding the ideological implications of these concepts in the context of this essay. For pragmatic reasons, I will therefore follow the concise, pointed and applicable definition provided by Takis S. Pappas:

'[L]iberalism'... revolves around the idea of individual liberty being supreme, as well as the need to institutionally protect it within complex political societies. Accordingly, when it comes to democratically run nations, a liberal democracy is the polity that acknowledges, and is built upon, the following principles: Society comprises a plurality of conflicting interests which, lest the polity regress to a Hobbesian nightmare of polarization and generalized social strife, must be subject to overarching commonly agreed institutions, the rule of law, and the protection of minority rights. Given the interdependency of such conditions, the polity ceases to qualify as a liberal democracy even if only one of them is violated. (2-3)
- 5 Populism is, on the other hand, defined, at least politically, as "democratic illiberalism" (3)—illiberal in the sense that it violates the principles outlined above, democratic in the sense that this violation is (allegedly) legitimized by the *vox populi*.
- 6 Focusing on the examples of *M*—the canonical thriller about a child murderer who haunts the German capital and is finally captured in a joint operation of the city's criminal underworld—and his first Hollywood production *Fury* (1936)—a revenge drama about an innocent man who fell prey to a lynch mob—this essay will show that the cinematic reflection on the toxic efficacy of the dynamics of rumor provides a gateway to Lang's integration into American liberalism. Revisiting and reevaluating these films as discursive laboratories on the potentially anti-liberal politics of rumor and the role of gossip¹ in our current era of surging authoritarianism shows the enduring topicality of these classics.

1. A Taxonomy of Speech-Acts

- 7 In his second *Cinema* book, Gilles Deleuze cites Lang's *M*—along with John Ford's *The Whole Town's Talking* (1935) and Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *People Will Talk* (1951)—as one of the key examples for his claim that "rumour has been a cinematographically privileged object" (227) in sound film. Deleuze defines rumor in this context as an "indeterminate speech-act... which circulates and spreads, making visible the live interactions between independent characters and separate places" (228). Although these remarks lack a political perspective, they offer a propaedeutic outlook on the cinematic representation of the dynamics and functions of rumor that will be helpful for the political reading of *M* and *Fury* I will offer in the following.
- 8 Deleuze traces the prominent presence of this particular indeterminate speech-act in the movies back to a pivotal shift in the semiotics of cinema which is, in turn, the outcome of a transformation in media technology: the transition from silent to sound film. In the silent era, the cinematic image had to be understood as a dyad "composed from the seen image, and the intertitle which is read (second function of the eye)" whereby the latter element also contains, in absence of a sonic component, "speech-acts" (Deleuze 225). In terms of specific subject matter,

[t]he visual image shows the structure of a society, its situation, its places and functions, the attitudes and roles, the actions and reactions of the individuals, in short, the form and the contents. And, no doubt, it grips speech-acts so tightly that it can make us see the lamentations of the poor or the cry of the rebels. It shows the condition of a speech-act, its immediate consequences and even its phonation. (225-226)
- 9 The pictorial layer in silent film is purely presentational, it may show us the conditions and contexts in which speech-acts are made but not their content—unless, of course, we are proficient lip-readers. This is the domain of the textual element—the intertitle—that addresses reading, as the "second function of the eye" (besides watching), and tells us what is said. What neither of the elements of the silent film image can adequately communicate is the modality of speech-acts and their repercussions in the social realm.
- 10 The advent of sound film, Deleuze continues, uncouples the speech-act from the textual medium of the intertitle, makes it "direct, and recovers the distinctive features of 'discourse'" (226). This directness of sound "takes on an area that might even be called *human interaction*" (227, emphasis in the original) in a way that silent cinema was not capable to do. It now became possible to depict all kinds of speech-acts that occur in social interaction, regardless if they are determinate or indeterminate: Determinate speech-acts usually originate from an identifiable source (an individual, a collective, an institution etc.), are transmitted via established communication channels and usually have an identifiable (individual or collective) addressee. Indeterminate speech-acts, in contrast, often have unclear origins, are not disseminated through preconfigured channels and circulate in the social realm without a declared addressee. Determinate speech-acts usually happen in already existing social environments in which the modalities of what Deleuze calls "*human interaction*" are already defined *a priori*. The indeterminate speech-act, in contrast, "through its continuous circulation, propagation and autonomous evolution, will *create* the interaction between individuals or groups who are far away, dispersed, indifferent to each other" (227, emphasis mine). It

therefore has—although lacking a preformulated telos—evocative potential as it can lead to the emergence of new (ephemeral or sustainable) forms of sociality that define their own modalities of human interaction (the revolutionary crowd, the mob etc.).

- 11 As “[i]nteractions *make themselves seen* in speech-acts”, sound film becomes, in its ability to depict such acts immediately, a diagnostic tool for the observation of social life or, as Deleuze phrased it “an interactionist sociology in action” (227, emphasis in the original). Both films discussed in this essay, *M* as well as *Fury*, undoubtedly count as examples *par excellence* for such a cinematic sociological enterprise.

2. The Ideological Intricacies of Lang’s Weimar-Era Films

- 12 The question of the politics of Lang’s films has to be answered in the context on the larger discourse on the political implications of German cinema during the era of the Weimar Republic. Historically, this discussion is overshadowed by two names—Siegfried Kracauer and Lotte H. Eisner. Both had already been working as film critics in Germany before they had to leave the country in 1933. Their two most influential contributions to the discussion of German interwar cinema were, however, written from an *ex post* perspective in an attempt to historize this short but vibrant period in the art form’s cultural history with the knowledge about the outcome of the fascist disaster: Kracauer’s aforementioned *From Caligari to Hitler* was first published in 1947 and Eisner’s *The Haunted Screen* in 1952 (in French; the first English translation appeared in 1969). These two books dominated the film historiography of the era for decades and, as Christian Rogowski put it, “cast the Weimar Cinema as precursor to, or prophet of, the Third Reich and as heir to specifically German cultural traditions, suggesting a direct correlation, perhaps even a causal nexus, between cultural production and historical realities” (1). Of course, this interpretation has been contested both by contemporaries (Lang famously detested Kracauer’s book) as well as by later film scholarship, not least for methodological reasons (cf. for example von Moltke 45-47 or Rogowski 1-9). For the purposes of the present essay, it is not necessary to revisit the scholarly debate for or against this dominant interpretation in detail but it seems import to point to the fact that it was very successful in fostering the “prevailing view of Weimar Cinema as sinister *auteurist* cinema” (Rogowski 1) and in establishing Lang, maybe more than Murnau or Papst, as the epitome of the masterful Weimar-era filmmaker.
- 13 The idea of the cinematic *auteur* has, however, become a heavily contested concept in film theory, starting with the heated debate between Pauline Kael and Andrew Sarris (cf. Roberts 158-164) and the publication of Peter Wollen’s *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* in the late 1960s and carried on by poststructuralist film criticism in the 1970s. If we acknowledge that the various objections against the *auteur* theory have at least some degree of cogency, the question whether we can actually speak about “Lang’s” films and, in consequence, of “Lang’s” politics arises inevitably.
- 14 In the context of this essay, I will follow the lead of Tom Gunning, who, in his study on Lang, has found an equally elegant as persuasive resolution to this question. He identifies the Fritz Lang as a cinematic *author*. This notion refuses to fully embrace the axiomatic claims formulated by critics associated with the *Cahiers du Cinéma* in the

1950s under the label *politique des auteurs*. According to this view, there is a pantheon of artistically superior filmmakers (which includes Lang) “whose moral authority over their work and personal imprint on it made them peers of novelists, painters, and composers” (Brody 36) and whose films should primarily be considered to be the outcome of an individual creative act. Yet on the other hand, it equally repudiates the harsh rejection of the formative influence directors have on their films that have been proposed by the detractors of the *auteur* theory in their effort to decenter the director and relegating him or her to the role of being just one creative wheel amongst many (screenwriters, actors etc.) in the Fordist machinery of film production. Gunning’s understanding of the author is “precisely poised on the threshold of the work, evident in the film itself, but also outside it, absent except in the imprint left behind” (5). Acknowledging that “the film medium readily lends itself to authorless discourse,” Gunning claims that

a director has to struggle to assert authorship, both in the making of the film and the discourses surrounding it. An authored film shows the signs of this struggle, a struggle by which the author may discover (and reveal to the viewer) something other than her personality or individual ‘history, tastes and passions.’ The *agon* of authorship in film invites an encounter with the language of cinema, just as the modern author in literature encounters the drives underlying language itself.... We can follow Foucault in claiming that the biographical person in effect dies to produce the author, as Barthes imagines Proust giving up his life in order to produce the novel of his life. I will not be tracing these films back to Fritz Lang’s life, but will rather trace the way Lang as an author, as an assembler of images and sounds, makes his hand sensed within the very filaments of the texts. His hand beckons to us to enter his texts and find him, but entices us into a maze rather than setting up a direct encounter. (5)

- 15 When I speak of “Lang’s” politics and “his” integration into American liberalism in the following essay, I will consequently speak not so much about the director’s personal political convictions as about how they manifest themselves in the mazes of his cinematic texts. Lang’s films were never explicit renderings of distinct political or ideological positions² but rather filmic explorations of fundamental ethical and/or existential questions within certain political circumstances.
- 16 In the case of Lang’s Weimar-era films the question of political authorship becomes even more complicated because of his close relationship with Thea von Harbou (1888-1954), who was not only his wife from 1922 to 1933 but also his (co-)screenwriter and collaborator in all his works between 1920 (the first cooperation was *Das wandernde Bild*) and 1933 (*Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse*). Von Harbou was one of the very few women who had a successful career behind the camera as a screenwriter and occasional director in the German film industry and probably the only one who managed to maintain it through three political systems: the Weimar Republic, Nazi Germany and the early Federal Republic of Germany.
- 17 Given the proximity of their relationship—both privately and professionally—it seems evident that the authorial imprint in these films is as much hers as it is Lang’s and that any attempt to disentangle the creative contributions of the two individuals must remain fruitless. And yet, these attempts have occasionally been made, especially with regards to the politics of Lang’s films before 1933. These are, to say the least, notoriously ambiguous. On the one hand, they displayed clearly anti-modernist, even reactionary tendencies as they had a penchant for the conservative motif and story world of German Romanticism (*Der müde Tod*, 1921), Germanic-nationalistic mythology

(*Die Nibelungen*, 1924) or by offering a naively sentimental (yet fundamental) critique of a fully automatized technocratic modernity (*Metropolis*, 1927). On the other hand, the films had remarkable diagnostic qualities in their allegorical treatment of the totalitarian specters haunting the precarious socio-cultural situation of interwar Germany—especially in the two-part *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler* (1922), its above-mentioned sequel *Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse* and also, as we will see below, *M*. Furthermore, Lang's Weimar-era oeuvre indeed did at times embrace modernity's narrative of technology as a gateway to progress (*Die Frau im Mond*, 1929) and borrowed heavily from the aesthetics of the modernist avant-gardes (*Metropolis* again, *Spione*, 1928) or, in other instances, from the social realism (again *M*) usually associated with leftist directors like Phil Jutzi or Slatan Dudow and the German proletarian film movement during second half of the 1920s.

- 18 It is hard to identify a coherent political world view in this cocktail of sometimes contradicting ideological and aesthetic ingredients. What manifests itself in this ambiguity is a politically indistinct "hand" of authorship that makes itself "sensed" (in Gunning's sense) in the films—or, to be more precise, the hand of the synergetic co-authorship of Lang and von Harbou. In his biography of the director, McGilligan describes her as a "conservative nationalist" who also "demonstrated progressive tendencies" by being "an early, outspoken advocate of legalized abortion in Germany, an activist for reform in sex-discrimination legislation [and] a proponent of equal rights for women" (157), just to become an avid supporter of the Nazi ideology around 1930. Lang himself had, as McGilligan concludes after the thorough consultation of numerous sources, indeed been "sleepwalking politically for most of the 1920s" (157) and "did not think very long or deeply about the Nazis" as he "regarded politics as not only beneath him, but remote from his own island-world of power and privilege" (158).
- 19 Lang's cinema during the 1920s was certainly neither leaning towards the political left nor exhibiting (at least during the silent era) a distinct liberal-democratic stance, which left it open to be co-opted by the far right. This embrace is, however, in itself ridden with many contradictions. On the one hand, the Nazis regarded some of Lang's films as being in line with their own aesthetico-ideological axioms. Especially *Die Nibelungen* received praise from this side (cf. McGilligan 102).³
- 20 The introduction of sound film marked, as I have stated before, a fundamental transformation of Lang's cinema, both aesthetically and thematically. Gunning has quite rightly noted that *M*, the director's first venture into this new and unknown territory, can be seen as the actual hinge "between his German and his American career" (in spite of the fact that *Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse*, Lang's last German film for three decades, was produced two years after *M*) as it "ties up a number of themes from the first part of Lang's career... but most importantly [because] it announces new themes and preoccupations" (164).⁴ Indeed, with moving on to the 'talkies', Lang abandoned mythological and fantastic subject matter, tuned down the exuberance of his visual vocabulary and became increasingly interested in the psychology of his characters. And, last but not least, there was a discernible shift in his cinematic authorship regarding the immanent politics of his work. One detail that reveals this subtle change is the filmic depiction of rumor in *M* which can be read as a small but significant indicator for Lang's development from being an (allegedly) politically undetermined filmmaker towards becoming the outspoken "anti-fascist, left-wing liberal, who gave generously to support refugees, and who was not afraid of signing

protest statements that could have given him trouble with the studios" (Elsaesser 216) as which he was known during his time in the United States.

3. In *Otto Normalbürger's* Court

- 21 Deleuze's comments on rumor in *M* are, as I have already noted, completely devoid of a political perspective, which may not come as a surprise given the fact that they are made in reference to Noël Burch, one of film theory's arch-formalists. This is somewhat regrettable. His notion of rumor as an indeterminate speech-act and of cinema as an analytical medium regarding the dynamics of human interaction actually invite a reading that focuses on the political nuances looming behind the crime story of the child murderer Hans Beckert (Peter Lorre) whose deeds induce fear and paranoia in the city of Berlin. In spite of the police's efforts—the film gives a famously detailed, almost documentary portrayal of the most modern criminalistic methods of the time—the hunt for the murderer is unsuccessful. Pressured by an anxious and upset public, police forces increase their activities, led by Inspector Lohmann (Otto Wernicke). These intensified law enforcement activities, in turn, obstruct business for the city's underworld. In order to reestablish the status quo ante, the organized crime syndicates decide to conduct a parallel manhunt, led by a ringleader called *Der Schränker* ("the safe-breaker"), played by Gustav Gründgens, who functions as Inspector Lohmann's shady double in the narrative. The crime world wins the race, they capture the murderer and conduct a kangaroo court, culminating in the iconic monologue in which Beckert delivers an act of "public self-explication and confession" (Gunning 194) in which he expounds the libidinal motivation of his deeds:

Could I act differently? Haven't I this curse inside me? The fire, the voice, the torment!

....

Always, always I have to roam the streets and I always feel like someone is following me... it's me... pursuing myself. Silently... but I can hear it. Yes, sometimes I feel like I am following myself. I want to get away, run from myself. But I can't, can't escape from myself. I have to... have to take the path that I am pushed to follow... and run... run through endless streets. I want to disappear! I want to disappear! And the ghosts are running with me, ghosts of mothers, of children! They will never go away! They will always be there! Always! Always! Always! Except... when I'm doing it... when I...⁵

- 22 The very moment the mob of mobsters is about to lynch Beckert, the building is raided by the police and the murderer is arrested "im Namen des Gesetzes" ("in the name of the law"). The last scene of the film shows a regular court, sentencing him "im Namen des Volkes" ("in the name of the people"), before cutting away immediately after the judge uttered that phrase to the mothers of the murdered children. Ultimately, the film's audience never learns the official verdict.
- 23 If we follow Deleuze's claim that, in the "talkie," human interactions *make themselves seen* in speech-acts (see above), many of the speech-acts that are depicted in *M* paint the picture of a society in a state of exception in which human interactions are full of pent-up tension. This becomes especially evident in the film's depiction of rumor. Let us therefore return to the sequence that is central for Deleuze's remarks, but also important in Gunning's (cf. 176–177) and of course Burch's classical interpretation (cf. Burch 23–24): It starts with a close-up of a police poster headlined "10000 Mk.

Belohnung. Wer ist der Mörder?" ("10.000 marks in reward. Who is the murderer?") with a block of undecipherable text below the heading. The camera is slowly pulling back revealing a large crowd standing in front of the billboard. We hear various dispersed voices (the individual speakers are not revealed as the camera only shows the peoples' backs) vent their horror and outrage ("Oh God, does it start again?"; "That's dreadful!"), followed by several voices from the back of the crowd complaining that they can't read the small print from a distance and calling on people in the front to read the statement out loud. One man starts to do so but after a few sentences we hear the voice of another man coming from the off, continuing to read the text while the frame continues to show the crowd in front of the poster for a few more seconds. The cut to the next shot reveals the owner of this second voice as a man who reads the police announcement from a newspaper to four of his friends in a tavern (a clichéd petit bourgeois German *Stammtisch* situation). While he is reading, two of the other men on the table start whispering and eyeing a third one suspiciously. After the reader has finished, they accuse this man of—potentially—being the killer on rather unsubstantiated grounds, as the following exchange shows:

The Accused: 'Why are looking you at me that way?'

The Accuser: 'Well, I guess you know that.'

The Accused: 'What do I know?'

The Accuser: 'Well, think! You'll remember!'

The Accused [shouting]: 'What do you want to say?'

The Accuser: 'That I have seen you going up the stairs behind the little girl from the 4th floor.'

The Accused [shouting]: 'You are crazy, you swine!'

The Accuser: 'Who's the swine here? Me or the one who chases little girls?'

The Accused [shouting]: 'You bastard! You skunk!'

The Accuser [screaming]: 'You murderer!'

- 24 A fight between the two is about to start but the other guests separate the two squabblers. The last insult the accused throws at the accuser ("You defamer! You damn slanderer!") serves as a sonic bridge to the next scene which is set in a family's apartment. The man complains: "Such defamers! Such slanderers! And the police fall for it!... Searching a man's house because of an anonymous letter!" The police detective excuses himself, explaining that he has to follow every lead as, as he says, "any individual on the street could be the perpetrator." While the audience still hears the second half of this sentence, there is a cut to a scene depicting an elderly man who is asked for the time by a girl, a harmless everyday occurrence which, in the paranoid climate of the society depicted in the film, incites a rapidly forming crowd to overpower the innocent man (one may call it a citizen's arrest) and calling for the police. Another cut and we see a policeman who has just arrested a pickpocket on a bus. This pickpocket complains: "Arresting a pickpocket is all you guys can do. Better catch the child murderer!" The people at the bus stop just get the last word "Kindermörder" ("child murderer"), mistake the petty criminal for the city's public enemy number one and the policeman has to struggle to protect him from the spurred-on mob.
- 25 There are several reasons why this sequence attracted so much scholarly attention. One is certainly the sophisticated montage of overlapping sound and image that broke new dramaturgic grounds for the then new medium of the talkie. Another reason is its depiction of the mechanisms of social scapegoating in a panic-fueled urban society which is simultaneously a site of "hiding in plain sight" and of toxic paranoia-induced denunciation: "In a succession of scenes, Lang shows four different people accused by

their fellow city inhabitants. 'One of us' becomes 'the guilty one,' The anonymous crowd cloaks the murderer from detection but renders everyone suspicious" (Gunning 177). For Deleuze, this scene, to some extent, also serves as an analogy for the shift in the semiotics of cinema through the introduction of sound film: "It will be noticed, in the example of Lang as in many others, that the written (the poster, the newspaper) is there to be rendered by the voice, taken up by determinate speech-acts which make each scene go hand in hand with the next" (228). However, this progression (the man in the front of the crowd, reading the poster; the man in the tavern reading out the same content from a newspaper) have not only structural effects on the editing (the spoken word overlaps the cut between two shots, linking two different settings with two different sets of characters etc.) but also on the social interactions in the diegetic realities of the films.

- 26 What, then, are the political implications of the human interactions that reveal themselves in the speech-acts depicted in the film? Most of the scholarship on *M* reads the film against the backdrop of its historical context, "distilling into the gloomy atmosphere of Berlin in the 1930s the climate of desperation and menacing suspense which characterized the final years of the Weimar republic" (Secchi 1424). Indeed, the year of the production of the film, 1930, was a pivotal year of crisis for the precarious first German democracy. The global economic crisis in the aftermath of the stock market crash of 1929 had hit the country hard, unemployment numbers had exploded, the political situation was polarized and unstable (in the general election of September 1930, the NSDAP had its first major success becoming the second largest party in the national parliament) and the country was on the verge of slipping towards totalitarianism. Many scholars—again writing from an ex post perspective—read the film against the backdrop of these developments and often focused on the character of the *Schränker* as a prefiguration of a fascist *Führerfigur* whose "shrill demand that Beckert 'be snuffed out like a candle'... recalls Nazi rhetoric of 'living beings unworthy of life'" (Gunning 196).⁶
- 27 I am not disputing this line of interpretation but want to add a more universal political reading that goes beyond the film's specific historicity. Lang's authorial hand makes itself sensed here, for the first time in his oeuvre, as a cinematic sociologist of the tension between liberal values and populist impulses by investigating how the emergence a collective affective upsurge undermines one of the core principles of liberal democracy: the separation of powers.
- 28 Populisms are, regardless of their specific ideological situatedness, defined by an actual or alleged antagonism between institutionalized power (in the hands of "the elite few") and the imaginary collective subject of "the people," often embodied by some figuration of the "common man." In spite of the fact that such categories are always discursive constructs, one cannot avoid assessing that they are operative in the political arena of the public. Animosity of the two camps usually gain traction in moments of crisis, when "the people" feel that institutional power fails.
- 29 *M* depicts exactly such a moment of crisis. A killer—a *child* murderer, the emblematic incarnation of evil in every familialist society—is on the loose and the executive branch of government seem to be unable to protect "the people" from this criminal, which is their task according to the social contract of liberal democracy. This crisis becomes evident in the speech-acts displayed in the sequence described above: The police poster, reprinted in the newspaper, is communicating the official message of

institutional power to the public sphere, informing it of the latest murder committed by the "ghostly fiend" ("gespenstischer Unhold")—a disembodied, unidentified threat it is not even able to name—and issues a warning regarding the permanent danger from this unknown enemy from within ("Anyone sitting next to you could be the murderer"). The renderings into a determinate speech-act of declaiming this information—the reader ventriloquizes the authorities here, thereby exposing that their power in this situation is merely performative—initiates a "process of gossip, accusation and misrecognition" (Gunning 177) as it is disseminated in increasingly indeterminate ways in the public sphere. The film does not show how the official information initially distributed by the executive via the media transforms into malicious rumor-mongering (here is, as we will see below, a difference to *Fury*) but it provides sufficient narrative cues that such a shift has been happening: Two *Stammtischbrüder* accusing a member of their own group to be the killer, anonymous denunciations of innocent people, lynch mobs. The initial question posed by the police poster ("Who is the murderer?") is answered by a resentful public of *Otto Normalbürger* (a German expression for the "common" or "everyman") identifying themselves—not in a constitutional but in an affective sense—as "the people." Their speech-acts (gossiping, rumor, character assassination) and their aggressive interactions reveal a high degree of anti-institutional resentment. And even more, we can see the evocative potential of rumor at work when it causes random individuals spontaneously to unite to a mob (e. g. in the case of the pickpocket on the bus) following the populist logic that the people have to take "things in their own hands" in light of the incompetence of the elites and their institutions. By not only taking over the function of the executive but also of the judicative branch, "the people's" emotionally laden collective suspends the principles of the separation of powers and of due process, both vital cornerstones of liberal democracy.

- 30 The general anti-institutional and distinctly anti-liberal stance of elevating the collective affects of "the people" over due process also manifests itself in the kangaroo court which is in itself, of course, a mockery of the liberal idea of the rule of law. The court is presided over by the *Schränker*, who rejects Beckert's demand to be put before a regular court of law in the following way:

You would like that, wouldn't you, buddy? Just to invoke clause 51 [to this day, the clause regulating the insanity defense in German criminal law] and to live at the taxpayer's expense for the rest of your life. And then you might escape or receive a pardon. And then you'll gleefully start chasing little children again, protected by law through your legally attested insanity. No, no, we won't have more of that. We'll have to dispose of you! You have to disappear!

- 31 The *Schränker* stylizes himself here as the representative of the *gesundes Volksempfinden* (the commonsensical will of "the people") and voices all the classic talking points (and little has changed in the past 90 years) of the populist vilification of liberal ideas of law and order: Denouncing a modern liberal penal system that also grants delinquents their basic human rights as lenient and weak, implying a fundamental contradiction between an allegedly elitist and detached concept of justice in the judiciary system and an allegedly healthy, down-to-earth sense of justice in "the people," and, finally advocating for the death penalty. The film presents an antagonist to the *Schränker's* populist position, a criminal who is appointed as a "defense attorney" by the mock court, defending the "liberal position [that] Beckert is sick and needs to be taken to an asylum, rather than delivered to the rough justice of the mob" (Gunning 196). Lang has

retrospectively claimed that "[i]n the mock trial with its objective discussion for and against capital punishment..., the picture argues strongly for the maintenance of democratic procedure without ifs or buts" (Lang 186). If this statement is true than the argument was not strong enough: Gunning pointed out that the contemporary reactions to the film were quite different: "Many viewers and reviewers, including liberal or leftist journalists as well as Herr Goebbels, found the film sympathetic to the death penalty and mob justice" (Gunning 196).

- 32 The film's ethical position regarding the death penalty cannot be definitely assessed, especially since the verdict of the official court in the final sequence of the film is not disclosed to the audience as Lang cuts away from the judges before they deliver it. But the possibility of a death sentence of course exists (the penal code of the Weimar Republic allowed for it). But it is notable that Beckert is not only the first villain in Lang's crime films in whom the director takes an actual psychological interest, but also the first who, ultimately, gets a regular trial (Dr. Mabuse "escapes" criminal persecution by becoming insane, Haghi in *Spione* by way of suicide). In terms of the moral-philosophical question of Beckert's culpability, the film remains purposefully undecided. It juxtaposes the liberal position of the killer rather being a pathological than a criminal case with the illiberal position of exterminating the "evil element" to protect the social body. The conflict between the two ideological viewpoints remains unresolved. What is unambiguous however, is its denouncement of populist impulses and its affirmative argument for the institutions and principles of liberal democracy: Questions of justice have to be negotiated in a due *representative* process "in the name of the people" and not *directly* by "the people" if that label refers to the populist phantasma of a homogenous collective subject, a mob conjured up by resentful rumor and sentiment. If one accepts McGilligan's interpretation that *M* is the "first film in which Lang had shown any curiosity about the psychology of ordinary human beings" (221), one has to conclude that his perspective on *Otto Normalbürger's* capacity of affect control (in Norbert Elias's sense) is rather bleak.

4. The *Fury* of Jane and John Doe

- 33 In *Fury*, a film that Gunning aptly called "a fully dialectical fable on the nature of American populism" (227), Lang continues his cinematic-sociological exploration of the pernicious potency of rumor as a driving force of illiberal impulses in the social body but shifts the focus from the modern European metropolis to small town America during the Great Depression. The film tells the story of Joe Wilson (Spencer Tracy), an honest working-class character, a literal "average Joe."⁷ As he passes through a small town called Strand, he is falsely suspected of being involved in a kidnapping. While he is waiting in jail for his exoneration, rumors about the capture of the alleged kidnapper spread through the town and spark a lynch mob that sets fire to prison house and finally blows it up with dynamite to cover the traces. Katherine Grant (Sylvia Sidney), Joe's fiancée, who has just arrived in Strand, has to witness the tragedy. Unbeknownst to her and the rest of the townspeople, Joe survives the incident and goes into hiding. As he is officially considered to be dead, the ringleaders of the mob are put on trial for murder. Joe, traumatized and full of vindictiveness, hides with his brothers and follows the trial on the radio. It seems to be a clear-cut court case: A newsreel camera team was present and provides footage, even in close-up view, of the delinquents. In light of this

filmic evidence, the defense attorney makes no attempts to deny the involvement of his clients nor the ferocity of the mob's actions but rejects the murder charge on the grounds that Joe's body has never been found. Hearing that on the radio, Joe sends an anonymous letter to the court, including his half-molten engagement ring. The letter convinces the court of Joe's death but stirs up suspicion in Kathrine as it contains a misspelling that is typical for Joe. She finds out his hideout and tries to appeal to his conscience, but he insists on his revenge. However, after a change of mind, he appears in the courthouse just as the guilty verdicts are delivered to give "a strong speech, excoriating the mob without absolving himself" (McGilligan 235). The happy ending is accentuated with Joe and Katherine kissing in the final shot.

- 34 Just like in *M*, Lang devotes an extended sequence that depicts the proliferation of the rumors and their role in the genesis of the lynch mob. But whereas *M* shows the escalating effects of rumor by means of structural analogy (a montage of vignettes that exemplify the incremental paranoia and hostility within the public, but that are otherwise detached from each other), *Fury* portrays this development in form of narrative causality. We can observe the gradual escalation step by step, starting with one initial determinate speech-act: a barber calls his wife and tells her about a philosophical dispute about basic questions criminality and guilt between some of his customers. It was caused by, as he frames it, "a cock-and-bull story about [the] capturing one of that Peabody kidnapping gang [the gang Joe is suspected of being a member of]" peddled by the town sheriff's deputy. From there, the news of Joe's arrest spreads like a virus among the town's population and the *mis-en-scène* of the dissemination makes it obvious that the film takes a judgmental stance towards the ferocious dynamics of these increasingly indeterminate speech-acts. This becomes conspicuous in a scene where the image of a flock of cackling chickens is superimposed on a group of gossiping women. Here, Lang clearly draws on the misogynist stereotype of malicious gossip being a particularly female activity and later, he presents some of the women as instigators of the mob violence.

- 35 The fact that the sequence is explicitly gendered distinguishes it from its counterpart in *M*. Gunning attributes this to the provincial setting of the film:

The rumour circulates through archetypical American small town gathering places via homosocial, same gender groups: men talking politics at the barber shop, women gossiping over the back fence and in the kitchen or grocery market, men growing more violent at the hardware store and eventually the bar. As opposed to the relatively anonymous forms of mass media in the Berlin of *M*, information in *Strands* travels orally and personally, and becomes elaborated and exaggerated in each retelling (220).

- 36 The proliferation within the social realm may happen at a more interpersonal level but rumor nevertheless remains an indeterminate speech-act as it is nonteleological and yet evocative of violent forms of collective action conducted by previously unconnected individuals of the town's community.

- 37 What fuels the dynamic here is not so much a crisis of executive power but a pseudo-egalitarian and anti-elitist resentment against due judiciary process. One conversation in a sequence, in which three of the townsmen spread distorted rumors about Joe's arrest is telling here:

First Man: 'My wife's sister called up and told her that a friend of hers told her that this guy acted as cocky as a bronco. All he's answer was "Let me phone my lawyer."'

Second Man: 'Sure. That's the racket of those big-time attorneys. Helping these skunks beat the law.'

Third Man: 'Well, they won't beat it with any jury I'm ever on. If all us people had the courage of our convictions these vermin would vanish like spit on a hot stove.'

- 38 Undeniably, an echo of the *Schränker* reverberates in this outburst of anti-systemic, anti-elitist and anti-liberal sentiments, culminating in an inhuman extermination fantasy.
- 39 In the second half of the film, the film enacts the conflict between these populist attitudes and liberal-democratic principles in the dialectical form of a classic courtroom drama. The incorruptible district attorney sees the events in *Strand* not as a temporal regression into frontier-period popular justice but as a symptom of the endemic problem of lynching in American culture (in that regard, Lang had thematically arrived in the U.S.). But like *M*, the film propagates the essential liberal tenets on which the political institutions are based on. "American democracy," the district attorney stresses in one of his courtroom speeches, "and its system of fair play for the rights of individuals under the law is on trial here[.]"
- 40 *Fury*, in spite of its occasional idealistic blatancy, makes a clear case for the principles and institutions that form the ideological backbone of American liberal democracy and thus marks the arrival of Lang's cinema in political liberalism, a journey that had started six years earlier with *M*. It does not, therefore, come as a surprise that the director regularly screened these two films "for heavily left-leaning office staff of his independent production company in the mid-1940s" (McGilligan 228).

5. Conclusion

- 41 In the two classic feature films revisited in this essay, Fritz Lang undertakes a sophisticated cinematic-sociological investigation of the populist politics of rumor. This particular speech-act becomes central to the endeavor of explicating the fragility of citizenship and the precarity of civic norms and procedures. In spite of the fact that the liberal-democratic principles, as well as the institutions and procedures founded on them remain resilient, the films show that rumor can serve as a catalyst for the destructive imaginary of the allegedly commonsensical collective action proposed by populism. In doing so, they offer more than just a cultural diagnosis of the specific periods they were produced in. The dynamics they so pointedly explicate are not tied to a particular historical moment and consequently compatible to analogous situations. It is certainly no coincidence that Lang's *M* has been remade twice, both times against the backdrop of a surge of populist sentiments: Joseph Losey's underrated remake from 1951 has to be considered in the context of McCarthyism and *M—Eine Stadt sucht einen Mörder*, a six episode mini-series produced by the Austrian writer-director David Schalko in 2019, adapts Lang's eponymous original to grapple with the wave of right wing demagoguery that has been haunting his home country in the past decades.
- 42 The efficacy of populist rumor with its inherent equation of suspicion with guilt and its ingrained logic of privileging the anecdotal over the factual, works in transhistorical, transnational and transmedial contexts. The indeterminate speech-acts that Lang's films portray share a structural similarity with contemporary hashtag-politics in their assertory character, their lack of discursivity and their ability to invoke spontaneous group dynamics.

- 43 Central to both films discussed in this essay is the phantasmagoric figure of the "everyman" which usually is at the center of populist imaginaries, both from the left and from the right. In his cinematic investigation, Lang displays a certain distrust of this character and exposes an aporia in the idea of democracy (in whichever form) which has been theorized since antiquity. For Lang, who has more than once been labeled as somewhat of a cynic, so-called ordinary human beings, regardless if they go by the name of *Otto Normalbürger* or John and Jane Doe are Janus-like figures: They are equally the backbone of the principle of liberal democracy as well as of its greatest foe—ochlocracy.

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NOTES

1. The distinction between the two concepts is narrow, if we follow Francis T. McAndrew: "In a sense, gossip can be thought of as a subset of rumor. Rumors are unsubstantiated bits of information that may involve future events, people, or some other topic of collective interest. Gossip is defined more specifically as a talk about people. Whether the information being discussed is true or false is irrelevant to labelling it as a gossip or rumor" (173-174).
2. The two films that might pose a notable exception are *Hangmen Also Die!* (1943), a fictionalization of the assassination of the Nazi war criminal Reinhard Heydrich, produced in collaboration with fellow émigré Bertolt Brecht, and *Ministry of Fear* (1944), an adaptation of Graham Greene's novel from 1943. Given their explicit anti-Nazi stance, these two films can be seen as Lang's contribution to Hollywood's war effort.
3. The famous story—recounted by Lang numerous times in a very cinematic, screenplay-like manner—according to which Goebbels personally offered him a high-ranking executive position in the German film industry has been exposed as one of the self-tailored legends the director used to peddle (cf. Werner or McGilligan 175-181). It is, however, a largely undisputed fact that the Nazis tried to woo Lang. On the other hand, *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* was among the first films whose domestic theatrical release was blocked by the Nazi regime because of its political overtones (cf. Kalat 76-79 and McGilligan 183-184), which bears a certain irony given the fact it was the last collaboration between Lang and von Harbou who, by that time, was in "solid standing with the Nazis" (McGilligan 184).
4. There seems to be a tacit consensus among Lang scholars to regard *Liliom*—an adaptation of Ferenc Molnár's 1909 play that Lang made during his short period of exile in Paris in 1934—as an irrelevant film in the transition between the director's first (German) and second (American) career.
5. All translations of the lines from *M* quoted in this essay are my own.
6. These interpretations are certainly reinforced by the fact that the *Schränker* is played by Gustav Gründgens (1899-1963) who later became one of Germany's great stage impresarios. While his artistic merits are generally acknowledged, he is also known for his fierce opportunism. He aligned himself with the Nazis early on and had a very successful career before 1945 which he was able to continue after the war in West Germany. He is the subject of *Mephisto*, Klaus Mann's 1936 *roman à clef*.
7. In its early stages of production, the film had the working title *Mob Rule* and the character of Joe was initially supposed to be a lawyer. Lang told Peter Bogdanovich that this idea was rejected by a studio executive: "He [the studio executive] explained to me something I *should* have known by then... everything there happens to Joe Doe [sic!]*—*meaning to you and me*—*not to some upper-class man. And he explained to me that in an American picture one would have to have Joe Doe*—*a man of the people*—*as a hero" (Bogdanovich 20-22).

ABSTRACTS

Based on Gilles Deleuze's claim that rumor has been a "cinematographically privileged object" in early sound cinema, this essay will provide a political analysis of the representation of rumor in two early sound films in the transnational oeuvre of Fritz Lang. This interpretation of *M—Eine Stadt sucht einen Mörder* (Germany, 1931) and Lang's first Hollywood production *Fury* (USA, 1936) will show that the shift from silent to sound cinema marks not only an aesthetic and technological innovation, but also coincides with an increased political awareness in the director's oeuvre. While his films of the silent era remain politically ambiguous and have often been accused of foreshadowing fascist themes and aesthetics, the sound films produced shortly before and after Lang's emigration to the United States take a clear political stand with regards to the toxic effects of rumors as expressions of populist sentiments and, in this, provide a gateway to the director's integration into American liberalism.

INDEX

Keywords: Fritz Lang, Gilles Deleuze, rumor, populism, liberalism, film history, political cinema, *M—Eine Stadt sucht einen Mörder*, *Fury*

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