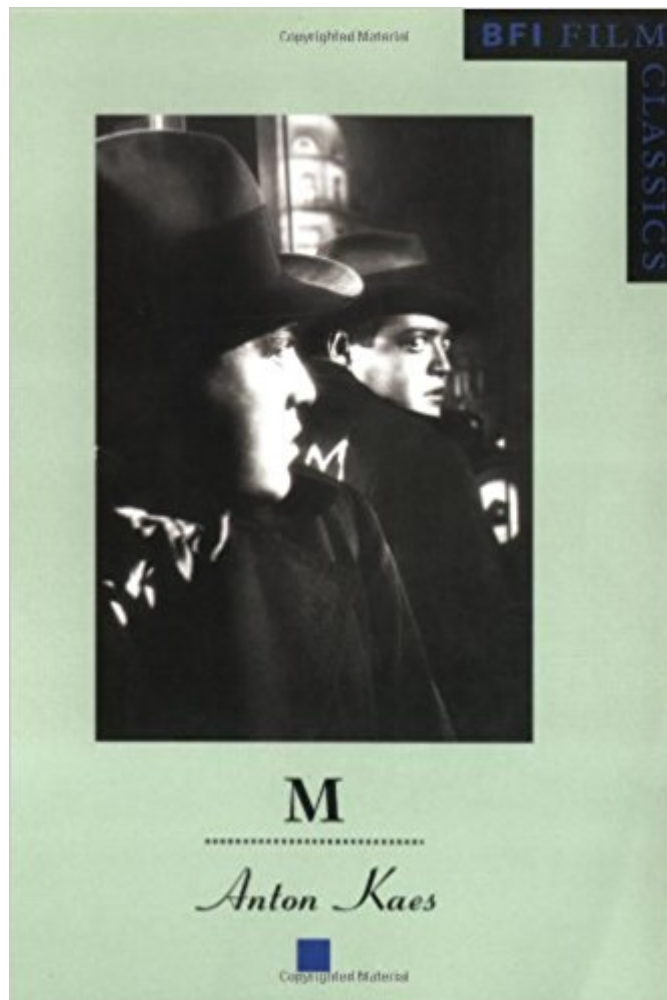


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## M (BFI Film Classics)



## Synopsis

Fritz Lang's "M" (1931) is an undisputed classic of world cinema. Lang considered it his most lasting work. Peter Lorre's extraordinary performance as the childlike misfit Hans Beckert was one of the most striking of film debuts, and it made him an international star. Lang's vision of a city gripped with fear, haunted by surveillance and total mobilization, is still remarkably powerful today. And "M" resonates too in the serial-killer genre which is so prominent in contemporary cinema. "M" speaks to us as a timeless classic, but also as a Weimar film that has too often been isolated from its political and cultural context. In this groundbreaking book, Anton Kaes reconnects "M"'s much-studied formal brilliance to its significance as an event in 1931 Germany, recapturing the film's extraordinary social and symbolic energy. Interweaving close reading with cultural history, Kaes reconstitutes "M" as a crucial modernist artwork. In addition he analyzes Joseph Losey's 1951 film noir remake and, in an appendix, publishes for the first time "M"'s missing scene.

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## Customer Reviews

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Anton Kaes is Chancellor's Professor of German and Film Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. He is the author of *From Hitler to Heimat: The Return of History as Film* (1989) and coeditor of *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook* (1994).

Many movies are referred to as classics, but how many really deserve the title? By any serious measure, *M* should make the list. Its director, Fritz Lang, would have a solid enough reputation in the history of cinema even without this flick, but *M* really is probably his best and most important work, an opinion that Lang himself shared. Yet what is it about *M* that makes it so compelling? Certainly there are some features that even an armchair film critic would note. Peter Lorre in the lead is quite possibly the single best casting - ever. It is not simply that his performance is incredible (though it is), but that he just puts that feel to the character, the child murderer, that simply could not have been matched by anyone in his day, or probably any other day for that matter. He just seems to 'be' the role. And there is, of course, the noir feel that comes across in every aspect of the movie, from its shading, camera angle and dialogue. But what else? It is here, in the less noticeable areas, that Anton Kaes, the author of this monograph, sheds some light. He places *M* into the context of the Weimar Republic from which it came, revealing aspects not immediately apparent. Far from a pure work of fiction, *M* touched upon the turbulent (to say the least) political and social atmosphere of its culture, in which the shadow of World War I, and the shame of having lost that war, is being eclipsed by the rise of a far more terrifying regime. National Socialists were already committing acts of violence and terror in the streets of Berlin in 1931, when *M* was released, and the film captures, if not the politics, then certainly the somber and dark mood, the foreboding sense of something bad, real bad, about to happen. Further, crime, and perhaps more important, the concept of crime, was rampant in Berlin at the time. Several serial killers had already been caught, whose motives simply seemed beyond the understanding of our knowledge of man's psyche. The public's response - fear ... combined with utter fascination, and no small degree of admiration for the underworld figures who played their cat and mouse game with the police with such expertise. *M* simply tapped into the interplay of human psychology, the law and crime that were paramount features of the Weimar Republic, and which, although perhaps more subdued in other societies, are also at play basically

everywhere. Although one may not be familiar with the specifics of Weimar society prior to reading this book, no doubt many will say to themselves 'Oh, now I get it' with respect to some aspect of the movie. They will get it because, although more to the fore in M's time and place, these are ultimately facets of the human condition to which we can all relate. Having read enough of these BFI books to know the red flags, let me say that Kaes keeps his analysis fairly well within reach of even those not interested in the mumbo jumbo of all too many film analyses. Anyone with enough interest to read a book about a black and white film shot in 1931 Berlin will probably be able to get everything here. Also, although Kaes occasionally shows his leftist tendencies (he seems to think that the downtrodden share many of the same theories of crime as American academic eggheads - they don't), they do not eclipse the film analysis itself. This is worth the time.

For most people if you tell them you are going to watch a movie or read a book about a child murderer they will look at you strangely. Don't kid yourself this IS a disturbing movie, from the opening sequence with the children singing a song about the "man in black" coming to get you to the end with the sobbing mothers warning this film is intense. The book places the movie in the context of Weimar Germany and is essential for understanding the use of imagery and the many subtexts that are present. The book is well written, hard to put down, and it really compliments the movie experience without either watering it down or making it too cerebral. For further reading I would encourage people to do a websearch on Fritz Haarman or Peter Kurten the actual serial killers the plot was loosely based on. If you thought serial killers were a modern invention, these guys make Ted Bundy look like an amateur.

Anton Kaes provides an extremely valuable in-depth examination of Fritz Lang's M, exploring this classic German film not only based on cinematic craft, but the historical, social, and political contexts that informed and are reflected by Lang's masterful directorial craft. Kaes devotes large sections of the book to the historical climate in Germany at the time that are alluded to in the film and/or inspired it, including the repercussions of World War I and the real-life serial killer that captured the attention and imagination of the German people at the time, and explores how M is not just a crime thriller or police procedural, but an exhaustive portrayal of how society reacts - both positively and negatively - to the almost mythological nature that such crimes invoke in the popular culture. A must read for any serious film enthusiast.

After almost 7 decades since its making, Fritz Lang's M remains a poignant, modern film; a striking

portrait of the human world as we live in. It is natural for the BFI to have chosen it as one of the 360 key films of all time. No other film deserves this status more than M. Fritz Lang, who always regarded M as his best film and the one by which he would be remembered, called it "a documentary". It is one of the first film about serial killers, and already Lang goes beyond depicting the pathology of such criminal; what M examines is the pathology of 20th century modern society. In this compact but meticulous study, Anton Kaes reveals the connection between the film and the Weimer German society in which it was made, and shows us how Lang fused his film with shrewd criticism and annualization of the world in which he lived in; a 20th century metropolis of mass society and mass-media culture. Yet he is not satisfied to put M back to its social context of the time. Lang's analysis of social pathology, and Kaes' explanations of it, inevitably reveals the parallel between that society of the 30's and ours of 70 years after. True, that the development of technologies has changed the face of the earth in all those years, but nevertheless the evolution took place in the same direction that Lang predicted 69 years ago. Kaes shares one brief chapter to analyze the 1951 Joseph Rosey's remake to point out that details may have changed (which restrained Lang from directing the remake himself), but the basic sociological pathology still applied in Los Angeles then. And it still remains so for that matters. The appendix shows the non-existent 6 minutes scene which was cut after the film passed the censor board. People from all over the town and the country call the police and proclaim to be the murderer. Lang recreated the same sequence later in THE BLUE GARDENIA. Paul Schrader said recently that in the culture of media and celebrity, there are no moralities. The deleted scene from M reveals that, and the same mentality is true more than ever at this beginning of the new century.

Book arrived promptly in excellent condition. I have seen this movie many times. I love Peter Lorre. He did such a marvelous acting job as the murderer.

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