

M

Release Date: 1931

Roger Ebert / Aug 3, 1997

The horror of the faces: That is the overwhelming image that remains from a recent viewing of the restored version of "M," Fritz Lang's famous 1931 film about a child murderer in Germany. In my memory it was a film that centered on the killer, the creepy little Franz Becker, played by Peter Lorre. But Becker has relatively limited screen time, and only one consequential speech--although it's a haunting one. Most of the film is devoted to the search for Becker, by both the police and the underworld, and many of these scenes are played in closeup. In searching for words to describe the faces of the actors, I fall hopelessly upon "piglike."

What was Lang up to? He was a famous director, his silent films like "Metropolis" worldwide successes. He lived in a Berlin where the left-wing plays of Bertolt Brecht coexisted with the decadent milieu re-created in movies like "Cabaret." By 1931, the Nazi Party was on the march in Germany, although not yet in full control. His own wife would later become a party member. He made a film that has been credited with forming two genres: the serial killer movie and the police procedural. And he filled it with grotesques. Was there something beneath the surface, some visceral feeling about his society that this story allowed him to express?

When you watch "M," you see a hatred for the Germany of the early 1930s that is visible and palpable. Apart from a few perfunctory shots of everyday bourgeoisie life (such as the pathetic scene of the mother waiting for her little girl to return from school), the entire movie consists of men seen in shadows, in smokefilled dens, in disgusting dives, in conspiratorial conferences. And the faces of these men are cruel caricatures: Fleshy, twisted, beetle-browed, dark-jowled, out of proportion. One is reminded of the stark faces of the accusing judges in Dreyer's "Joan of Arc," but they are more forbidding than ugly.

What I sense is that Lang hated the people around him, hated Nazism, and hated Germany for permitting it. His next film, "The Testament of Dr. Mabuse" (1933), had villains who were unmistakably Nazis. It was banned by the censors, but Joseph Goebbels, so the story goes, offered Lang control of the nation's film industry if he would come on board with the Nazis. He fled, he claimed, on a midnight train -- although Patrick McGilligan's new book, *Fritz Lang: The Nature of the Beast*, is dubious about many of Lang's grandiose claims.

Certainly "M" is a portrait of a diseased society, one that seems even more decadent than the other portraits of Berlin in the 1930s; its characters have no virtues and lack even attractive vices. In other stories of the time we see nightclubs, champagne, sex and perversion. When "M" visits a bar, it is to show closeups of greasy sausages, spilled beer, rotten cheese and stale cigar butts.

The film's story was inspired by the career of a serial killer in Dusseldorf. In "M," Franz Becker preys on children -- offering them candy and friendship, and then killing them. The murders are all offscreen, and Lang suggests the first one with a classic montage including the little victim's empty dinner plate, her mother calling frantically down an empty spiral staircase, and her balloon--bought for her by the killer--caught in electric wires.

There is no suspense about the murderer's identity. Early in the film we see Becker looking at himself in a mirror. Peter Lorre at the time was 26, plump, baby-faced, clean-shaven, and as he looks at his reflected image he pulls down the corners of his mouth and tries to make hideous faces, to see in himself the monster others see in him. His presence in the movie is often implied rather than seen; he compulsively whistles the same tune, from "Peer Gynt," over and over, until the notes stand in for the murders.

The city is in turmoil: The killer must be caught. The police put all their men on the case, making life unbearable for the criminal element ("There are more cops on the streets than girls," a pimp complains). To reduce the heat, the city's criminals team up to find the killer, and as Lang intercuts between two summit conferences -- the cops and the criminals -- we are struck by how similar the two groups are, visually. Both sit around tables in gloomy rooms, smoking so voluminously that at times their very faces are invisible. In their fat fingers their cigars look fecal. (As the criminals agree that murdering children violates their code, I was reminded of the summit on drugs in "The Godfather.")

"M" was Lang's first sound picture, and he was wise to use dialogue so sparingly. Many early talkies felt they had to talk all the time, but Lang allows his camera to prowl through the streets and dives, providing a rat's-eye view. One of the film's most spectacular shots is utterly silent, as the captured killer is dragged into a basement to be confronted by the city's assembled criminals, and the camera shows their faces: hard, cold, closed, implacable.

It is at this inquisition that Lorre delivers his famous speech in defense, or explanation. Sweating with terror, his face a fright mask, he cries out: "I can't help myself! I haven't any control over this evil thing that's inside of me! The fire, the voices, the torment!" He tries to describe how the compulsion follows him through the streets, and ends: "Who knows what it's like to be me?"

This is always said to be Lorre's first screen performance, although McGilligan establishes that it was his third. It was certainly the performance that fixed his image forever, during a long Hollywood career in which he became one of Warner Bros.' most famous character actors ("Casablanca," "The Maltese Falcon," "The Mask of Dimitrios"). He was also a comedian and a song-and-dance man, and although you can see him opposite Fred Astaire in "Silk Stockings" (1957), it was as a psychopath that he supported himself. He died in 1964.

Fritz Lang (1890-1976) became, in America, a famous director of film noir. His credits include "You Only Live Once" (1937, based on the Bonnie and Clyde story), Graham Greene's "Ministry of Fear" (1944), "The Big Heat" (1953, with Lee Marvin hurling hot coffee in Gloria Grahame's face) and "While the City Sleeps" (1956, another story about a manhunt). He was often accused of sadism toward his actors; he had Lorre thrown down the stairs into the criminal lair a dozen times, and Peter Bogdanovich describes a scene in Lang's "Western Union" where Randolph Scott tries to burn the ropes off his bound wrists. John Ford, watching the movie, said, "Those are Randy's wrists, that is real rope, that is a real fire."

For years "M" was available only in scratchy, dim prints. Even my earlier laserdisc is only marginally watchable. This new version, restored by the Munich Film Archive, is not only better to look at but easier to follow, since more of the German dialogue has been subtitled. (Lorre also recorded a soundtrack in English, which should be made available as an option on the eventual laserdisc and DVD versions.) Watching the new print of "M," I found the film more powerful than I remembered, because I was not watching it through a haze of disintegration.

And what a haunting film it is. The film doesn't ask for sympathy for the killer Franz Becker, but it asks for understanding: As he says in his own defense, he cannot escape or control the evil compulsions that overtake him. Elsewhere in the film, an innocent old man, suspected of being the killer, is attacked by a mob that forms on the spot. Each of the mob members was presumably capable of telling right from wrong and controlling his actions (as Becker was not), and yet as a mob they moved with the same compulsion to kill. There is a message there somewhere. Not "somewhere," really, but right up front, where it's a wonder it escaped the attention of the Nazi censors.

Cast & Credits

Franz Becker: **Peter Lorre**
Inspector Lohmann: **Otto Wernicke**
Schraenker: **Gustaf Grundgens**
Bauernfaenger: **Theo Linggen**
Mme. Becker: **Ellen Widmann**

Directed by **Fritz Lang** and written by **Lang, Thea von Harbou, Paul Falkenberg, Adolf Jansen and Karl Vash**. Running time: 117 minutes. No MPAA rating (adult theme makes it unsuitable for children).

Citizen Kane

Release Date: 1941

"I don't think any word can explain a man's life," says one of the searchers through the warehouse of treasures left behind by Charles Foster Kane. Then we get the famous series of shots leading to the closeup of the word "Rosebud" on a sled that has been tossed into a furnace, its paint curling in the flames. We remember that this was Kane's childhood sled, taken from him as he was torn from his family and sent east to boarding school.

Rosebud is the emblem of the security, hope and innocence of childhood, which a man can spend his life seeking to regain. It is the green light at the end of Gatsby's pier; the leopard atop Kilimanjaro, seeking nobody knows what; the bone tossed into the air in "2001." It is that yearning after transcendence that adults learn to suppress. "Maybe Rosebud was something he couldn't get, or something he lost," says Thompson, the reporter assigned to the puzzle of Kane's dying word. "Anyway, it wouldn't have explained anything." True, it explains nothing, but it is remarkably satisfactory as a demonstration that nothing can be explained. "Citizen Kane" likes playful paradoxes like that. Its surface is as much fun as any movie ever made. Its depths surpass understanding. I have analyzed it a shot at a time with more than 30 groups, and together we have seen, I believe, pretty much everything that is there on the screen. The more clearly I can see its physical manifestation, the more I am stirred by its mystery.

It is one of the miracles of cinema that in 1941 a first-time director; a cynical, hard-drinking writer; an innovative cinematographer, and a group of New York stage and radio actors were given the keys to a studio and total control, and made a masterpiece. "Citizen Kane" is more than a great movie; it is a gathering of all the lessons of the emerging era of sound, just as "Birth of a Nation" assembled everything learned at the summit of the silent era, and "2001" pointed the way beyond narrative. These peaks stand above all the others.

The origins of "Citizen Kane" are well known. Orson Welles, the boy wonder of radio and stage, was given freedom by RKO Radio Pictures to make any picture he wished. Herman Mankiewicz, an experienced screenwriter, collaborated with him on a screenplay originally called "The American." Its inspiration was the life of William Randolph Hearst, who had put together an empire of newspapers, radio stations, magazines and news services, and then built to himself the flamboyant monument of San Simeon, a castle furnished by rummaging the remains of nations. Hearst was Ted Turner, Rupert Murdoch and Bill Gates rolled up into an enigma.

Arriving in Hollywood at age 25, Welles brought a subtle knowledge of sound and dialogue along with him; on his Mercury Theater of the Air, he'd experimented with audio styles more lithe and suggestive than those usually heard in the movies. As his cinematographer he hired Gregg Toland, who on John Ford's "The Long Voyage Home" (1940) had experimented with deep focus photography--with shots where everything was in focus, from the front to the back, so that composition and movement determined where the eye looked first. For his cast Welles assembled his New York colleagues, including Joseph Cotten as Jed Leland, the hero's best friend; Dorothy Comingore as Susan Alexander, the young woman Kane thought he could make into an opera star; Everett Sloane as Mr. Bernstein, the mogul's business wizard; Ray Collins as Gettys, the corrupt political boss, and Agnes Moorehead as the boy's forbidding mother. Welles himself played Kane from age 25 until his deathbed, using makeup and body language to trace the progress of a man increasingly captive inside his needs. "All he really wanted out of life was love," Leland says. "That's Charlie's story--how he lost it."

The structure of "Citizen Kane" is circular, adding more depth every time it passes over the life. The movie opens with newsreel obituary footage that briefs us on the life and times of Charles Foster Kane; this footage, with its portentous narration, is Welles' bemused nod in the direction of the "March of Time" newsreels then being produced by another media mogul, Henry Luce. They provide a map of Kane's trajectory, and it will keep us oriented as the screenplay skips around in time, piecing together the memories of those who knew him.

Curious about Kane's dying word, "rosebud," the newsreel editor assigns Thompson, a reporter, to find out what it meant. Thompson is played by William Alland in a thankless performance; he triggers every flashback, yet his face is never seen. He questions Kane's alcoholic mistress, his ailing old friend, his rich associate and the other witnesses, while the movie loops through time. As often as I've seen "Citizen Kane," I've never been able to firmly fix the order of the scenes in my mind. I look at a scene and tease myself with what will come next. But it remains elusive: By flashing back through the eyes of many witnesses, Welles and Mankiewicz created an emotional chronology set free from time.

The movie is filled with bravura visual moments: the towers of Xanadu; candidate Kane addressing a political rally; the doorway of his mistress dissolving into a front-page photo in a rival newspaper; the camera swooping down through a skylight toward the pathetic Susan in a nightclub; the many Kanes reflected through parallel mirrors; the boy playing in the snow in the background as his parents determine his future; the great shot as the camera rises straight up from Susan's opera debut to a stagehand holding his nose, and the subsequent shot of Kane, his face hidden in shadow, defiantly applauding in the silent hall.

Along with the personal story is the history of a period. "Citizen Kane" covers the rise of the penny press (here Joseph Pulitzer is the model), the Hearst-supported Spanish-American War, the birth of radio, the power of political machines, the rise of fascism, the growth of celebrity journalism. A newsreel subtitle reads: "1895 to 1941. All of these years he covered, many of these he was." The screenplay by Mankiewicz and Welles (which got an Oscar, the only one Welles ever won) is densely constructed and covers an amazing amount of ground, including a sequence showing Kane inventing the popular press; a record of his marriage, from early bliss to the famous montage of increasingly chilly breakfasts; the story of his courtship of Susan Alexander and her disastrous opera career, and his decline into the remote master of Xanadu ("I think if you look carefully in the west wing, Susan, you'll find about a dozen vacationists still in residence").

"Citizen Kane" knows the sled is not the answer. It explains what Rosebud is, but not what Rosebud means. The film's construction shows how our lives, after we are gone, survive only in the memories of others, and those memories butt up against the walls we erect and the roles we play. There is the Kane who made shadow figures with his fingers, and the Kane who hated the traction trust; the Kane who chose his mistress over his marriage and political career, the Kane who entertained millions, the Kane who died alone.

There is a master image in "Citizen Kane" you might easily miss. The tycoon has overextended himself and is losing control of his empire. After he signs the papers of his surrender, he turns and walks into the back of the shot. Deep focus allows Welles to play a trick of perspective. Behind Kane on the wall is a window that seems to be of average size. But as he walks toward it, we see it is further away and much higher than we thought. Eventually he stands beneath its lower sill, shrunken and diminished. Then as he walks toward us, his stature grows again. A man always seems the same size to himself, because he does not stand where we stand to look at him.

Cast & Credits

Kane: **Orson Welles** Jedediah Leland: **Joseph Cotten** Susan Alexander: **Dorothy Comingore** Jim Geddes: **Ray Collins** Walter Parks Thatcher: **George Coulouris** Mrs. Kane: **Agnes Moorehead** Emily Norton: **Ruth Warrick**

Directed and produced by **Orson Welles**. Screenplay by **Herman J. Mankiewicz** and Welles. Photographed by **Gregg Toland**. Not rated, Black & White, 119 min

The Maltese Falcon

Release Date: 1941

Among the movies we not only love but treasure, "The Maltese Falcon" stands as a great divide. Consider what was true after its release in 1941 and was not true before:

(1) The movie defined Humphrey Bogart's performances for the rest of his life; his hard-boiled Sam Spade rescued him from a decade of middling roles in B gangster movies and positioned him for "Casablanca," "Treasure of the Sierra Madre," "The African Queen" and his other classics.

(2) It was the first film directed by John Huston, who for more than 40 years would be a prolific maker of movies that were muscular, stylish and daring.

(3) It contained the first screen appearance of Sydney Greenstreet, who went on, in "Casablanca" and many other films, to become one of the most striking character actors in movie history.

(4) It was the first pairing of Greenstreet and Peter Lorre, and so well did they work together that they made nine other movies, including "Casablanca" in 1942 and "The Mask of Dimitrios" (1944), in which they were not supporting actors but actually the stars.

(5) And some film histories consider "The Maltese Falcon" the first film noir. It put down the foundations for that native American genre of mean streets, knife-edged heroes, dark shadows and tough dames.

Of course film noir was waiting to be born. It was already there in the novels of Dashiell Hammett, who wrote *The Maltese Falcon*, and the work of Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, John O'Hara and the other boys in the back room. "Down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean," wrote Chandler, and that was true of his hero Philip Marlowe (another Bogart character). But it wasn't true of Hammett's Sam Spade, who *was* mean, and who set the stage for a decade in which unsentimental heroes talked tough and cracked wise.

The moment everyone remembers from "The Maltese Falcon" comes near the end, when Brigid O'Shaughnessy (Mary Astor) has been collared for murdering Spade's partner. She says she loves Spade. She asks if Sam loves her. She pleads for him to spare her from the law. And he replies, in a speech some people can quote by heart, "I hope they don't hang you, precious, by that sweet neck. . . . The chances are you'll get off with life. That means if you're a good girl, you'll be out in 20 years. I'll be waiting for you. If they hang you, I'll always remember you."

Cold. Spade is cold and hard, like his name. When he gets the news that his partner has been murdered, he doesn't blink an eye. Didn't like the guy. Kisses his widow the moment they're alone together. Beats up Joel Cairo (Lorre) not just because he has to, but because he carries a perfumed handkerchief, and you know what that meant in a 1941 movie. Turns the rough stuff on and off. Loses patience with Greenstreet, throws his cigar into the fire, smashes his glass, barks out a threat, slams the door and then grins to himself in the hallway, amused by his own act.

If he didn't like his partner, Spade nevertheless observes a sort of code involving his death. "When a man's partner is killed," he tells Brigid, "he's supposed to do something about it." He doesn't like the cops, either; the only person he really seems to like is his secretary, Effie (Lee Patrick), who sits on his desk, lights his cigarettes, knows his sins and accepts them. How do Bogart and Huston get away with making such a dark guy the hero of a film? Because he does his job according to the rules he lives by, and because we sense (as we always would with Bogart after this role) that the toughness conceals old wounds and broken dreams.

John Huston had worked as a writer at Warner Bros. before convincing the studio to let him direct. "The Maltese Falcon" was his first choice, even though it had been filmed twice before by Warners (in 1931 under the same title and in 1936 as "Satan Met a Lady"). "They were such wretched pictures," Huston told his biographer, Lawrence Grobel. He saw Hammett's vision more clearly, saw that the story was not about plot but about character, saw that to soften Sam Spade would be deadly, fought the tendency (even then) for the studio to pine for a happy ending.

When he finished his screenplay, he set to work story-boarding it, sketching every shot. That was the famous method of Alfred Hitchcock, whose "Rebecca" won the Oscar as the best picture of 1940. Like Orson Welles, who was directing "Citizen Kane" across town, Huston was excited by new stylistic possibilities; he gave great thought to composition and camera movement. To view the film in a stop-action analysis, as I have, is to

appreciate complex shots that work so well they seem simple. Huston and his cinematographer, Arthur Edson, accomplished things that in their way were as impressive as what Welles and Gregg Toland were doing on "Kane."

Consider an astonishing unbroken seven-minute take. Grobel's book *The Hustons* quotes Meta Wilde, Huston's longtime script supervisor: "It was an incredible camera setup. We rehearsed two days. The camera followed Greenstreet and Bogart from one room into another, then down a long hallway and finally into a living room; there the camera moved up and down in what is referred to as a boom-up and boom-down shot, then panned from left to right and back to Bogart's drunken face; the next pan shot was to Greenstreet's massive stomach from Bogart's point of view. . . . One miss and we had to begin all over again."

Was the shot just a stunt? Not at all; most viewers don't notice it because they're swept along by its flow. And consider another shot, where Greenstreet chatters about the falcon while waiting for a drugged drink to knock out Bogart. Huston's strategy is crafty. Earlier, Greenstreet has set it up by making a point: "I distrust a man who says 'when.' If he's got to be careful not to drink too much, it's because he's not to be trusted when he does." Now he offers Bogart a drink, but Bogart doesn't sip from it. Greenstreet talks on, and tops up Bogart's glass. He still doesn't drink. Greenstreet watches him narrowly. They discuss the value of the missing black bird. Finally, Bogart drinks, and passes out. The timing is everything; Huston doesn't give us closeups of the glass to underline the possibility that it's drugged. He depends on the situation to generate the suspicion in our minds. (This was, by the way, Greenstreet's first scene in the movies.)

The plot is the last thing you think of about "The Maltese Falcon." The black bird (said to be made of gold and encrusted with jewels) has been stolen, men have been killed for it, and now Gutman (Greenstreet) has arrived with his lackeys (Lorre and Elisha Cook Jr.) to get it back. Spade gets involved because the Mary Astor character hires him to--but the plot goes around and around, and eventually we realize that the black bird is an example of Hitchcock's "MacGuffin"--it doesn't matter what it is, so long as everyone in the story wants or fears it.

To describe the plot in a linear and logical fashion is almost impossible. That doesn't matter. The movie is essentially a series of conversations punctuated by brief, violent interludes. It's all style. It isn't violence or chases, but the way the actors look, move, speak and embody their characters. Under the style is attitude: Hard men, in a hard season, in a society emerging from Depression and heading for war, are motivated by greed and capable of murder. For an hourly fee, Sam Spade will negotiate this terrain. Everything there is to know about Sam Spade is contained in the scene where Bridget asks for his help and he criticizes her performance: "You're good. It's chiefly your eyes, I think--and that throb you get in your voice when you say things like, 'be generous, Mr. Spade.'" He always stands outside, sizing things up. Few Hollywood heroes before 1941 kept such a distance from the conventional pieties of the plot.

Casablanca

Release Date: 1942

If we identify strongly with the characters in some movies, then it is no mystery that "Casablanca" is one of the most popular films ever made. It is about a man and a woman who are in love, and who sacrifice love for a higher purpose. This is immensely appealing; the viewer is not only able to imagine winning the love of Humphrey Bogart or Ingrid Bergman, but unselfishly renouncing it, as a contribution to the great cause of defeating the Nazis.

No one making "Casablanca" thought they were making a great movie. It was simply another Warner Bros. release. It was an "A list" picture, to be sure (Bogart, Bergman and Paul Henreid were stars, and no better cast of supporting actors could have been assembled on the Warners lot than Peter Lorre, Sidney Greenstreet, Claude Rains and Dooley Wilson). But it was made on a tight budget and released with small expectations. Everyone involved in the film had been, and would be, in dozens of other films made under similar circumstances, and the greatness of "Casablanca" was largely the result of happy chance.

The screenplay was adapted from a play of no great consequence; memoirs tell of scraps of dialogue jotted down and rushed over to the set. What must have helped is that the characters were firmly established in the minds of the writers, and they were characters so close to the screen personas of the actors that it was hard to write dialogue in the wrong tone.

Humphrey Bogart played strong heroic leads in his career, but he was usually better as the disappointed, wounded, resentful hero. Remember him in "The Treasure of the Sierra Madre," convinced the others were plotting to steal his gold. In "Casablanca," he plays Rick Blaine, the hard-drinking American running a nightclub in Casablanca when Morocco was a crossroads for spies, traitors, Nazis and the French Resistance.

The opening scenes dance with comedy; the dialogue combines the cynical with the weary; wisecracks with epigrams. We see that Rick moves easily in a corrupt world. "What is your nationality?" the German Strasser asks him, and he replies, "I'm a drunkard." His personal code: "I stick my neck out for nobody."

Then "of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world, she walks into mine." It is Ilsa Lund (Bergman), the woman Rick loved years earlier in Paris. Under the shadow of the German occupation, he arranged their escape, and believes she abandoned him--left him waiting in the rain at a train station with their tickets to freedom. Now she is with Victor Laszlo (Henreid), a legendary hero of the French Resistance.

All this is handled with great economy in a handful of shots that still, after many viewings, have the power to move me emotionally as few scenes ever have. The bar's piano player, Sam (Wilson), a friend of theirs in Paris, is startled to see her. She asks him to play the song that she and Rick made their own, "As Time Goes By." He is reluctant, but he does, and Rick comes striding angrily out of the back room ("I thought I told you never to play that song!"). Then he sees Ilsa, a dramatic musical chord marks their closeups, and the scene plays out in resentment, regret and the memory of a love that was real. (This scene is not as strong on a first viewing as on subsequent viewings, because the first time you see the movie you don't yet know the story of Rick and Ilsa in Paris; indeed, the more you see it the more the whole film gains resonance.)

The plot, a trifle to hang the emotions on, involves letters of passage that will allow two people to leave Casablanca for Portugal and freedom. Rick obtained the letters from the wheedling little black-marketeer Ugarte (Peter Lorre). The sudden reappearance of Ilsa reopens all of his old wounds, and breaks his carefully cultivated veneer of neutrality and indifference. When he hears her story, he realizes she has always loved him. But now she is with Laszlo. Rick wants to use the letters to escape with Ilsa, but then, in a sustained sequence that combines suspense, romance and comedy as they have rarely been brought together on the screen, he contrives a situation in which Ilsa and Laszlo escape together, while he and his friend the police chief (Claude Rains) get away with murder. ("Round up the usual suspects.")

What is intriguing is that none of the major characters is bad. Some are cynical, some lie, some kill, but all are redeemed. If you think it was easy for Rick to renounce his love for Ilsa--to place a higher value on Laszlo's fight against Nazism--remember Forster's famous comment, "If I were forced to choose between my country and my friend, I hope I would be brave enough to choose my friend."

From a modern perspective, the film reveals interesting assumptions. Ilsa Lund's role is basically that of a lover and helpmate to a great man; the movie's real question is, which great man should she be sleeping with? There is actually no reason why Laszlo cannot get on the plane alone, leaving Ilsa in Casablanca with Rick, and indeed that is one of the endings that was briefly considered. But that would be all wrong; the "happy" ending would be tarnished by self-interest, while the ending we have allows Rick to be larger, to approach nobility ("it doesn't take much to see that the problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world"). And it allows us, vicariously experiencing all of these things in the theater, to warm in the glow of his heroism.

In her closeups during this scene, Bergman's face reflects confusing emotions. And well she might have been confused, since neither she nor anyone else on the film knew for sure until the final day who would get on the plane. Bergman played the whole movie without knowing how it would end, and this had the subtle effect of making all of her scenes more emotionally convincing; she could not tilt in the direction she knew the wind was blowing.

Stylistically, the film is not so much brilliant as absolutely sound, rock-solid in its use of Hollywood studio craftsmanship. The director, Michael Curtiz, and the writers (Julius J. Epstein, Philip G. Epstein and Howard Koch) all won Oscars. One of their key contributions was to show us that Rick, Ilsa and the others lived in a complex time and place. The richness of the supporting characters (Greenstreet as the corrupt club owner, Lorre as the sniveling cheat, Rains as the subtly homosexual police chief and minor characters like the young girl who will do anything to help her husband) set the moral stage for the decisions of the major characters. When this plot was remade in 1990 as "Havana," Hollywood practices required all the big scenes to feature the big stars (Robert Redford and Lena Olin) and the film suffered as a result; out of context, they were more lovers than heroes.

Seeing the film over and over again, year after year, I find it never grows over-familiar. It plays like a favorite musical album; the more I know it, the more I like it. The black-and-white cinematography has not aged as color would. The dialogue is so spare and cynical it has not grown old-fashioned. Much of the emotional effect of "Casablanca" is achieved by indirection; as we leave the theater, we are absolutely convinced that the only thing keeping the world from going crazy is that the problems of three little people do after all amount to more than a hill of beans.

The Third Man

Release Date: 1949

Has there ever been a film where the music more perfectly suited the action than in Carol Reed's "The Third Man"? The score was performed on a zither by Anton Karas, who was playing in a Vienna beerhouse one night when Reed heard him. The sound is jaunty but without joy, like whistling in the dark. It sets the tone; the action begins like an undergraduate lark and then reveals vicious undertones.

The story begins with a spoken prologue ("I never knew the old Vienna, before the war. . ."). The shattered postwar city has been divided into French, American, British and Russian zones, each with its own cadre of suspicious officials. Into this sinkhole of intrigue falls an American innocent: Holly Martins (Joseph Cotton), alcoholic author of pulp Westerns. He has come at the invitation of his college chum Harry Lime. But Lime is being buried when Martins arrives in Vienna.

How did Lime die? That question is the engine that drives the plot, as Martins plunges into the murk that Lime left behind. Calloway (Trevor Howard), the British officer in charge, bluntly says Lime was an evil man, and advises Holly to take the next train home. But Harry had a girl named Anna (Alida Valli), who Holly sees at Lime's grave, and perhaps she has some answers. Certainly Holly has fallen in love with her, although his trusting Yankee heart is no match for her defenses.

"The Third Man" (1949) was made by men who knew the devastation of Europe at first hand. Carol Reed worked for the British Army's wartime documentary unit, and the screenplay was by Graham Greene, who not only wrote about spies but occasionally acted as one. Reed fought with David O. Selznick, his American producer, over every detail of the movie; Selznick wanted to shoot on sets, use an upbeat score and cast Noel Coward as Harry Lime. His film would have been forgotten in a week. Reed defied convention by shooting entirely on location in Vienna, where mountains of rubble stood next to gaping bomb craters, and the ruins of empire supported a desperate black market economy. And he insisted on Karas' zither music ("The Third Man Theme" was one of 1950's biggest hits).

Reed and his Academy Award-winning cinematographer, Robert Krasker, also devised a reckless, unforgettable visual style. More shots, I suspect, are tilted than are held straight; they suggest a world out of joint. There are fantastic oblique angles. Wide-angle lenses distort faces and locations. And the bizarre lighting makes the city into an expressionist nightmare. (During a stakeout for Lime, a little balloon man wanders onto the scene, and his shadow is a monster three stories high). Vienna in "The Third Man" is a more particular and unmistakable *place* than almost any other location in the history of the movies; the action fits the city like a hand slipping on a glove.

Then there are the faces: Joseph Cotton's open, naive face contrasts with the "friends" of Harry Lime: the corrupt "Baron" Kurtz (Ernst Deutsch); the shifty Dr. Winkel (Erich Ponto), the ratlike Popescu (Siegfried Breuer). Even a little boy with a rubber ball looks like a wizened imp. The only trusting faces are those of innocents like the hall porter (Paul Hoerbiger) who tells Holly, "There was another man . . . a third man. . ." and the beefy Sgt. Paine (Bernard Lee), Calloway's aide, who levels the drunken Holly with a shot to the chin and then apologizes. Even the resident exiles are corrupt; Crabbin (Wilfrid Hyde-White), the head of the discussion group, chatters about culture while smoothly maneuvering his mistress out of sight through doors and up stairs.

As for Harry Lime: He allows Orson Welles to make the most famous entrance in the history of the movies, and one of the most famous speeches. By the time Lime finally appears we have almost forgotten Welles is even *in* the movie. The sequence is unforgettable: the meow of the cat in the doorway, the big shoes, the defiant challenge by Holly, the light in the window, and then the shot, pushing in, on Lime's face, enigmatic and teasing, as if two college chums had been caught playing a naughty prank.

The famous speech comes during an uneasy ride on a giant Ferris wheel; at one point, Lime slides open the door of the car they are riding in, and Holly uneasily wraps an arm around a post. Harry tries to justify himself: "You know what the fellow said: In Italy for 30 years under the Borgias they had warfare, terror, murder and bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and the Renaissance. In Switzerland they had brotherly love--they had 500 years of democracy and peace, and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock." (Greene says this speech was written by Welles.)

The emotional heart of the movie is Holly's infatuation with Anna, who will love Harry and be grateful to him no matter what she learns. The scenes between Holly and Anna are enriched by tiny details, as when they visit Harry's apartment and she opens a drawer without looking--because she already knows what will be inside. Or the way she sometimes slips and calls Holly "Harry." Everyone in the movie has trouble with names. Holly calls Calloway "Callahan," and Dr. Winkle insists on "VINK-ell!" And the name on Harry Lime's tombstone is wrong, too.

The chase sequence in "The Third Man" is another joining of the right action with the right location. Harry escapes into the sewer system like a cornered rat, and Reed edits the pursuit into long, echoing, empty sewer vistas, and closeups of Lime's sweaty face, his eyes darting for a way out. Presumably there would be no lights in the Vienna sewers, but there are strong light sources just out of sight behind every corner, throwing elongated shadows, backlighting Harry and his pursuers.

The final scene in "The Third Man" is a long, elegiac sigh. It almost did not exist. Selznick and Greene originally wanted a happy ending. (Greene originally wrote, "... her hand was through his arm"). Reed convinced Greene he was wrong. The movie ends as it begins, in a cemetery, and then Calloway gives Holly a ride back to town. They pass Anna walking on the roadside. Holly asks to be let out of the jeep. He stands under a tree, waiting for her. She walks toward him, past him, and then out of frame, never looking. After a long pause, Holly lights a cigarette and wearily throws away the match. Joseph Cotten recalled later that he thought the scene would end sooner. But Reed kept the camera running, making it an unusually long shot, and absolutely perfect.

"The Third Man" reflects the optimism of Americans and the bone-weariness of Europe after the war. It's a story about grownups and children: Adults like Calloway, who has seen at first hand the results of Lime's crimes, and children like the trusting Holly, who believes in the simplified good and evil of his Western novels.

"The Third Man" is like the exhausted aftermath of "Casablanca." Both have heroes who are American exiles, awash in a world of treachery and black market intrigue. Both heroes love a woman battered by the war. But "Casablanca" is bathed in the hope of victory, while "The Third Man" already reflects the Cold War years of paranoia, betrayal and the Bomb. The hero doesn't get the girl in either movie--but in "Casablanca," Ilsa stays with the resistance leader to help in his fight, while in "The Third Man" Anna remains loyal to a rat. Yet Harry Lime saved Anna, a displaced person who faced certain death. Holly will never understand what Anna did to survive the war, and Anna has absolutely no desire to tell him.

Of all the movies I have seen, this one most completely embodies the romance of going to the movies. I saw it first on a rainy day in a tiny, smoke-filled cinema on the Left Bank in Paris. It told a story of existential loss and betrayal. It was weary and knowing, and its glorious style was an act of defiance against the corrupt world it pictured. Seeing it, I realized how many Hollywood movies were like the pulp Westerns that Holly Martins wrote: naive formulas supplying happy endings for passive consumption. I read the other day that they plan to remake "The Third Man." Do you think Anna will cave in to Holly--or will she remain true to her bitter cynicism and unspeakable knowledge?

Holly Martins: **Joseph Cotten** Anna Schmidt: **Alida Valli** Maj. Calloway: **Trevor Howard** Harry Lime: **Orson Welles** Porter: **Paul Hoerbiger** "Baron" Kurtz: **Ernst Deutsch** Dr. Winkle: **Erich Ponto** Popescu: **Siegfried Breuer** Old Woman: **Hedwig Bleibtreu** Sgt. Paine: **Bernard Lee** Crabbin: **Wilfrid Hyde-White**

Directed by **Carol Reed**. Produced by **Alexander Korda, Reed and David O. Selznick**. Screenplay by **Graham Greene**. Photographed by **Robert Krasker**. Music by **Anton Karas**. Edited by **Oswald Hafenrichter**. Running time: 104 minutes. Not rated (suitable for all but children).

Touch of Evil

Release Date: 1958

Come on, read my future for me. You haven't got any. What do you mean? Your future is all used up. So speaks a fortune-telling madam, played by Marlene Dietrich, to the drunken sheriff of a border town, played by Orson Welles, in "Touch of Evil."

Her words have a sad resonance, because Welles was never again to direct in Hollywood after making this dark, atmospheric story of crime and corruption.

It was named best film at the 1958 Brussels World Fair (Godard and Truffaut were on the jury), but in America it opened on the bottom half of a double bill, failed, and put an end to Welles' prospects of working within the studio system. Yet the film has always been a favorite of those who enjoy visual and dramatic flamboyance. "I'd seen the film four or five times before I noticed the story," the director Peter Bogdanovich once told his friend Orson. "That speaks well for the story," Welles rumbled sarcastically, but Bogdanovich replied, "No, no--I mean I was looking at the direction."

That might be the best approach for anyone seeing the film for the first time: to set aside the labyrinthine plot, and simply admire what is on the screen. The movie begins with one of the most famous shots ever made, following a car with a bomb in its trunk for three minutes and 20 seconds. And it has other virtuoso camera movements, including an unbroken interrogation in a cramped room, and one that begins in the street and follows the characters through a lobby and into an elevator. The British critic Damian Cannon writes of its "spatial choreography," in which "every position and movement latches together into a cogent whole."

Welles and his cinematographer, Russell Metty, were not simply showing off. The destinies of all of the main characters are tangled from beginning to end, and the photography makes that point by trapping them in the same shots, or tying them together through cuts that match and resonate. The story moves not in a straight line, but as a series of loops and coils.

Some of those loops were removed when Universal Studios took the film from Welles and re-edited it, adding closeups and chopping scenes, so that it existed for years in a confusing 95-minute version, and then belatedly in a 108-minute version that still reflected the studio's meddling. Now at last Welles' original intentions (explained in a 58-page memo to the studio) are reflected in a restored version that is three minutes longer and contains 50 changes, some large, some small. This version was produced by Rick Schmidlin and edited by Oscar winner Walter Murch, inspired by a crucial 1992 article in *Film Quarterly* by Chicago critic Jonathan Rosenbaum.

The story takes place in Los Robles, a seedy Mexican-American border town ("border towns bring out the worst in a country"). It's a place of bars, strip clubs and brothels, where music spills onto the street from every club. In the opening shot, we see a bomb placed in the trunk of a car, and then the camera cranes up and follows the car down a strip of seamy storefronts, before gliding down to eye level to pick up a strolling couple. They are newlyweds, Mike and Susan Vargas (Charlton Heston and Janet Leigh); he's a Mexican drug enforcement official.

At a border checkpoint, they're eventually joined by the doomed car, which has been delayed by traffic and a herd of goats. Mike and Susan are completing the check when there's an offscreen explosion--and then finally a cut, to the burning car lifting in the air. (I've always felt this cut is premature; better to hear the offscreen explosion, stay on Mike and Susan as they run to the burning car, and then cut.)

Everyone awaits the arrival of Sheriff Hank Quinlan (Welles), a massive, sweaty, rumbling figure who looms over the camera. (Welles was not that big when he made the picture, and used padding and camera angles to exaggerate his bulk.) Quinlan takes charge, "intuiting" that the explosion was caused by dynamite. Vargas, a bystander, finds himself drawn into the investigation, to Quinlan's intense displeasure; the movie becomes a competition between the two men, leading to the sheriff's efforts to frame Vargas and his bride on drug and murder charges.

Viewers familiar with the earlier version will not feel they are seeing a different film, but may be able to follow the plot more easily. The most important changes take place in these opening minutes, when the stories of the Heston and Leigh characters are now intercut (the studio positioned all of the wife's hazards with a local gang after her husband's dealings with Quinlan). Another significant change: The opening shot is now seen without superimposed credits (they've been moved to the end), and with music from car radios and clubs, instead of Henry Mancini's title theme (Welles thought source music and sound effects would better establish the atmosphere).

Welles fills his story with a meaty selection of supporting characters, including Quinlan's faithful sidekick Menzies (Joseph Calleia), the slimy local crime boss Grandi (Akim Tamiroff), the local madam (Dietrich), a butch gang leader (Mercedes McCambridge), an ineffectual district attorney (Ray Collins, from "Citizen Kane") and particularly a sexually obsessed motel night clerk (Dennis Weaver), whose peculiar skittishness may have given ideas to Anthony Perkins for "Psycho" two years later.

These figures move back and forth across the border, through a series of grim and grungy locations. Although the plot line is possible to follow, the real point is the way Quinlan veers from the investigation to follow his own agenda. He's prejudiced against Mexicans, resents Vargas for invading his turf, and supports "hunches" by planting evidence. When Vargas calls him on the fraud, he vows to destroy him.

As Vargas and Quinlan jockey for position in the investigation, Susan is endangered in scenes that work as a terrified counterpoint. Vargas unwisely checks his wife into a motel run by the local gang, and young thugs terrorize her. Her perils sometimes border on the ludicrous, especially in a scene where they shine a flashlight into her room. Later, a gang rape is implied, but the movie curiously ignores or forgets its repercussions for Susan.

Menzies, the deputy, has been faithful to Quinlan because the sheriff once stopped a bullet intended for him. The movie establishes his gradual enlightenment, as Vargas proves that Quinlan planted evidence and framed innocent people. Why does Quinlan stoop so low? Thirty years earlier his own wife was murdered, and the killer went free; now he boasts, "That was the last killer that ever got out of my hands."

The final sequence involves the disillusioned Menzies wearing a concealed microphone while prompting Quinlan into a confession. Vargas shadows them with a radio and tape recorder. This scene is visually effective, as the sheriff and deputy follow a garbage-strewn canal, but it's not logical. Vargas wades through water and climbs mountains of debris to stay within radio range of the talking men, when he could simply have hidden the tape recorder on Menzies. And he inexplicably leaves the radio turned up, so Quinlan can hear the echo of his own voice. That works as showmanship even while it fails as strategy.

The surface themes of "Touch of Evil" are easy to spot, and the clash between the national cultures gets an ironic flip: Vargas reflects gringo stereotypes while Quinlan embodies clichés about Mexican lawmen. But there may be another theme lurking beneath the surface.

Much of Welles' work was autobiographical, and the characters he chose to play (Kane, Macbeth, Othello) were giants destroyed by hubris. Now consider Quinlan, who nurses old hurts and tries to orchestrate this scenario like a director, assigning dialogue and roles. There is a sense in which Quinlan wants final cut in the plot of this movie, and doesn't get it. He's running down after years of indulgence and self-abuse, and his ego leads him into trouble.

Is there a resonance between the Welles character here and the man he became? The story of Welles' later career is of projects left uncompleted and films altered after he had left them. To some degree, his characters reflected his feelings about himself and his prospects, and "Touch of Evil" may be as much about Orson Welles as Hank Quinlan. Welles brought great style to his movies, embracing excess in his life and work as the price (and reward) of his freedom.

Film Noir Unit Questions

- M
- 1 What two genres is “M” credited with forming?
 - 2 What film are we reminded of when viewing the “stark faces” in “M”?
 - 3 What film technique does Lang employ when portraying the first murder in the film?
 - 4 What two groups are exposed as being similar in their needs/desire/tactics in relation to capturing the child killer?
 - 5 What 1970s film is the viewer reminded of when watching the criminals discuss the fact that murdering children violates their code?
 - 6 Name TWO other films that you have seen starring Peter Lorre:
 - 7 Name TWO other films that Fritz Lang has directed:
 - 8 What is Lang accused of in his treatment of actors?
 - 9 The individual mob members were capable of telling _____ from _____, but as a mob they moved with the same compulsion to kill
 - 10 What is the message that Lang insinuates with this mob mentality?
- CK
- 1 Rosebud represents:
 - 2 Who are the two men responsible for creating this film?
 - 3 What theatre company did Welles create?
 - 4 Why did they shoot the film with deep focus photography?
 - 5 List three striking visual moments within this film:
- MF:
- 1 Why do you think the writers named the protagonist Sam Spade
 - 2 How does the filmmaker get away with making a dark guy the hero of the film?
 - 3 Where did Huston get the idea of storyboarding the screenplay?
 - 4 What is the Maltese Falcon an example of?
 - 5 The movie is essentially _____

- Casa. 1 What is Casablanca essentially about?
- 2 If the previous playscript wasn't great, and there isn't much action, what helped the screenplay be so successful?
- 3 What is the film's major conflict?
- 4 What makes the conflict unique as compared to most films?
- 5 What were the two optional endings? How did they shoot the film in order to get Bergman's confusing emotions during the end scene?
- 3rd M 1 What question serves as the engine that drives the plot?
- 2 How did Selznick want to shoot the film?
- How did Reed shoot the film?
- 3 What do the various tilted shots suggest?
- The bizarre lighting exemplifies what film/art movement?
- 4 This film reflects what American attitude?
- What is the European attitude?
- 5 What are the contrasting attitudes between Casablanca and 3rd Man?
- Evil 1 This film won what award in 1958?
- 2 What is "spatial choreography"?
- 3 What message is implied through the use of "spatial choreography"?
- 4 What is ironic with this film's portrayal of the clash between cultures?
- 5 What is the similarity between Quinlin and Orson Wells?