

Chapter 2

***M*, FRITZ LANG AND HANS BECKERT (1931)**

When studying the career of Peter Lorre, particular prominence must be given to Lorre's first major screen role: Hans Beckert, the serial killer at the centre of Fritz Lang's 1931 film, *M* (Nero-Film). More than any other role, Beckert has come to be seen as the character which had the biggest impact on Lorre's life – both in terms of his continued employment in the film industry and also in the way that this character contributed to the development of Lorre's otherwise extra-filmic persona.

Throughout Lorre's internationally successful career, and up to the present day, attitudes towards the actor found in a variety of sources, ranging from Hollywood promotional material to scholarly and journalistic retrospectives, recurrently frame the status of Lorre's fame and reputation in accordance to his memorable appearance in *M*. In particular, a significant number of the retrospective essays which purport to analyse Lorre's career repeat a similar three-step template: (a) they present *M* as a significant artistic achievement, (b) they praise Lorre's performance within it, and (c) they then describe the ways in which his later career either failed to live up to this promise or suffered from typecasting as a result of the association between the actor and the character of the deranged serial killer.

Gerd Gemünden (2003: 89) makes the link between Lorre's typecasting and his role in *M* in the most explicit terms, choosing to read Lorre's Hollywood career as 'an extended quotation, re-writing and mimicking that of the paedophile and killer, Hans Beckert'. He defines the remainder of Lorre's screen work as highly limited, and argued that Hollywood either cast Lorre as a pervert, a serial killer, a sexual threat or an outsider. Pronouncements such as these construct a direct correlation between the character of Beckert and Lorre's later Hollywood roles, and in turn, posit that the similarities between his film roles were seen to directly inform Lorre's famous but restrictive persona, whereby the actor was too closely associated with the very marketable image of a dangerous killer or a sadistic pervert.

The common accusation that Hollywood did not employ Lorre to the best of his abilities has its genesis in the reception of *M*. *M* is seen to be an

anomaly within Lorre's career: a widely acclaimed performance in a major European art film that was both commercially and critically successful. As Beckert, Lorre demonstrated immense potential but his Hollywood work promised much yet – for many – delivered too little, too often. Lorre's career has repeatedly been read in terms of diminishing returns. The commentary on *M* in *The Films of Peter Lorre* illustrates this as the authors rather unfairly present the supposition that 'had Peter Lorre retired from the screen after making *M*, his importance in film history would in no way be diminished. In fact, it could be argued that his reputation would be greater had *M* been his only contribution to motion pictures' (Youngkin, Bigwood and Cabana Jr. 1981: 63). Attitudes like this have had a detrimental effect on the critical reputation of Lorre as, increasingly, the spectre of *M* and the character of Beckert are seen to have cast an inescapable and sombre shadow over the actor and the trajectory of his Hollywood screen career.

Such reflections upon Lorre's life encourage the perception that the actor can be defined through a tragic narrative in which his potential artistic achievements were cut short as a result of his exile from Germany and his arrival in Hollywood in 1934. An underlying pessimistic and mournful tone typifies many retrospective accounts about Lorre's emigration. Speculative questions are often raised about what Lorre could have achieved 'if only' he had been able to remain working in Europe – the implication being that his artistry was quickly corrupted by the Hollywood filmmaking industry. These perspectives rely upon the notion that Beckert was an exceptional role and that *M* was virtually unique, enabled by the presence of both the directorial skill of Fritz Lang, and the remarkable skill of Lorre's own performance.

One of the flaws of this argument is that it is reliant upon a binary division between person/persona, at the expense of an accurate consideration of the labour of the actor and the circumstances under which he operated, because it emphasizes the problematic relationship between the ambitions of Lorre as an 'artist' and the limitations of Lorre's extra-filmic persona. In keeping with this, there has been little discussion about the work that Lorre put into his performance as Beckert, other than to vaguely praise it or to state that it led to typecasting. As such, when *M* is reviewed in relation to the rest of Lorre's career, it primarily analyses how Beckert contributed to the persona of the actor. This neglects direct comparisons between performative contexts, conditions of employment and specific technical strategies in evidence throughout Lorre's screen, stage and broadcasting work in an international arena, or even in terms of the actor's own agency within the role. This has led to a situation whereby the significance of *M*, in relation to Lorre's career, has been overstated and misunderstood.

The Production of *M*: The Creative 'Partnership' between Lang and Lorre

A detailed analysis of Lorre's performance of Beckert allows for a more balanced view of how this film fits within the wider context of Lorre's film career. Doing so also suggests possible reasons as to why critiques of this performance have proved elusive. This is partly due to the complex relationship that existed between Lorre and his director/screenwriter, Fritz Lang, during the filming process, and also retrospectively, because of Lang's presence as a figure who was redefined as an auteur during the 1950s and 1960s and Lorre's more lowly critical position during the same time period. The apparent downward trajectory of Lorre's career post-*M* has meant that, in many ways, the presence of Lorre as an active agent has been excoriated from analyses of the film itself, in favour of a more detailed discussion of what Lang achieved on-screen.

Despite this, *M* contains a complex and 'star-making' performance from Lorre which undoubtedly furthered the actor's career. It enabled him to gain employment with both Gaumont-British film studios in the UK, where Lorre made two films directed by Alfred Hitchcock: *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934) and *Secret Agent* (1936), and Harry Cohn's Columbia Pictures in Hollywood after his exile from Germany. For the first five years of his screen career, Lorre was perceived as a highly skilled artist as a result of *M* and other film roles; a position which mirrored the reputation he had already been developing prior to 1931 in his work on the European stage. As discussed in the next chapter, after 1937, perceptions regarding Lorre began to change significantly as a result of how the actor was presented to the public by marketing discourse, and it is around this period that interpretations of the creative agencies within *M* also began to shift dramatically.

This shift was aided, first by Lang's increasing commercial success during the 1940s and 1950s in Hollywood, and secondly by his critical 'reappraisal' during the 1960s. During the early years in which Lorre's critical reputation was on the rise (1928–1930), Lang had already attained privileged status as a director within German silent cinema, but had suffered a series of critical and commercial failures, and had undertaken the project of *M* as an attempt to rectify his downturn in fortunes – a strategy which proved successful. In light of Lang's wider achievements as a director and Lorre's own supposed career troubles from the mid-1930s, the latter's apparent failure to match his performance in the screen appearances that followed the film (in both Europe and Hollywood) has suggested an underlying assumption that, despite the talent of the actor, his success in the role could be attributed more to Lang's skilled direction than to Lorre's own creative input.

Stephen D. Youngkin uses a comparison between the trial sequence in Lang's film and its French version that was (in keeping with established filmmaking practices of the time) filmed concurrently, and also starred

Lorre as the killer, to claim that the success of Lorre's performance was primarily down to Lang's control. Youngkin (2005: 62–63) argues that in the French film, when left to his own devices, Lorre took his performance to 'where he felt it belonged: ... [Lorre] stands instead of crouches, wildly flipping his head and shaking his body. He directs himself outward rather than inward in a portrayal that is more personified than personal.' The English version of the same film, recently uncovered in its entirety, features a similar situation: a somewhat static *mise-en-scène* devoid of Lang's expertise, coupled with an overbearing and blustering performance from Lorre.

However, between the various versions that exist and the changes within Lorre's acting, there are other factors to take into account. In the English version, Lorre himself speaks the dialogue, but given that he did not become fluent in English until around 1934, the lack of nuance is understandable. In the French version, a French actor redubbed the lines for Lorre and this may explain the increased attention that Lorre paid to the physical, gestural aspects of his performance – effectively this is what he was solely responsible for. The implied mimetic characteristics of the performances which followed Lorre's original German performance may be present precisely because it was a moment of mimicry: Lorre was imitating what he had already placed on film.

During the filming of the trial sequence, Lang reportedly subjected Lorre to excessive physical brutality in order to create the hysterical countenance of the imprisoned Beckert (enough to supposedly irrevocably taint Lorre's view of the director). Youngkin notes that the changes in Lorre's performance in the other language versions were not only due to being 'left to his own devices' but also indicative of being 'freed from Lang's notorious sadism', although he does not draw further conclusion from this. Lang's treatment may have helped engender the fragile emotional state of the character, but Lorre may have also relished the opportunity to act in opposition to his previous direction – regardless of whether it was appropriate or not. The differences in the performance could as easily be the culmination of a battle of wills between two artists (one, an established cinematic force, and the other, an up-and-coming star of the Berlin stage) as an indication of skilled practice and control.

These are all deliberately hypothetical observations about Lorre's performance in the three versions. What they highlight is the difficulty in making absolute or conclusive statements about on-screen performance. Rather than aiming to definitively 'prove' Lang's power (or Lorre's skill – or even lack of it), the films and my readings of them emphasize the intangible and mutable nature of screen performance and interpretation. Creative authorial agency can be suggested and argued but very rarely proved, despite stories which persist around the extent of Lang's control, such as Henry Fonda's claims that the director would literally place actors within the frame with his own hands.¹

The dismissal of Lorre's significance in favour of the mythicizing of Lang's creative authority was a view that Lang himself was more than happy

to supplement via anecdotal evidence in interviews, particularly during the period of intense critical interest in his work towards the end of his career from the mid-1950s to the 1970s, and in stories which were subsequently repeated in Patrick McGilligan's 1997 biography of the director.² Two specific stories repeated by Lang work towards diminishing Lorre's political economy and creative agency in his work on the film. Firstly, on employing Lorre, it was reported that Lang refused to reveal the nature of the character of Beckert to the actor until he felt it was appropriate to do so, and the director stipulated in the conditions of employment that Lorre must not appear in any other film role until *M* was finished. By fulfilling these terms, Lorre would remain relatively powerless and unknown to the mass cinema-going audience and could therefore be introduced as Lang's 'discovery': the product of the director's autonomous creative power.³ Secondly, there is the story that Lang was himself responsible for the most famous element of Beckert's characterization: the whistling of a melody from Grieg's *Peer Gynt* ('In the Hall of the Mountain King') which signifies the presence of the killer. Lang frequently claimed that he had to provide the whistle because Lorre was unable to do so. This is untrue as Lorre whistles in many of his other films, but in retelling the story so that he *had* to do the whistling, rather than because he chose to (because Lorre could not achieve the particular off-key pitch required by Lang), Lang shifts part of the creative agency for determining the physicality of the character away from Lorre and onto himself.

However, Lorre's own creative history and performative skills played a far more central role in Lang's casting of *M* than these stories acknowledge. Lorre's practical theatrical training, in experimental productions and as part of avant-garde companies around Europe, had encouraged the development of a multi-layered acting style that could be described as 'dualistic' or even 'pluralistic' through tone, character or engagement, self-reflexive, and either stylized or naturalistic dependent on what was perceived to be most appropriate. Lang first saw Lorre in the Volksbühne (People's Theatre) production of Wedekind's *Frühlings Erwachen* (Spring's Awakening) in Berlin in 1929, playing – to great critical appreciation – a role which required the actor to present a character that was highly distasteful and yet sympathetic to the audience.

This proved to be the perfect audition for *M* as Lang perceived that his killer had to invoke a similar response in the film's audience, and had to appear harmless to those around him within the film whilst simultaneously hinting at the horror beneath the benign surface. Lorre's experience demonstrated that he could represent a character's internal conflicts in a way that provoked a conflicted sense of sympathy and engagement with that character on the part of the audience. In addition to his skills as an actor, Lang also believed that Lorre's particular physical appearance would add a further layer to the characterization of Beckert. The actor's youthful and chubby physicality would suggest an ironic element as Lorre's own appearance, which resembled an overgrown schoolboy, would align

Beckert much more closely with his intended victims than with the adults who were intent on pursuing the killer.

Within critical writing about the film, the importance of Lorre's portrayal has always been recognized. However, the degree to which the impact of Beckert has been credited to Lorre's performative agency has changed since 1931, as has the understanding of the particular creative relationship between director and actor. Earlier critical opinion tended to emphasize Lorre's central creative force within the film, often placing the actor and the director on equal footing regarding accountability. This perspective can be observed in a review of the 1937 re-release of *M* by the *New York Herald-Tribune* (27 June 1937) which stated that 'Peter Lorre can take almost equal responsibility with Mr Lang for the creation of a masterpiece', and in one of the later pieces to subscribe to this viewpoint by Siegfried Kracauer (1947: 220), who calls the performance the 'true centre of the film'. From the 1950s and 1960s onwards, it became more common to prioritize the figure of the director, and as such, focus on the role of the actor diminished and discussions concerning the methods that Lorre employed in his portrayal were sidelined in favour of analyses of Lang's directorial techniques.

The apparent imbalance that this critical approach engendered has been highlighted by Anton Kaes, who moved beyond a consideration of the creative influence of Lang in order to pose a tantalizing question about creative agency within the film: 'If *M* made Lorre a film star, Lorre also made *M* what it is. For many critics then and now, the film's centre of gravity lies in Lorre's unique dramatic persona. In the final analysis, is *M* as much a Peter Lorre film as it is a Fritz Lang film?' (Kaes 2000: 26). Kaes's suggestion that both Lorre and Lang played different but equally significant creative roles requires further development, and this can be discerned within the film through an analysis of how both chose to represent the character of Beckert.

Both Lang and Lorre refuse to present Beckert in wholly 'black and white' terms, leaving the audience to contemplate a killer who is shown to be all too human rather than simply a monstrous incarnation of evil, despite the opinions of the other characters within the film's narrative. One of the most important formal strategies employed by Lang was the choice to make *M* a film of two distinct halves: in each half particular techniques are used to create a different tone or focus. In the first, Lang relies upon a series of distancing techniques as he sets up the premise that the killer is a shadowy presence who permeates the lives of the inhabitants of the unnamed German city. Despite his central importance in *M*, Beckert appears in only nine scenes or sequences in the entire film. In the first half of the film he is only seen briefly and has virtually no dialogue. The viewer sees him perpetrate his crimes before his face or his name is revealed. The sense of disconnection created between Beckert and the viewer occurs primarily because of Lang's decision to film Beckert in long shots with little dialogue when he is occupying the position of the 'hunter', and through Lorre's use of non-naturalistic performance and exaggerated gesture. By

contrast, the second half aims to draw a certain emotional response from the viewer, as the net tightens around the murderer who is reconstructed as a 'hunted' character, especially during the trial sequence. However in terms of Lorre's representation, there is more to Beckert than a simplistic performance of two halves, and even within the first half of the film he uses both non-naturalistic and naturalistic acting. It is this careful manipulation of acting techniques throughout Beckert's scenes which reveals the extent of Lorre's creativity and his understanding of how to present the character most effectively in line with Lang's own remit.

In his early scenes, Beckert is closely associated with the idea of the 'monster' through a series of interlinking stylistic and performative devices and thematic motifs that introduce and then juxtapose imagery of 'Beckert as a monster' with imagery of 'Beckert as a man'. One of these devices is the repeated visualization of Beckert through the use of virtual images, such as shadows and reflections. This effect denies Beckert any physical substance and encourages the perception of him as a mythical intangible being that is always just out of reach. Beckert's first scene in the film is announced only by the appearance of his shadow which falls across a poster that details a reward for the killer's capture. Against this setting, Beckert's black profile speaks to his latest victim, Elsie, before (it is assumed) abducting, abusing and killing her.

The visual strategy of depicting Beckert as a shadow is often used to signal his presence when the viewer may not otherwise be aware of it, and contributes to the pervading sense of paranoia within the first part of the film. In a later sequence in which Beckert is stalking another young girl, Lang cuts to a blind beggar (Georg John), who is the key to identifying the killer as he sold Elsie a balloon whilst she was in the company of Beckert. The beggar hears a man whistling the same melody he heard during Elsie's abduction and strains to hear where it is coming from. Lang's choice of framing for this scene means that he places the camera in between the beggar and Beckert so that the only clue to Beckert's whereabouts is the shadow that falls across the beggar's face. Even at this moment of hope – that he might be recognized and apprehended – the killer remains as elusive as ever, both for the characters in the narrative and for the audience watching it unfold.

Although in this first half Beckert is mostly represented as a shadowy unseen figure, an early sequence somewhat surprisingly reveals the face of the murderer to the viewer. This enables Lorre's performative techniques to be foregrounded more substantially. The image remains in the context of the impersonal 'police procedural' that characterizes the first half of the film, since it is accompanied by the voiceover of a graphologist outlining the possible psychological profile of the killer, but it also offers an audience-only insight into the killer as Beckert stares into his dressing-table mirror trying to 'see' the psychopath that is being described aurally within his own seemingly benevolent face. Beckert is presented as a man whose indistinct physicality allows him to pass unnoticed by potential witnesses and evade capture. (Although in later years Lorre was often described as

physically unusual, in *M* his physical appearance was predominantly used to signify youth and conventionality.) Although the audience is apparently privileged with this point of view that recognizes the ‘abnormality’ beneath the surface, the sequence relies upon the distancing techniques of both Lang’s framing and Lorre’s performance. In doing so, its apparent status as a moment of psychological connection is purposefully undermined as the use of the reflection constructs a barrier between the audience and Beckert that belies the apparent closeness of the image.

In addition to the mirror image which dominates the frame, Lang includes Beckert’s actual face in the right-hand side of the frame. Due to the position of the camera and the angle of the shot, only a partial view of the face’s left side is visible. Therefore, whilst Beckert is contorting his features into the increasingly disturbing mask-like faces in his reflection, his actual face (as visible to the viewer) barely changes expression. This sequence becomes a way of successfully conveying an interior process: Beckert is outwardly ‘normal’ and does not actually change into an obviously visually monstrous character when his murderous desires are aroused. It remains an internal transformation, but through the use of a reflected image rather than a ‘real’ image this can still be presented in a visual and physical sense without destroying the reality of the situation.

Within the sequence, Beckert’s capacity for murder is demonstrated through Lorre’s physical performance. Lorre utilizes a technique which is highly reminiscent of those practised in his own experimental stage experi-



Figure 2.1 Lorre as Hans Beckert in *M* (1931). Photo: Nero-Film AG/Foremco Pictures Co.

ences, such as the development of epic theatrical strategies with Bertolt Brecht. Using an epic mode of performance which attempts to create a distancing or 'alienating' effect between actor, character and audience, Lorre demonstrates the character to the viewer rather than trying to create an illusion of reality by 'becoming' the character. Rather than conveying the transformation via one seamless facial movement, Lorre uses a series of disjointed and increasingly shocking expressions which resemble a number of 'masks' being put on by the character. This objective technique is reinforced because the visuals effectively mimic the emotionless voiceover of the graphologist's report into the possible psychological make-up of the killer (a visual and aural juxtaposition which is, in itself, also an explicit commentary on the performative aspects being used throughout the sequence), despite both Beckert and the graphologist occupying different physical and possibly temporal spaces within the narrative. In this brief moment Lang and Lorre are able to demonstrate the internal struggles of Beckert, and Lorre's alienating performance coheres with Lang's equally distancing visual representation.

Lang's use of this technique occurs throughout the first half of the film where Beckert remains a threatening presence. The psychological 'insights' offered are conveyed through the use of reflected images, and this illustrates an attempt on the part of Lang to effectively prevent the viewer from making an emotional connection with Beckert. The most notable example of this is the moment when Beckert realizes he has been discovered and branded with the letter 'M'. He becomes aware of this by turning and looking at his reflection in a darkened shop window. This is the last scene in which Lang uses the reflection motif. The chalk mark signals the killer's identity to all: he is no longer able to hide behind a façade of 'normality', and the articulation of his hidden abnormality does not have to be communicated via the technique of the virtual image.

However, whilst Lang effectively relies upon two distinct approaches over the first and second halves of the film, Lorre's performance is not as easily split into these oppositional techniques. Throughout the film, his acting juxtaposes non-naturalistic and jarring representations with more naturalistic and coherent moments of characterization. The same visual transformation from 'man' to 'monster' that is being performed in front of Beckert's bedroom mirror is repeated in the later sequence where Beckert is entranced by the reflection of a young girl in a shop window and slowly begins to stalk her, but this time Lorre performs it without the literal 'face-making' required by Lang's alienating distancing effect (although the director continues to use the motif of the reflected image). The viewer no longer merely sees a demonstration of, and commentary upon, the stages of 'evil', but, through Lorre's performance, is presented with a clearer insight into the psychological process of Beckert's mental struggle. In effect, the same transformation occurs in both sequences, but there are purposeful differences within the specifics of Lorre's performance. Even if one takes into account claims that Lang physically manipulated actors within the frame,

these two scenes reveal that there was still space for the actor's own agency, either in terms of the specific gestures used by Lorre or in the way he chose to structure and pace his movements between each separate directed action.

Within this silent sequence, Lorre carefully uses facial and bodily movements, with props, to externalize Beckert's thoughts. He begins by showing Beckert as 'normal' – smiling and happily eating some fruit. As he spots the girl all signifiers of normality disappear: his hands drop heavily down to his side and his smiling face becomes expressionless. By wiping the fruit juice off his mouth with his left hand, Lorre is symbolically removing the last trace of 'normality' from Beckert.⁴ The way his fingers pull down the corner of his mouth is reminiscent of the last 'mask' he contorts his face into from the earlier scene in front of his bedroom mirror. Here, unlike that previous sequence, Lorre demonstrates that this is not a straightforward transformation into evil: there is a struggle for control within Beckert between the sane and the insane elements of his mind. This internal conflict is represented physically through Lorre's use of his hands: his right hand, which still holds the fruit, is connected to Beckert's 'normal' persona, whereas the left hand still hovering at his mouth is linked with the perverted desire within.

The ambiguity of this scene – as to whether Beckert will act upon his murderous desires – is reflected in the positioning of Lorre's hands. Whilst he is struggling with himself he brings them both down to the handrail where they rest inactively as he considers the situation. Once he decides that his impulses cannot be ignored, his left hand malevolently moves slowly to grasp the air as if to pull the girl towards him, but then falls to his side and reluctantly repeats the gesture. Despite this moment of resistance, the 'monster' within finally gains supremacy, and with the course of action decided, Lorre's hands are thrust firmly inside his coat pockets out of sight. This sequential movement will become more significant as Beckert argues in his defence that he is a vulnerable 'victim' who is compelled by forces within him to act out horrific fantasies that spiral way out of his control.

Within the second half of the film, Lang dramatically reversed the structure and style that he had so far used. Instead of being a predominantly unseen catalyst for the unfolding narrative, Beckert is now placed centre stage and the viewer is positioned to bear witness to his loss of control over the unfolding events: namely his pursuit and capture by the underworld forces. Lang also chooses to replace the episodic, impersonal style employed in the first half of the film with a more linear, personal one. This encourages a sense of forward momentum within the story that was lacking in the pseudo-documentary style used to outline the growing mass hysteria and the various police procedures being employed. Additionally, the combination of this style with the structure of the first half tends to distance the viewer from any particular character, resulting in a noticeable absence of identification figures. Anton Kaes (2000: 52–53) has discussed the way in which the traditional 'hero figure' of the investigating officer, Inspector Lohmann (Otto Wernicke) is undermined by Lang. A similar interpretation

can be taken towards the alternative protagonist, the underworld boss Schränker (Gustaf Gründgens), whose physicality, costuming and dialogue convey a close association with terror and oppression, and whose moral obligation to catch the killer stems from the desire to continue with his business free from police interruption, rather than from a superior moral position.

Lang's decision to undermine the 'heroic' characteristics of both Lohmann and Schränker prompts the audience to look elsewhere for an empathetic character. This remains a somewhat problematic decision since it creates a space which encourages an emotional connection between the viewer and Beckert. This connection contributes to the source of the film's main ambiguity: that despite the danger posed to society by Beckert, the viewer is not necessarily encouraged to wholly condemn him. This ambiguity would be difficult to support if the film had offered the viewer an acceptable alternative hero figure. The change in tone and tempo of the film also directs the audience's attention towards Beckert and succeeds in reducing the impact of the pursuit narrative as the dramatic changes subvert the significance of Lohmann's and Schränker's goal to capture one man. Therefore the formal construction of the other main protagonists promotes a particular perception of Beckert by the audience. Lang uses the structure of the film as an aid to develop the representation of Beckert as a troubled human being rather than an anonymous force of evil.

The decision to make Beckert a continuously visible presence throughout the second half of the film allows Lorre's performance to humanize the killer and develop him as a rounded character, and as such his presence dominates the film, despite his relatively short screen time. Much of this power is generated from the final sequence in which Beckert is put on trial and Lorre delivers his extended monologue. However, the strength of Lorre's performance does not come from this impassioned speech alone or from his position only within the film's second act. Looking at Lorre's scenes throughout the film, a carefully considered performative strategy can be determined which aims to foreshadow the objectives of the trial sequence, in the way that the sequence offers a challenge to the viewer's supposed attitudes towards Beckert, the monstrous child killer. Throughout the film, Lorre works in conjunction with Lang's formal techniques to conduct the process of humanizing a monster. This is achieved by utilizing alternating performance styles throughout the action: moving between a performance that encourages distance from the character and a performance that draws the viewer into an emotional connection with the killer.

When considered alongside a detailed analysis of his acting techniques in other scenes, Lorre's performance in the final trial sequence is not as shocking a departure as we might first believe. Although it is explored most fully in this sequence, the idea that Beckert is more than an incarnation of 'evil' is present throughout Lorre's performance as a whole and he clearly demonstrates the ongoing process of humanizing an abstract hate figure. However, because of the formal choices made by Lang that place

certain restrictions on Lorre's acting, it is in the trial scene that the full extent of Lorre's construction of Beckert is revealed, despite Youngkin's insistence that Lang remained the dominant creative force during this sequence. Rather than being carefully manipulated by the director, Lorre is set free from the technical constraints and visual trickery employed by Lang, and the long sequence is played very much as a theatrical sketch, with minimal camera movements or cuts as Beckert begins his defence.

The sequence begins by directing the audience to question the legitimacy of a 'trial' run by the criminal underworld, most notably in the brutal way Beckert is physically treated and in the shrieking laughter directed at him when he says in surprise, 'But you can't just murder me!'. Throughout this, the viewer is encouraged to form an emotional connection with Beckert that deepens as he speaks, through formal and performative means. The position of the camera holds Lorre's face in a medium shot throughout most of the sequence and is the most detailed visual presentation of the actor (and character) experienced so far in the film. Beckert turns towards the camera, but does not look directly at it, as direct address would have a self-reflexive and confrontational effect, drawing attention to the moment as one of a 'performance' by an actor and breaking the possible empathetic connection with the viewer. Instead of occupying a position which distances the viewer from the character, Lorre's performance figures the moment as one which strives towards conveying the psychological 'truth' of Beckert. He demonstrates Beckert's confused state of mind by focusing on nothing. This stance also positions Beckert's words as an authentic confession rather than a calculated speech which seeks a particular response from the diegetic audience. In addition to this, Lorre uses quiet words and small controlled movements which make Beckert appear much less animalistic than his wild entrance into the 'court' (a motif also used in the previous sequence, where the pursuit and capture of the killer resembled the hunt for a wild animal).

The pacing of both Lorre's verbal performance of Beckert's speech and the specific choices the actor makes about when to employ different physical performative modes during the speech are also significant in demonstrating how the scenes work towards (and at times, against) creating the level of empathy in the viewer needed by Lang in order for the film's conclusion to be successful. On the whole, Lorre uses a naturalistic style based around revealing the psychological motivations of Beckert, but at times he chooses to revert momentarily to a contrasting non-naturalistic physical performance. One such instance occurs early in the sequence as the 'prosecutor', Schränker, shows Beckert photographs of the murdered children. In response, Lorre melodramatically jerks backwards and clasps his fists into his mouth. Lorre's movement illustrates that the moment is a turning point in the trial, as it identifies Beckert as the killer that held the city in a grip of terror. In keeping with this, Lorre adopts a stance which parallels the earlier representation used by himself and Lang, briefly demonstrating the 'monster' within through a symbolic series of expressionistic gestures rather than using more naturalistic techniques.

In contrast to this moment, which briefly attempts to break the realistic and emotionally engaging representation of Beckert through physical means, the way that Lorre's performance is verbally structured seeks to maintain this connection between character and viewer. As Beckert pleads with the court, saying 'I can't help myself', he is accused by one of the jeering crowd of using the old trick of pleading madness. To counter this accusation, Lorre reverts back to a mode of representation based around the performance of Beckert as a 'normal' sane figure (briefly seen elsewhere in the film when Beckert buys fruit from a street vendor). He intelligently and articulately accuses the court of being merely career criminals unqualified to judge his own mental state. The moment aligns Beckert with the audience, who have been encouraged to formulate a similar viewpoint through the brutal treatment of Beckert in the sequence and through the overall representation of Schränker. Furthermore, the positioning of this brief moment of sense and lucidity is crucial because it occurs just before Beckert launches into an intense and detailed description of his crimes. An immediate movement from the animal-like hysteria which characterized his entrance into the room, to the frightening world of Beckert's compulsion to kill, would have destroyed the necessary emotional connection between the character and viewer. This convincing moment of sanity serves to reinforce the notion that Beckert is more 'man' than 'monster', and as such could be received as a possible figure of identification or sympathy.

As Beckert begins to explain himself, Lorre allows the intensity to return to his voice and stance. His brief words describing 'the fire, the voice, the torment' inside him build up the tension and uneasiness around the character that is wholly constructed through this more naturalistic performance. There are few symbolic, mythic or distancing aspects to this part of the performance, and every gesture used by Lorre can be seen less as a Brechtian-style commentary on the character's behaviour, and more in keeping with realistic or even Stanislavskian modes of performance which attempt to convey a sense of 'psychological truth'. In keeping with this agenda, which was derived from realist approaches to theatrical performance, Lang minimizes cinematic 'distractions' and uses no editing, dramatic music or lighting changes to embellish the struggles of the character. Only once, after Beckert says 'And I shadow myself', does Lang momentarily relieve the tension by cutting to the courtroom. In contrast to earlier, the 'jury' are now silent and a few have begun to nod in confused empathy. Over these shots, Beckert's voice continues, growing louder and higher. Lang cuts back to him in order to visualize the internal battle of the character. As he breathes, every part of Lorre's body moves in and out to illustrate physically the capture and release of Beckert's two personalities. As Beckert continues, Lorre increasingly keeps his movements to a minimum. Instead he shifts the struggle between his personalities back towards an internal one, conveying this via changes in his voice rather than through changing facial expressions or physical gestures. He uses a high pitched

shriek to describe his emotions, followed by a muted emotionless voice to describe the ghosts that haunt him (implying that it is his capacity to kill rather than the consequences of his actions which terrifies him the most).

This part of the performance works towards allowing the viewer to have some sympathy for Beckert by gaining an understanding of the mental processes that drive him through Lorre's first physical, and then verbal, performances. However, this film has a more complex agenda than merely reconstructing Beckert as a sympathetic killer. Having revealed Beckert as a damaged human being, the film refuses to ignore the horrific nature of his crimes. Again this is demonstrated through elements of Lorre's performance which juxtapose naturalistic with non-naturalistic modes, and move swiftly between moments which engage or alienate the viewer. During his heartfelt confession, Beckert also continues to repulse the audience by recounting the pleasure he feels whilst killing. As with the earlier example of seeing the photographs of his victims, at this moment, Lorre's acting ensures that Beckert is once more visually represented as a 'monster': as he says the words 'Except when I'm doing it', the actor suddenly returns to a grotesque and mask-like facial expression and allows a malevolent lustful smile to fill his face. This briefly severs the empathetic connection created between him and the audience, as the actor objectively reminds them who they pity. This commentary only surfaces for the briefest interlude, and in the next instant the mask is gone and the childlike bewilderment returns, along with the less reflexive performance style.

Through his tension-filled and skilled performance, Lorre successfully demonstrates that Beckert's psychological struggle is one which can only continue indefinitely. Repeated phrases, such as 'Don't want to! Must!', which vary only in the way Lorre delivers them using different volume, speed and intensity, emphasizes Beckert's loss of control over his conscious behaviour and emotions as he describes his desperate existence that condemns him to repeat his actions over and over with no hope of ending the struggle. The overall cyclical structure of the speech increases the tension as it makes it difficult to anticipate when and how it will end. Lorre's continually shifting performance style echoes the ongoing internal fight of the character, and the formal techniques used by Lang illustrate an unwillingness to either interrupt Lorre's acting with cinematic 'distractions' via editing, or allow the other characters into Beckert's temporal space in order to stop the confession.

Given the general objective of constructing an ambiguous position regarding the punishment of Beckert, the sequence must end in a way which encourages neither condemnation nor support for the killer. Lang and Lorre carefully manage a conclusion which conforms to this by continuing the theme of repetition which has been central to characterizing Beckert's speech. To finish, Lorre repeats one line four times: 'I can't!'. The repetition illustrates the lack of forward momentum and Beckert's mental and physical exhaustion. With each reading, Lorre slows his delivery and lowers his voice, so that it moves from a terrified scream to an exhausted sob, winding

down the performance and moving the focus back to 'political/social' concerns (the legitimacy of the trial and treatment of the killer), rather than to the 'psychological' (Beckert's emotional experiences). In accordance with this, Lorre's acting again moves from a style which encourages emotional engagement to one that constructs a sense of distance between viewer and character, as he reacts non-naturalistically to the steady hold of the unseen policeman by ignoring it.

The Impact of *M* on Lorre's Career and Screen Performances

As previously outlined, there is an assumed close association between Lorre's appearance in *M* and the remainder of the actor's international career. The remainder of Lorre's characters may have elements in common with Beckert at some level, but the direct correlation with the other roles is not strong enough to describe it accurately as typecasting. Even in the immediate aftermath of *M*, and the keenness of the German film industry to capitalize on the impact made by the actor by offering him the same types of roles, Lorre resisted this particular employment strategy. Instead, he played a range of characters in a variety of different genres and worked mainly as a supporting actor for the rest of his European film career, including: musical performances in *Was Frauen Träumen* (What Women Dream) (1933); comic or romantic roles in farcical films such as *Die Koffer des Herrn O.F.* (The Trunks of Mr. O.F.) (1931); as support to the popular star Hans Albers in *Bomben auf Monte Carlo* (Bombs over Monte Carlo) (1931), *FP1 Antwortet Nicht* (FP1 Doesn't Answer) (1932), and *Der Weisse Dämon* (The White Demon) (1932); and unsympathetic criminal roles in popular thrillers like *Unsichtbare Gegner* (Invisible Opponent) (1933). This template is equally applicable to his Hollywood career, during which Lorre played a wide variety of roles from comic sidekicks, quirky eccentrics, dangerous criminals, fatalistic anti-heroes and cynical mercenaries, rather than being restricted only to roles which could be described in limiting terms as either serial killers or psychopaths.

Within the context of Lorre's overall screen career, *M* can be seen be an especially atypical performance. I have described how Lorre shifts from a non-naturalistic, almost Brechtian, style to one which actively courts a particular emotional engagement from the viewer, using a combination of his own earlier theatrical training and realist conventions of early sound screen acting. Although Lorre often utilizes a similarly dualistic acting style in many of his following films, there are differences which have a significant effect upon characterization and the potential for engagement with his audience. The biggest difference between *M* and the other films in which Lorre juxtaposes a non-naturalistic distancing style with realist or naturalistic acting is that in the latter category, through Lorre's use of either self-reflexive or distancing techniques, the juxtaposition serves as political or industrial commentary on his employment within a mass media industry which favoured

a realist aesthetic. In each film, Lorre's acting choices carefully ensure that his position as a performer is continually highlighted in addition to (or at times, at the expense of) the characterization of his role. In many of his Hollywood films made between 1935 and 1964, the spectacle of Lorre's performance is often presented as the potential point of engagement with the viewer, instead of through the presentation of a psychologically-realistic character.

With regards to *M*, Lorre's agenda for using a non-naturalistic acting style at certain moments is first to create a barrier between the audience and Beckert. Gradually, this barrier is then eroded by the more naturalistic elements of his performance as the film progresses, culminating in the trial sequence. By contrast, many of his later performances attempt to achieve the opposite effect in terms of identification. This shift is a calculated strategy on the part of Lorre and can be recognized even at the smallest gestural level, and as such these expressions should be considered as complex articulations of character rather than as evidence of the actor's tendency to simply 'make faces'. As Beckert, Lorre repeats certain intended movements, such as holding his eyes wide open or raising his brow line, the aim of which is to have a humanizing effect by conveying the vulnerability of the character to the viewer. Lorre uses the same gestures throughout his career, but in his later films they are used as a specific distancing effect rather than a moment of engagement. For example, in *All Through the Night*, Lorre raises his brow line to signify that his character, Pepi, has changed from a comically harmless figure to one who is dangerous and unpredictable. The gesture is contained within a close-up of Lorre's face (and is therefore not included for the benefit of other characters) and is intended to create a moment of disquiet and tension in the mind of the viewer, rather than being used to signify a moment of empathy.

Although Lorre uses contrasting performative techniques throughout *M*, the naturalistic style remains the dominant style of acting. This is mainly due to the way it is appropriated within the trial sequence. For the most part, this crucial scene conforms to concepts of realistic performance that were influenced by Stanislavsky's approach to characterization in its aim to convey the psychological 'truth' of the character. As such, the impact of the scene is created by the way in which the emotionally engaging acting style allows for a challenge to conventional perceptions surrounding the killer's motivations and actions to be mounted, which have otherwise been communicated through excessively expressionistic representations. Furthermore, naturalistic practices – rather than more experimental or self-reflexive techniques – have historically been very compatible with the principles of mainstream film acting (and many mainstream appraisals of what constitutes 'good' acting). This may help to explain why Lorre's performance as Beckert is seen in a more favourable light than any of his other more obviously self-reflexive or non-naturalistic performances.

Looking at *M* from the wider perspective of a consideration of Lorre's international career, it is difficult to pigeonhole Lorre's performance style,

screen roles and extra-filmic persona on the basis of this film alone. *M* occupies a significant place within the career of Peter Lorre, but it is simplistic merely to define Peter Lorre according to his appearance as Beckert or to analyse his later work in Hollywood and Germany solely around its relation to this film. Much of the special significance that can be identified in *M* with specific regard to Lorre comes from one of the most overlooked elements of the film: the labour that the actor puts into his performance. Lorre's performance as Beckert is a carefully constructed exercise in characterization and audience engagement which demonstrates how the actor appropriated his own professional experiences to bring authorial agency to the character rather than just relying on his natural attributes and appearance, unconscious personal gestures or directorial instruction. However, *M* cannot be seen as the one and only significant work in Lorre's international career – from either a perspective that prioritizes the actor's labour and performances or one which prioritizes Lorre's persona. The film is a very precise example of Lorre's skill as an actor, but it is not the only example.

Additionally, an analysis of the way Lorre constructs Beckert – particularly within the context of his whole career – challenges the assumption that Lorre spent his entire professional life playing echoes of this one character or that he was incapable of playing characters too far removed from the image of the serial killer, because it reveals the differences between Beckert and other characters at both the level of Lorre's deliberate performative choices and also the industrial and artistic decisions behind the employment of the actor. Although he uses techniques and gestures in this film that can be found throughout his other films, there is little sense of cohesion between this role and the roles that Lorre subsequently played in both Europe and Hollywood. Despite the insistence that *M* cast a long shadow over Lorre's career, especially in the way that the Hollywood industry used him, there is little evidence that his American employment – at least on the cinema screen – was conditional upon a repeated association with his character from *M*.

Linked to Lorre's employment within the American filmmaking industry is the central role played by the American mass audience within the career of Peter Lorre. The major consumers of Lorre's labour and image were the American public, and he worked almost exclusively within the United States between 1935 and 1964. Just as it is impossible to describe Lorre's cinematic employment by Hollywood as predominantly indebted to his role in *M*, it is also difficult to view the reception of Lorre by the American public as a whole as dependent upon an explicit association with Hans Beckert. It is highly unlikely that the average American picturegoer would have had frequent or prolonged access to *M* on-screen. Therefore, they would also be unlikely to have derived a perception of the actor based upon his role or performance in the film – these perceptions came from other sources. Those who were able to see Lorre in *M* would have done so on only a few occasions in selected cinemas (on its initial release, at a New York re-release in 1937, and in 1959 when a shortened version was re-released first in Germany and then

worldwide).⁵ Therefore, for the majority of his Hollywood career, his performance as Beckert would have been at best a distant memory to Lorre's largest potential audience. The public association of Lorre's image with a particular type of unsavoury character was aided by promotional material which continually made reference to *M*, although publicity departments had specific agendas for making this connection, and were not always accurate in their representations of the actor's relationship to the film.

The close relationship between *M* and Lorre has been overplayed partly because his appearance as Beckert appears to support and explain the actor's nefarious extra-filmic persona in the United States. Whilst there are obvious connections between the role and the image, this is also a more complex relationship than may otherwise be assumed for a number of reasons: firstly, because so few other screen roles contribute meaningfully to the construction of Lorre's extra-filmic persona (in spite of their frequent notoriety); secondly, despite being linked to the German film, *M*, Lorre's extra-filmic persona remains a construct of a variety of American media industries; and thirdly, the extra-filmic persona which most coherently signified 'Peter Lorre' only came into existence circa 1937 – six years and fifteen films after Lorre's appearance as Beckert. Lorre's persona may have its origins in *M*, but its creation was not necessarily a direct progression from that film.

Notes

1. Henry Fonda (1966) commented at the height of Lang's redefinition as an 'auteur' that '[Lang] is the master puppeteer, and he is happiest only when he can manipulate the blank puppets. He would actually manipulate you with his hands.'
2. Interviews in Barry Keith Grant 2003; Henry Hart 1956: 13–15; Gretchen Berg 1965: 50–80; Gene D. Phillips 1975: 175–87; Patrick McGilligan 1997.
3. This was stipulated despite Lorre's growing reputation within theatrical circles circa 1930 (see Chapter 1) and despite his brief appearances in two films prior to the release of *M* – *Die Verschewunde Frau* (The Missing Wife) (Karl Leiter, Österreichisches Filmindustrie, 1929) and a short recording of *Mann ist Mann* (Man Equals Man) directed by Brecht in 1931.
4. It remains ambiguous as to whether this 'wiping' action is Lorre's invention or Lang's own direction. Stephen D. Youngkin cites the moment as being present within the script (and therefore not credited to Lorre), but the script to which he refers to is not the shooting script written by Thea von Harbou, but a version published in 1968 and subtitled an 'English translation and description of action' by Nicholas Garnham. Garnham's script makes no mention of von Harbou and constructs its text from a direct description of the film itself. Nicholas Garnham 1968: 58.
5. The limited release of *M* in English-speaking countries was noted in a 1937 British article about Lorre, which stated that 'Although comparatively few English-speaking people saw *M*, [Lorre] has never been able to get away from that grim murderer': John K. Newham, *Film Weekly*, 3 July: 14. The paradoxical nature of this type of statement has rarely been explored in critical appraisals of the actor's career.