

Volker Pantenburg
Fritz Lang (1974/1990)
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Fritz Lang (1974/1990)

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Director: Werner Dütsch

First broadcast: 3 December 1990



Werner Dütsch, born in 1939, came to the WDR film department in 1970. Over more than three decades, he produced essayistic work by Helmut Färber, Harun Farocki, Hartmut Bitomsky, and the like. He also acted as a co-producer for films by Johan van der Keuken (*Amsterdam, Global Village*), Straub/Huillet (*Workers, Peasants*), Mark Rappaport (*From the Journals of Jean Seberg*), and many others.

Like his fellow commissioning editors at the WDR, Dütsch not only organised television-retrospectives and initiated and co-produced work by others, but he also took the liberty to work as an author and director himself. His

filmography includes the three-part program *Das goldene Zeitalter der Kine-matographie* (1976, with Hartmut Bitomsky), an essay about Charlie Chaplin (*Monster Charlie* [1973]) and countless contributions for WDR film magazines. ‘We were obsessed by the idea to explain movies’, as he recalls the WDR Filmredaktion spirit.[1]

Fritz Lang is a reworked version of an earlier program on the German di-rector (*Die schweren Träume des Fritz Lang* [The Heavy Dreams of Fritz Lang, 1974]). The essay is organised as a dialogue between two voices (Dütsch and Martina Müller), addressing the main themes and obsessions of the director. It starts with a remark about Lang’s poor eyesight which is linked to his aes-thetics of ‘rigorously organised gazes’. ‘Lang focused on looking, seeing and being seen more intensely than any other director’, Dütsch states. The se-quence that follows traces and registers some of these intense gazes by intro-ducing the films that will be investigated later: Edward G. Robinson’s tired gaze in *The Woman in the Window*, Arthur Kennedy’s fixed stare and Marlene Dietrich’s melancholy glance in *Rancho Notorious*, Peter Lorre and Jon White-ley’s paralysed look in *M* and *Moonfleet*. [2] An elegant phrase makes the tran-sition to other films and topics within Lang’s oeuvre: ‘What other images, scenes, and stories relate to these troubling gazes?’ In the remaining 43 minutes, central motifs and aesthetic choices are highlighted by sharing con-cise observations with the spectator:

There is a lot of killing in Lang’s films; with energy, skilfulness, and arrogance. Im-ages of bodies, falling heavy and helplessly, follow. As if the dead, with their specific weight, wanted to block the way of the living. [3]

It is easy to forget how complicated it was technically to produce a television essay like *Fritz Lang*. After a screening of *Fritz Lang* at the Essay Film Festival in 2017, Dütsch recalled:

All these movies were on two inch tapes, and the cutter – a woman – needed help to move these (between 5 and 10 kilos a piece). For every little clip from each movie, we had to change tapes, because we only had one master and one slave.

However, this is not the reason why Dütsch decided to concentrate on a man-ageable number of Lang films. Rather, he wanted to mix so called ‘minor films’ with canonical ones, well-known ones with lesser-known ones: *The Woman in the Window*, *Rancho Notorious*, *Moonfleet*. From Lang’s German ca-reer, he chooses *M* and *Die Nibelungen*, while some other movies are present as photographs.

The only thing I knew: I would talk about these five movies; I would use these two interviews; I had a few photos, and that's it. And then it started really in the cutting room. [4]

At the time, the act of composing the text and adjusting it to the images was just as tedious as the choice and montage of clips.

I improvised the text. I had a few passages before the editing process, a few were written afterwards. There are a lot of quotations, Freud, Thomas Mann. [...] I liked the idea to have two voices. Not to give it a linear structure, but to have little pieces. This, and this, and this..., open to speculation, to question and answer. [5]

Amongst the many detailed observations about Lang's obsession with the gaze or his predilection for claustrophobic interiors, it is particularly interesting how *M* is treated.[6] Concentrating on the question if Peter Lorre is guilty or not, Dütsch takes on the role of an advocate:

Everybody is sure he, Lorre, is the killer. But it needs a lawyer. And a good lawyer – let's say: James Stewart – would find out: There is no proof. [...] Even when Peter Lorre is in front of the mirror and makes these gestures with his face, everybody says: This is horror. But I can also say: Children are going to do this, and he has a kind of childish behavior. So I would reopen the case. [7]

Werner Dütsch's *Fritz Lang* might be the perfect piece of evidence to reopen the case of videographic film studies.

Volker Pantenburg (Freie Universität Berlin)

Audiovisual Essayist

Born in 1939, Werner Dütsch was commissioning editor for fiction films, documentaries, and programmes about cinema at the WDR (West German Broadcasting Station) in Cologne for over three decades, and for over two decades he taught at the Academy of Media Arts Cologne (KHM). He has also worked for the Documentary Film Week in Duisburg for many years. He is the author of *Im Banne der roten Hexe – Childhood, Youth and the Magic of Cinema in Postwar Germany* (2016) and co-author of *Lola Montez – eine Filmgeschichte* (2002).

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Notes

- [1] Werner Dütsch in conversation with Volker Pantenburg, Essay Film Festival 2017, London, Birkbeck Cinema, 25 March 2017. For a panorama of Dütsch's activities see Girke 2006.
- [2] From today's vantage point, this sequence seems to anticipate the beginning of Kevin B. Lee's *The Spielberg Face* – in fact, the passage in Dütsch's program could fittingly be called 'The Lang Gaze'.
- [3] The voice-over commentary was published in 1991 in the Cologne-based journal *steady cam* (Dütsch 1991).
- [4] Werner Dütsch in conversation with Volker Pantenburg, Essay Film Festival 2017, London, Birkbeck Cinema, 25 March 2017.
- [5] *Ibid.*
- [6] It seems that no other movie from film history has been subjected to videographic treatment as often as Fritz Lang's *M*. Fascinating examples include Klaus Kremeier's *Fritz Lang's German Movies* (1971), Dütsch's *The Heavy Dreams of Fritz Lang* (1974), passages in Harun Farocki's and Felix Hofmann's *The Double Face of Peter Lorre*, Jean Douchet's *Image par Image: M de Fritz Lang* (1987), amongst others. See Pethke & Schlüter 2010.
- [7] Dütsch in conversation with Pantenburg.