

## 激怒

### *Fury*

マービン・スミス  
Marvin SMITH

#### Abstract

Fritz Lang (1890–1976), after a successful career as a director of both silent and sound films in Germany during the 1920s and early 1930s, left Germany in 1933 after Hitler's rise to power. Eventually arriving in the United States, he went to work for MGM Studios in Hollywood. His first and only film for MGM was *Fury* (1936), which was loosely based on an infamous lynching that took place in San Jose, California, in 1933. Using the events surrounding the lynching as a backdrop, Lang creates at once both an insightful psychological drama and a powerful social commentary in which he explores such themes as mob violence, justice, guilt, revenge, and capital punishment. In doing so, he also gives us one of the earliest examples of *film noir*.

*Keywords* : cinema, *film noir*, social commentary, Fritz Lang

キーワード : 映画、フィルム・ノワール、社会問題、フリッツ・ラング

#### Introduction

It could be argued that Lang's American films are better than his German ones; certainly they are meaningful to a larger audience. (Bogdanovich 1967, p. 7)

Friedrich Christian Anton "Fritz" Lang was born on December 5, 1890, in Vienna, the second son of architect Anton Lang and his wife Pauline. Although his mother was Jewish, she had converted to Catholicism, and therefore Lang was raised a Catholic.<sup>(1)</sup> He briefly studied engineering and then art at the Technical University of Vienna before leaving Vienna in 1910 for travels that took him through Europe, Africa, Asia, and parts of the Pacific area. Returning to Europe in 1913, he studied painting in Paris. When World War I broke out, he

joined the Austrian army and served honorably until his discharge in 1918.

After a brief stint as a stage actor and a writer for films, Lang began work as a director at the Universum Film AG (UFA), the principal German film studio during the Weimar Republic. This period coincided with the rise of the Expressionist movement in Germany. Visually, German Expressionism stressed such things as *chiaroscuro* lighting, sharp angles, rigid movements, great heights, and crowds. Thematically, Expressionism often involved introspection, psychological imbalance, a fate-driven story line, symbolism, and fantastic elements. Throughout the 1920s and early 1930s Lang directed silent films ranging from art films (*Der Müde Tod*) to thrillers (*Die Spinnen*) to science fiction (*Metropolis*). All of these films relied heavily on Expressionism both visually and thematically, thereby foreshadowing the *film noir* of Lang's later years in the United States: "Although some consider Lang's work to be simple melodrama, he produced an oeuvre that helps to establish the characteristics of *film noir*, with its recurring themes of psychological conflict, paranoia, fate and moral ambiguity." ("Fritz Lang", 2011) Lang's first sound film, *M* (1931), considered by many to be his masterpiece, deftly combines Expressionist elements to produce what has been called "The Original *Film Noir*".

After Hitler came to power in Germany, Lang left Germany in 1933. The reasons and circumstances of his flight from Germany are somewhat unclear, but, after a short stay in Paris, he arrived in the United States under a one-year contract to direct for one of Hollywood's major studios, MGM. *Fury* (1936) is the only film Lang made under his contract with MGM.

After Lang arrived in the United States, he had several months before he finally started working on *Fury*:

During this period when he had nothing to do but get to know life in the United States, he had continued in his habit of noting everything that seemed different and important to him. He read everything he could lay hands on—particularly newspapers, to learn English and also to understand the mentality of the people. . . . From the moment he arrived, he traveled all over America, talking to everyone: taxi drivers, van drivers, garage hands, shop assistants, bar-tenders and their customers. (Eisner 1976, p. 161)

*Fury* therefore is a film made in America, set in America, conceived to be about America's people, laws, and society, but envisioned by an Austrian immigrant who had been in America less than a year and was less than fluent in English. In this paper, I'll consider the major themes that the immigrant Fritz Lang stressed in his depiction of America in the film *Fury*. I'll also consider *Fury* as *film noir*.

### *Fury*

The cornerstone of Fritz Lang's Hollywood career is *Fury*, his first realized production for MGM—his first American picture. (McGilligan 1997, p. 219)

*The Source.* The inspiration for *Fury* was the kidnapping, murder, and lynching that took place in San Jose, California, in 1933. The most widely accepted version of *The Story* is as follows. On November 9, 1933, Brooke Hart, the twenty-two-year-old son of Alex Hart, the wealthy and influential San Jose owner of the Brookhart Department Store, was kidnapped by two men.<sup>(2)</sup> These men, gas station attendant Thomas Harold Thurmund and unemployed salesman Jack Holmes, took Brooke Hart to the San Mateo-Hayward Bridge, struck him in the head with a concrete block, and threw his body into San Francisco Bay. Due to low tide, the water under the bridge was shallow, so they shot Hart to insure his death. In spite of the fact that Hart was dead, they sent a series of ransom notes demanding \$40,000 over the next six days. On November 15, at about 8 p.m., San Jose sheriff William Emig arrested Thurmund in a parking garage near a phone booth a mere 150 feet from the San Jose Police Station. By 3 a.m. Thurmund had signed a confession to the kidnapping and murder. He identified his accomplice in the kidnapping-murder as Jack Holmes, who was subsequently arrested at 3:30 a.m. in his room at the California Hotel, which was within walking distance of the police station.

The crime of Holmes and Thurmund, neither of whom had been in trouble before, was incredibly brutal and incredibly stupid. Their bumbling execution of the atrocity verged on the comic. And they could have chosen no victim whose popularity and place in the community would more surely guarantee the violent retribution that followed. (Farrell 1992, p. x)

Inflamed by media reports, events over the next twelve days led inexorably to violence. First, there were reports that Holmes's and Thurmund's confessions were directed against each other and therefore, in effect, cancelled each other out. Further, it was reported that Holmes

and Thurmond had met with psychiatrists to explore the possibility of pleading not guilty by reason of insanity. As a volatile mob continued to form outside the jail where the alleged kidnapers were being held, both Sheriff Emig and Jack Holmes's attorney asked California governor Rolph to call out the National Guard to prevent a lynching. The governor refused and reportedly retorted that he would "pardon the lynchers". Finally, on Sunday, November 26, two duck hunters found a badly decomposed body a mile south of the San Mateo-Hayward Bridge. The body was identified as that of Brooke Hart.

After the discovery of Hart's body, radio stations in northern California issued announcements that a lynching would take place that evening in St. James Park in San Jose. The mob outside the jail continued to grow until—

By midnight, November 27, thousands had gathered outside the jail, while the sheriff's deputies fired tear gas into the crowd in an attempt to disperse them. However, the crowd became angrier and larger. The nearby construction site at the post office . . . was raided for materials to make a battering ram. Emig ordered his officers to abandon the bottom two floors of the jail, where Thurmond and Holmes were being held. The mob, by this time estimated at 6,000-10,000 (other reports are of 3,000-5,000), stormed the jail, took Holmes and Thurmond across the street to St. James Park, and hanged them. ("Brooke Hart", 2011)

Although many in California, the nation, and the world condemned the lynching, only seven involved in the lynching were ever arrested, and none of these was convicted of a crime.

These events spawned a multitude of books and films, both fiction and nonfiction. In order of appearance, they were as follows:

- 1) *Fury* (1936): Fritz Lang's film based loosely on the events,
- 2) *The Condemned* (1947): a fictionalized version in novel form,
- 3) *The Sound of Fury* (1950): a fictionalized film that was largely faithful to the best-known version of the 1933 events,
- 4) *Ministers of Vengeance* (1964): the second novel to appear,
- 5) *Swift Justice* (1992): a nonfiction book about the kidnapping, murder, and lynching,
- 6) *Night Without Justice* (2004): a twenty-minute film documentary, and
- 7) *Valley of the Hearts Delight* (2006): the third fictionalized film version.

The remainder of this paper will center on Fritz Lang's 1936 film.

*The Story.* The opening credits of the movie *Fury* are accompanied by intense, dramatic music that segues into music that might be heard in any of dozens of romantic comedies churned out by Hollywood during the 1930s. We are presented with Chicago showroom window displays in a wedding and newlywed motif. Katherine and Joe stand in front of the "his and hers" bedroom reaffirming their commitment to each other with banter about "moving in." It's soon clear that they are deeply in love and plan to marry, but it's also clear that they don't have enough money to marry. It turns out that in order for them to save up enough money, Katherine is going to California where she has found a better job. Joe will remain in Chicago. As the film opens, Joe is accompanying her to the train station.

On the way to the train, three minor events occur that become important later. First, Joe takes some peanuts from his pocket and eats them. We learn that it is his habit to keep some in his coat pocket. Second, Joe buys Katherine a gift and gives it to her saying, "I got you a little memento." It's one of his idiosyncrasies to use the word 'memento' for 'memento'. Finally, Katherine gives Joe a gold ring inscribed "Katherine to Joe".

On the way home to the apartment he shares with his younger brothers Charlie and Tom, Joe picks up a stray dog. Charlie and Tom have gone to a movie and arrive at the apartment soon after Joe. It seems that Charlie, who is apparently working for some smalltime criminal named Donelli, has managed to get Tom drunk. Joe is very protective of Tom and admonishes Charlie for both his bad influence on Tom and the bad company he keeps.

The opening scenes are crucial in that they establish Joe as a kind, hardworking man who has faith in the basic goodness of man and optimism for the future.

The Story fast-forwards through the next year in a series of letters from Joe to Katherine. Katherine lives in California and works as a teacher, while Joe stays in Chicago. At first Joe works in a factory, but he has trouble saving money. Through Joe's influence, though, Charlie stops working for the gangster, and when all three brothers go into business together to run a gas station, the money begins to roll in. Finally, after more than a year, Joe buys a car and sets out to California to marry Katherine.

Within a few miles of his appointed meeting place with Katherine, Joe is stopped at a

roadblock and taken to the county jail in Strand for questioning. It turns out that a girl has been kidnapped by three men and a woman, and Joe fits the general description of one of the men. In addition, the ransom note sent by the kidnapers had traces of salted peanuts, and Joe, as usual, has peanuts in his coat pocket. The most damning evidence, however, is that Joe is carrying a five dollar bill with the serial number on one of the bills used to pay the ransom. Joe asserts that he must have gotten the bill in change, but Sheriff Hummel decides to hold him over for the district attorney.

Thanks to one of the sheriff's deputies, Bugs Meyers, news of Joe's arrest spreads throughout the town like a contagion. The news grows and morphs as it gets farther from the source: "My wife's sister called up and told her that a friend of hers told her that this guy acted as cocky as a bronco." Incensed 'citizens' (some of whom have had trouble with the law themselves) go to the jail to demand the latest news from the sheriff. Most of them are already convinced of Joe's guilt. As one gossip intones, "My dear young woman, in this country people don't land in jail unless they're guilty!" Throughout the afternoon excitement and anger continue to grow. Fearing the worst, Sheriff Hummel calls the governor to ask for help. The governor promises to mobilize the National Guard.

Late in the afternoon, fueled by liquor, rumors, and righteous indignation, a mob marches out of a bar headed for the jail. The mob grows larger and larger and seems to be in an almost festive mood as it approaches the jail. At the jail, the crowd is met by the sheriff and his deputies. One of the mob leaders demands to talk with Joe. The sheriff ignores their request and tries to persuade the mob to disperse, telling them that the National Guard is on its way. (The sheriff doesn't know that the governor has bowed to political pressure and rescinded his order mobilizing the Guard.) When someone throws a tomato at the sheriff, a riot starts.

Meanwhile, at the diner where Katherine is waiting for Joe, some newsmen pass by asking how to get to Strand. They let drop that a guy named Joe Wilson has been arrested for the kidnapping and is being held at the jail in Strand. When the newsmen arrive in Strand, they set up their cameras to film the riot. When Katherine finally gets to Strand it's just in time to see Joe's panicked face in his cell window as the jail is going up in flames. Katherine faints. When a young boy runs up shouting, "The soldiers are coming!"<sup>(3)</sup> the mob begins to disperse, but not before two men toss dynamite into the burning jail. A loud explosion is heard.

The next day's papers carry both the news of Joe's presumed death in the fire and the capture of the real kidnappers. Back in Chicago, Joe's brothers are surprised when Joe returns with injuries from the fire but still alive. The explosion had destroyed his cell wall so that he was able to escape undetected by climbing down a drainpipe.

Joe is a completely changed man driven solely by a lust for revenge. He has found that there is a law that states that anyone who is found guilty of participating in a lynching that results in death can be put to death. It's Joe's plan to have his brothers pressure the district attorney who has jurisdiction over the case to bring the lynchers to trial. Joe also insists that his brothers not tell Katherine that he is alive because he wants her to be convincing when she's called upon to testify in court.

The trial opens with twenty-two citizens of Strand charged with the death of Joe Wilson. The trial hinges on three issues. First, it must be proven that those being charged actually did take part in the lynching. At first this seems to be problematic as townspeople testify to provide alibis for the whereabouts of those charged. These alibis are demolished, however, when the district attorney enters into evidence newsreel footage taken at the riot. The footage clearly shows the accused participating in the riot.<sup>(4)</sup> Second, it must be proven that Joe was actually in the jail when it burned. Katherine's testimony serves to prove this. The final issue, however, is more difficult: without a body, how can it be proven that Joe actually died? According to the defense attorney, "The law is that the *corpus delicti* must be established at least by fragments of the human body or of articles known and proved to have been worn by the deceased." This too is testified to by Katherine when she identifies the half-melted ring she had given to Joe.

When Joe had heard the defense attorney's demand to prove that he had died, Joe had sent the ring to the judge with an anonymous letter supposedly from a citizen of Strand who had found the ring during the cleanup after the fire and explosion. With Katherine's testimony Joe's death was legally proven to the court, but inadvertently Joe proved to Katherine that he was alive when he used the word "mementum" instead of "memento" in the letter sent to the judge. Katherine follows Charlie and Tom and confronts Joe. She finds him a completely embittered man, consumed by his obsession for revenge. She pleads with him to go to the judge and tell the truth, saying that the defendants had suffered enough. Joe refuses to listen to her and continues to rant about his suffering and how the would-be lynchers must pay. Kathryn says that the Joe that she had known had died in the fire. She ends by saying, "I

can't help thinking we'd all be better off if you hadn't escaped from that jail."

Joe storms out of the apartment to go "celebrate alone". As he walks the city streets, he comes upon a display window in a department store. A sign in the window reads "For the Newlyweds", and behind the sign is a bedroom almost identical to the one at the opening of the film. As he looks through the window, he imagines he hears Katherine's voice. He wanders into a bar and the number "22" on a calendar reminds him of the 22 people who stand accused of killing him. A flower shop makes him think of flowers for the dead—those 22 soon-to-be-convicted people. He runs back to his apartment as though pursued by the ghosts of those people.

On the next morning, as the verdict is being read in court, Joe enters the courtroom and walks up to the judge:

**Joe :** "I know that by coming here I saved the lives of these 22 people. But that isn't why I'm here. I don't care anything about saving them. They're murderers. I know the law says they're not because I'm still alive. But that's not their fault. And the law doesn't know that a lot of things that were very important to me—silly things, maybe, like a belief in justice, and an idea that men were civilized and a feeling of pride that this country of mine was different from all others—the law doesn't know those things were burned to death within me that night. I came here today for my own sake. I couldn't stand it anymore. I couldn't stop thinking about them with every step and every breath I took."

*Themes.* The themes Fritz Lang deals with in *Fury* fall into three broad categories: social, psychological, and 'cosmic', although there is inevitable overlap and interplay among these categories. The main social themes are mob violence, the meaning of justice, and capital punishment. The psychological themes are individual responsibility and obsession. (In *Fury* the main obsession is an obsession for revenge.) The 'cosmic' category involves destiny and the unfairness/indifference of the universe.

As mentioned above, there are three principal social themes considered in *Fury*: mob violence, justice, and capital punishment. Lang presents these three as a closely interwoven set. A mob tries to mete out its own version of justice by lynching<sup>(5)</sup> Joe for his supposed part in the kidnapping of a young girl. This irrational mob justice is then contrasted to the

slow, deliberate, methodical justice of the judicial system. It's clear that Lang considers the latter preferable to the former, but what doesn't come through so clearly is that Lang actually envisioned *Fury* as a film against capital punishment. This message becomes somewhat muddled by the fact that there is never any actual capital crime in the film.

The psychological themes flow out of the social themes. First of all, to what extent are we responsible for our own actions? Lang suggests a mob is a particularly frightening thing because when someone becomes part of a mob that person surrenders his/her individual responsibility to the mob:

Masses lose conscience when they are together; they become a mob and they have no personal conscience any more. Things that happen during a riot are the expression of a mass feeling; they are no longer the feeling of individuals. (Bogdanovich 1967, p. 31)

The second psychological aspect that Lang addresses is obsession—in particular, Joe's obsession for revenge. For Lang, obsession in an individual is the analog to mob mentality in a mob. Both of these are destructive forces: obsession destroys an individual's psychological balance and mob violence destroys a society's structure and balance.

Finally, there are the 'cosmic' considerations: destiny and unfairness/indifference of the universe. In simplistic terms, Joe was destined by an indifferent/unfair universe to suffer a fate he didn't deserve.

*Fury* as *Film Noir*. Even though most critics define the classic *film noir* period as stretching from *The Maltese Falcon* in 1941 till *Touch of Evil* in 1958, I've mentioned already that some actually consider Lang's 1931 film *M* to be the beginning of this cinematic genre.<sup>(6)</sup> Made five years after *M*, *Fury* too has many elements that would lead one to classify it as *film noir*.

In brief, there are six major representative features that define *film noir*, although it's not necessary to have all of the elements to classify a film as *film noir*. Here is a list of these elements with comments as to their presence in *Fury*. (The original list is taken from Smith 1995, p. 30-32.)

**Cinematic Technique :** *Film noir* used camera and lighting to establish and maintain

the mood of a film. Shots from disorienting angles reinforced the psychological imbalance of the characters. Shots from above the characters underscored their insignificance, their subjugation to fate. Close-ups of characters implied restriction. Lighting stressed shadows — especially shadows cast in the shape of jail bars — providing a sense of uneasiness, uncertainty, confinement and doom. Mirrors were often employed to indicate a person's dual nature or the conflicting tendencies within him/her.

*Fury* is filled with many examples of disorienting angles: camera shots from above, camera shots from below, Dutch angles, etc. Shadows of bars are ever present in the film. The faces of rioters are often shot with lighting from below, giving them an evil, maniacal appearance.

**Setting :** . . . [T]he general setting for most *film noirs* was the modern city. This city was usually dark, impersonal, and menacing, with lots of concrete, confining walls, shadows and rain. This was the general setting, but much of *film noir* was actually shot indoors showing confining interiors intersected with shadows. Stairs were used either to show superior-inferior relationships or to imply psychological imbalance.

The city of Strand on the night of the lynching is a typical *noir* city. The jail interior is a perfect example of a shadow delineated menacing interior.

**Narrative Techniques :** Narrative techniques fall into three general categories: [1] the language used, [2] the viewpoint adopted, and [3] the timeline followed. . . . [T]he language used in *film noir* tended to be terse, earthy, and full of banter. *The Story* was usually told from the limited standpoint of the protagonist rather than from an all-seeing third person outlook, often using the voice-over narration of the hero. Finally, while *The Story* sometimes flowed in a simple, straight path from the present into the future, the timeline often wound through a series of flashbacks that gradually brought *The Story* up to the present.

Fritz Lang told the *Story* in a largely matter-of-fact way. In fact, he requested that his cameraman film as though it were a newsreel, "Because I think every serious picture that depicts people today should be a kind of documentary of its time." (Bogdanovich 1967, p. 19) Much of the dialogue of the film follows this pseudo-documentary style.

**Plot Line :** There were several common plot patterns in *film noir*. In each of them

the hero would inevitably become entangled in some kind of treachery or grief while pursuing his goal, but the plot would vary depending on the goal. In the first plot pattern, the hero tried to discover the identity of a murderer or the answer to some mystery. The key distinction of this plot variation was that the hero was not initially directly involved with the crime or mystery: he was an outside agent. In another kind of plot, the hero/victim would try to extricate himself from some difficult, compromising, or criminal situation. In this kind of story, the hero was not a bystander but rather a vitally concerned party. The third common plot variation was similar to the second, but it was such a common pattern that I think it should be treated separately. In this plot pattern the hero/victim attempted to make up for, escape from, or rectify something from his past. Often *film noir* plots contained elements from more than one of these patterns.

The plot of *Fury* is driven in turn by two different goals that the hero (Joe) is trying to attain. The first half of *Fury* provides an almost textbook example of a hero becoming entangled by events from which he tries to extricate himself to reach his goal (marrying Katherine). In the second half of the film, the goal changes from marrying Katherine to getting revenge.

**Worldview :** To say that *film noir* had a pessimistic view of life would be a gross understatement. As mentioned earlier, happy endings were rare. The world was generally dark and threatening, with traps and pitfalls for even the best of men. Even the best of men had their 'tragic flaws.' In fact, it was a common theme — harking back to Freud — that the roots of our doom lay within us. Again and again in *film noir*, men stumbled because they gave in to some inner compulsion: it was sometimes greed and sometimes sexual attraction to a *femme fatale*. Whatever it was, it was irresistible and inescapable: it was fate.

The worldview described above is a perfect fit for *Fury*. Joe's 'tragic flaw' is his lust for revenge. At the end of the film, although he seems to be reunited with Katherine, his beliefs in justice and the basic goodness of man have been shattered. This is far from a happy ending.

**Character Types :** There were several recurring character types in *film noir*, and films often revolved around their relationships. The three main types were [1] (male) hero, [2] *femme fatale*, and [3] domestic woman. The hero could be a seeker of the

truth, a victim trying to escape some terrible fate, or a combination of the two. The *femme fatale* was typically a sexually provocative 'woman with a past.' The domestic woman was a steadfast, supportive invitation to a 'normal' family life. The hero's fate was typically determined by whether, in the end, he chose (or couldn't escape from) the *femme fatale* and was destroyed — or chose the domestic woman and was 'saved.'

In this film, we can easily recognize the hero and the domestic woman. I would argue, however, that the *femme fatale* is present in nonhuman form: it is the revenge that Joe lusts for just as he might lust for a woman.

### Conclusion

*Fury*, Fritz Lang's first film in America, is interesting and rewarding on several levels. First of all, it presents us with an outsider's view of American society and Americans. Second, it delves into various social, psychological and 'cosmic' themes. Finally, it offers us one of the earliest examples of *film noir*.

### [Notes]

- (1) Although he was never devout, Catholic imagery can be found in some of his films.
- (2) Some witnesses reported that they saw Brooke Hart in the company of five kidnapers. While their story has never been corroborated, some people doubt to this day that Thurmond and Holmes were the only ones involved in the kidnapping.
- (3) It's not actually clear in the movie if the governor did send troops after all.
- (4) When this film was made, there was no precedent for using newsreel footage as evidence in a trial in the United States.
- (5) Of course, lynching is just the mob version of capital punishment.
- (6) Even today, there is great controversy concerning whether to call *film noir* a genre or a style or something else. For the purpose of this paper, I'll refer to it as a genre.

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