

Spies / Spione

(1928, Fritz Lang, Germany)

Component 2: Global Filmmaking Perspectives (AL)

Core Study Areas: Key Elements of Film Form Meaning & Response The Contexts of Film

Specialist Study Area: Critical Debates (AL)

Rationale for study

- Fritz Lang's *Spies* is the film that established the model for the recurrent themes of the spy/action genre: surveillance, disguise, mystery, intrigue, suspense and sex. The hugely enjoyable action unfolds in a series of extraordinary images featuring characters that are not always what they seem.

STARTING POINTS - Useful Sequences and timings/links

- Opening titles 'Throughout the world strange things happen' 0:0:57 - 0:01:55
- 'Nothing is to deter a man from the path of duty – not even a woman' Dr. Masimoto 1:06:54 - 1.15.41

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

Cinematography

- Cinematographer Fritz Arno Wagner. Use of the close up to convey information, the film opens with a series of images of theft, mystery and communication: gloved hands opening a safe, hands putting a document into an envelope, motor cyclist in goggles in low angle shot, radio masts from a low

angle with signals radiating out followed by an abstract shot with circles radiating in.

- Tight composition of interiors, aware of off screen space but not always sure what is happening.
- Light/dark interiors. Masimoto turns off the light as he leaves the room. Kitty in the background in darkness. He slides the door on his temptation and shuts himself in a light room.

Mise-en-Scène

- Art direction by Otto Hunte and Karl Vollbrecht establishes the mood of modernity. In the opening sequence cameras, telephones, radio masts, duplicating devices equipment used by spies; men frantically search through huge towers of files contrasting with the regulated space of the official in the imposing government building and Haghi's hi-tech desk. Masimoto's apartment is ordered; he sits upright in a single chair but Kitty lies on a couch against elaborately patterned cushions in a contrasting image of decadence.
- The women often wear revealing costumes. Kitty sits on Haghi's desk, her dress slipping off her shoulder; in Masimoto's apartment she is in a dressing gown that reveals her breasts.
- Props are vital as agents in the story: telephones communicate between characters, photographs link action, cigarettes are used to establish different characteristics. Items such as Sonia's medallion or 326's emptying whiskey bottle convey information.

Editing

- Opening montage sets the tone for the episodic nature of the narrative. Series of parallel linked actions – robbery, murder – ending with the introduction of Haghi. The intertitle 'Almighty God what power is at work here?' cuts to a close up of the controlling master criminal staring into the camera.
- Inserts can provide false information. When Masimoto finds Kitty cowering in the doorway

an insert shows a domestic setting with a man we suppose to be her father, beating an unseen victim with a whip. Cut to a slovenly older woman in a dressing gown sitting in a supposedly drunken stupor on the edge of a bed. But Kitty is a spy a “honey trap” sent by Haghi.

- To establish the debauchery of the Grand Bar we see images of a gramophone playing a record, hands hitting a table covered in debris and a woman’s legs performing a wild dance. The next shot is of the lower half of a woman seated on a man’s lap, his hand on her thigh. When we cut to the Bar, there does not appear to be anyone else there but the black barman. 326 drinks alone.

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS – Meaning & Response

Representations

- The men in *Spies* are in command although this can be undermined, made vulnerable by emotional weakness. Haghi holds the ultimate power through his control over both male and female characters through violence carried out by his henchmen and blackmail using information obtained through spying and other subversive means. When they fail, men sometimes kill themselves rather than submit –Colonel Jellusic, Doctor Masimoto and Haghi himself all commit suicide.
- Women use their sexuality to gain what appears to be power and exhibit a certain kind of liberation through their dress and action. This however is ultimately determined by the men who control them.
- The modern city is a setting for violence, deception, vice and paranoia. Huge impersonal buildings contain subversive hidden spaces. The Grand Bar is a place of drunkenness and despair, the streets are windswept and dark.

Aesthetics (i.e. the ‘look and feel’ of the film including visual style, influences, auteur, motifs)

- *Spies* followed *Dr Mabuse the Gambler* (1922) and *Metropolis* (1927), all written or partly written by Thea von Harbou, Lang’s wife at the time. Art directors Otto Hunte and Karl Vollbrecht worked on all 3 films. The central characters are controlling evil geniuses who operate from the underground networks beneath the modern city and are all played by Rudolph Klein-Rogge. *Metropolis* had

almost bankrupted the studio and *Spies* was to repair some of the financial damage by being shot on a much tighter budget. However the original *Spies* was nearly three hours long –popular storytelling on an epic scale.

- Lang’s visual style uses oblique shots, partial shots and close ups particularly of hands holding objects
- In *Spies*, Lang shows the influence of the popular detective/criminal serial such as Louis Feuillade’s *Judex* (1916) in its subject matter and its episodic structure

CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS – Contexts

Social

- In 1924 the Dawes Plan to stabilise the German economy brought substantial American investment into Germany and ushered in American culture and American values with an emphasis on modernity and technological innovation. American companies were luring talent away from Germany to work in Hollywood.

Historical

- The Weimar Republic had replaced the Empire in 1919 after Germany’s defeat in World War I and the German Revolution of 1918-1919. In the mid 1920s there was a Centre Right coalition Government and a relatively stabilised currency

Political

- The political polarisation of the left and right were to culminate in the election of the National Socialists under Hitler in 1933.

Technological

- Germans were among the inventors and pioneers in photographic technology, film-makers were keen to experiment with the cinema as a medium.

Institutional

- The German film industry had to organise itself in the face of huge competition from Hollywood. By the mid 1920s UFA (Universum Film Aktiengesellschaft) provided competition to major Hollywood studios because of its modern studio, elaborate distribution/exhibition networks and huge financial backing. Its trademark style was innovative set design and technical expertise securing the international market through

prestige productions with creative production teams given freedom and scope to experiment.

SPECIALIST STUDY AREA: Realism & Expressionism - STARTING POINTS

- After World War 1, German artists were attracted to work in the cinema, which they perceived as an intellectually exciting medium. From 1918 to 1928 Berlin was the cultural centre for the European *avant-garde* in art, drama and music and some films enjoyed the status of distinctive works of art. The artistic movement they contributed to was German Expressionism which represented internal conflicts by projecting them onto an external world through stylised décor, lighting, acting/gesture, making it appear strange and distorted.
- The *Kino* Debate examined the status of cinema among the arts. Film production in Hollywood was regarded as an industry, whose task was to produce entertainment, not art. In order to be given artistic status, German films had to differentiate themselves from those produced in Hollywood. German directors were seen as independent artists, as *auteurs*, and the highly stylised nature of the films, especially in cinematography and set design, set them apart from other 'commercial' products. At the same time it enlarged the audience by attempting to overcome the prejudices of the middle classes towards cinema.
- From the mid 1920s Expressionism had transformed from the *avant-garde* to a popular and accepted mode of representation. It was superseded by The New Objectivity (*Der Neue Sachlichkeit*) a 'realist' movement that dealt with the actuality of economic, social and political change in Germany and was contemporary with Art Deco. *Spies* lies somewhere between the two styles, with its clear geometric compositions representing control and its distorted angles and dramatic lighting signifying states of emotion.