

Themes in Fritz Lang's Films

Corruption

Destiny. The main setting is the 19th Century town of the framing tale—and the town's social dynamics are outlined swiftly. The local elites—mayor, priest, schoolmaster, notary, physician—are simpletons who are not capable of understanding the significance of the presence of the Weary Death. Some of the same characters appear in the town council's meeting about the sale of a strip of land to the Weary Death. The council is reluctant to sell the lot adjacent to the cemetery—but plentiful gold coins generously offered by the Weary Death easily persuade its members. Overall, the local leaders appear to be weak, uncomprehending and greedy. Such characterization could have been intended to allude to the institutions of the Weimar Republic.

The Woman in the Window. Heidt—"a known crook with a blackmailing record"—is a former police detective. He is the bodyguard of Claude Mazard, "the founder of the fabulous public utilities empire of World Enterprises Incorporated". Why was Heidt chosen to protect Mazard? "Don't ask me why Wall Street geniuses do anything" the District Attorney Lalor sarcastically remarks. The questionably rich rubbing elbows with law enforcement would be a theme for Lang to explore in *The Big Heat*.

Rancho Notorious. Frenchy explains that he originally became an outlaw because of an injustice. "A bullet I put in a rancher, another man who had his own sheriff and cheated me out of a homestead". Dishonest officials are not a rarity in Lang's films and *Rancho Notorious* is no exception. When Vern arrives in Gunsight to hook up with him, Frenchy is in jail and an election is in progress. Vern gets himself detained to befriend Frenchy and subsequently leads their escape. The corrupt local politicians who also happen to be in custody ("you could bribe them with a rusty nail" Frenchy remarks) bribe the incumbent sheriff to let them out.

The Big Heat. Lagana represents a new breed of criminals who prefer to operate in the shades and take care to maintain a respectable façade. A police officer explains that "Mr. Lagana kind of runs things, I guess that's no secret". Bannion insinuates Lagana's connection to the murder of the would-be informant b-girl Lucy Chapman. He refers to her overtly violent murder as "prohibition style"—which outrages Lagana, who obviously doesn't want to be associated with the flashy mobsters of previous decades.