Review #70: Ministry of Fear (1944)

Ray Milland & Marjorie Reynolds

TRAILER

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ga9QishZc5Y



Graham Greene's *Ministry of Fear*, adapted by Fritz Lang, takes place in a setting similar to *Man Hunt*, but the mood has changed entirely. Instead of a fearless adventurer, the hero is a neurotic nursing a guilt complex and ensnared in a shadowy conspiracy.



Newly released from an asylum, Stephen Neale (Ray Milland) wins a prize cake at an English country fair, only to find that the staff intended it to be won instead by a mysterious Mr. Cost (Dan Duryea). When his train is stopped by an air raid, a blind man steals the cake, but is blown up by Nazi bombs.

Motivated to make sense of the mystery, Neale contacts the war relief charity that sponsored the country fair and meets its charming organizers, Austrian refugees Willi and Carla Hilfe (Marjorie Reynolds). Stephen and Willi attend a séance given by Mrs. Bellane (Hillary Brooke). More than one person from the fun-fair attends, along with noted anti-Nazi author J.M. Forrester (Alan Napier). The mysterious Mr. Cost shows up at the last minute, and when the room goes dark he is shot dead. Suspected as the murderer, Stephen goes on the run pursued by a strange man with a nail file (Percy Waram). The private detective he had hired, George Rennit (Erskine Sanford) is found dead, and suspicion falls on Neale once again. With both Scotland Yard and a nest of spies on his tail, Stephen can only turn to the sympathetic Carla and Willi. But are they part of the conspiracy as well?

REVIEW

Ministry of Fear is Fritz Lang's second and last film for Paramount: the film follows Lang's recipe for a spy show in the classic <u>Dr. Mabuse</u> tradition, including a murder at a clairvoyant's séance and more than one character with a double identity. The main change is that the emphasis is on the **luckless victim instead of an evil mastermind**. The basic novelty of the story at the time was the now-trite concept of a **helpless hero caught in an invisible conspiracy**, watching his options close as an unseen group of villains frames him for crimes and kills his friends. In 1944, this was still something of a novel approach. Graham Greene himself explained the differences between the book and the film, which downplayed the Neale character's neuroses for instance. In the book, Neale suffers a real **nervous breakdown**.



He even fears that the web of spies may be a **paranoid delusion**. But the film is told straight, and its hero is **perplexed but reasonable**. The script imposes a battery of **breathtaking visuals to stress the character's anxiety** such as ticking clocks and an emphasis on strange objects like that mystery cake.

The best depiction of psychological distress is a key image where Neale waits in a tailor's shop for what might be a murderous conspirator. Sitting in a medium shot, Neale observes the

room around him. We only see what's **reflected in a large mirror** behind him, but we can't tell what he's looking at. The image suggests a **psychic detachment from his environment,** an anxious, helpless isolation...

Ray Milland is his usual utterly charming and likeable self. Marjorie Reynolds is sweet but not to the heights Graham Green imagined, considering that she eventually takes the Langian 'blood revenge' role, as a sort of Kriemhild character but with a gun, not a sword. Hillary Brooke steeps every scene she's in with mystery as the sultry Mata Hari clairvoyant. Also wholly effective is the great and menacing Dan Duryea, who injects tension at one point just by toying with a large pair of tailor's scissors, disturbingly close to Stephen Neale's stomach. Fritz Lang must have been impressed with Duryea, for the actor won plum parts in Lang's next two movies, The Woman in the Window and Scarlet Street.



Although *Ministry of Fear* opens on Stephen's release from an asylum, it's the **lunacy of the real world** that gives this film the feel of some kind of a **bizarre dream**, or, perhaps more precisely, a nightmare. While the narrative may be a subdued and simplified version of Graham Greene's novel, the distortions typical of director Fritz Lang's distinctively **German expressionist style** complement and enhance the **sinister and twisted plot**. Exploring questions of **reality and false appearances**, this film both **visually enthralling and psychologically provoking**.

For instance, the **importance of a seemingly inconsequential event** such as the guess of the cake's weight is highlighted through **drastic change in the tone**. At first, the fair-goers are unrealistically cheery, their exaggerated jubilance giving the impression of an ideally harmonious community. They even let out a hearty cheer when Neale decides to take a second stab at the 'guess-the-weight' contest. But the mood turns unmistakably grim the moment he utters the correct number, revealed to him by the fortune teller in a nearby tent after his inadvertent use of a code phrase: 'Don't bother with the past — tell me about the future.' The people fall deadly silent as all eyes turn to Neale. Their extreme cheerfulness is replaced by **intense suspicion, a feeling that permeates the rest of this stark and grim film**.

Indeed, these watchful eyes elicit a paranoia that haunts our protagonist throughout his series of bizarre mishaps. Neale's enemy remains largely enigmatic, a generic antagonist consisting of some anonymous invincible power.

Pritz Lang actually enhances the nightmare by forcing the focus on the **absurd and erratic progression of the story** rather than on characters' psychological complexities. For example, when a random blind man (who isn't really blind) steals the cake and Neale inanely chases after him into the swampy wilderness amid falling bombs, or when the old woman telling fortunes at the fair (**Aminta Dyne**) turns into a femme fatale (**Hillary Brooke**) who hosts swanky séances, those discontinuities (which would in other films be characterized as deficiencies) are entirely appropriate for *Ministry of Fear* precisely because they break down reality and take us to a place where nothing makes sense, not unlike the world of a dream.

The nightmare is heightened by the film's stark visual quality. By using high-contrast shots depicting, for example, faces engulfed by darkness, lit only by the ghostly glow of a crystal ball, Lang reflects the kind of tunnel vision dreamers often experience as well as the intensity of dream imagery. Exaggerated objects, like the garishly large scissors the tailor uses when dialing a rotary phone, heighten the film's surreal quality, as do the visual distortions produced by sharp camera angles, such as the vertigo-inducing chase scene on a towering flight of stairs. Critics also applauded Lang's final trick shot, the striking visual of the bullet hole in a door. On a reasonably large theater screen, the shot really works: all is darkness except for this sudden round point of light.

For these reasons, *Ministry of Fear* is not only an excellent example of Lang's distinctive style, but it also very effectively evokes a sort of **unconscious unease**, pulling the viewer into a sort of dream state, into this twisted nightmare.

Neale's adventure takes an erratic and nightmarish course throughout the majority of the movie, but it is cleverly balanced with **light and cheery scenes** that stand in stark contrast. After a character is being forced to make a **grisly and deadly decision**, the abrupt shift to a light-hearted and sunny drive along the beach is **more than just shocking**. The final scene is nothing like the demented and darkly surreal stuff of the film, it is just dramatic. *Ministry of Fear*'s presentation of reality is therefore constantly called into question, and, by sucking the viewer into its unstable dream-world, this fine film provokes a consideration of **psychological and metaphysical realities**. +++