# Spione review – Philip French on Fritz Lang’s groundbreaking spy thriller – The Guardian – 7/12/14

**R**eeling from the box-office disaster of his monumental science-fiction movie [*Metropolis*](https://www.theguardian.com/film/metropolis), Fritz Lang was still contracted to Berlin’s UFA studio, whose bosses now demanded a cheaper surefire success in the crowd-pleasing style of his early thrillers. The result was *Spione* (aka Spies), which circulated in severely truncated versions until 2006, when the German restorers drew on a variety of prints to bring it back to the original three-hour duration. Until then it was regarded as a minor work that Lang would invariably refer to as “a small film with a lot of action”. In fact, *Spione*weaves together recurrent Lang themes of fate, fear, power and paranoia into a dynamic conspiracy thriller that taps into the underlying tensions of Weimar Germany and presents the modern city as at once liberating and frightening.

The movie’s narrative origins reside in the Louis Feuillade French serials much admired by the surrealists and centres on the megalomaniac schemes of Haghi (Rudolf Klein-Rogge, Lang’s regular villain in *Metropolis* and the *Dr Mabuse*films), a master criminal with many faces. He controls his empire from a wheelchair in a secret headquarters beneath a bank and anticipates both Bond’s enemies and Kubrick’s [*Dr Strangelove*](https://www.theguardian.com/film/dr-strangelove). Haghi’s nemesis is the suave government secret agent No 326 (debonair German matinee idol Willy Fritsch), who falls in love with the former Russian spy Sonja (Gerda Maurus), one of Haghi’s accomplices.

The McGuffin that Haghi seeks is a secret treaty with the Japanese, just one of numerous items Hitchcock borrowed from Lang during the following decade. A hectic car chase begins with a train crash and ends in a shootout in a luxury hotel. Three key dramatic strands culminate in suicide. There are references to recent political scandals (Colonel Redl’s treachery in Vienna, the Arcos incident involving Soviet spies in Britain, the assassination of Walther Rathenau, the German foreign minister). “Almighty God!” shrieks one senior police official. “What fiend is behind all this?” The action is endlessly inventive, the eroticism still powerful. While many aspects have since become genre cliches, the film’s editing and dramatic use of space remain astonishing. This masterwork is accompanied by a 70-minute documentary that puts it in the context of its time and Lang’s oeuvre.