# Spione review – Keith Ulich on Fritz Lang’s spy thriller – Slant Website – 28/01/05

Spies opens in an orgy of excess, the visceral excitement of on-screen chaos and death paralleling the anything-goes headiness of Weimar-era Germany. While banks are robbed and bureaucrats are assassinated, the pencil-pushing working classes bug their eyes and rip out their hair (as only German silent-film characters can) amid stacks of paperwork—piled floor-to-ceiling—that topple at the lightest touch. A drive-by shooting occurs so suddenly it is nearly subliminal—even now, nearly eight decades after the film was made, the audience gasps for breath. Immersed in the rush of violence and intrigue we may miss that split-second when a bullet breaks through an embassy window, silencing its target (the first of the film’s many spies) with brutal efficiency. And in this most confusing of moments, as one character’s query (“Who is responsible?”) becomes ours, an answer comes in the form of a mocking, declarative intertitle: “I!”

This is the Fritz Lang method: pose a question, then answer it, though never in any sort of predictable rhythm. His best narratives masterfully interweave and overlap with a Teutonic precision that befits the oft-recalled image of the director as a perfectly poised, monocled tyrant, cracking a horsewhip in time with the slavish, synchronized movements of hundreds of extras. Yet Lang’s is also a messily emotional cinema, obsessed with parallel love themes for women and for country. As Spies’ conflicted operative Sonia, the luminous Gerda Maurus (with whom Lang, then involved with scenarist Thea von Harbou, had a passionate affair) is perhaps the most complex of the director’s virginal leading ladies, caught in this film and the subsequent Woman in the Moon at an ineffable, metaphysical divide between younger and elder womanhood. The Madonna and child medallion Sonia gifts to her enemy-in-trade—later lover—no. 326 (Willy Fritsch) hints at the perverse mixture of spirit-/sex-uality inherent to Lang’s female characters, mothers and whores all, but never to reductive detriment. Indeed, the tender way in which Lang offers the villainous spy-in-training Kitty (Lien Deyers) with a parodic past-from-hell straight out of Griffith’s [Broken Blossoms](https://www.slantmagazine.com/film/review/broken-blossoms) reveals his admiration for the fairer sex’s many machinations, be they of loving or cold-blooded intent.

Sacrifice is a concept alien to Lang’s women—they are survivalists and/or ethereal beauties, possessing the entrancing temptations of Greek sirens. They cackle from a burning funeral pyre or gaze down upon their wounded men like Mother Mary frozen in a pietà close-up. The men of Spies find their salvation and/or doom in these women: In the case of the Austrian agent Colonel Jellusic (Fritz Rasp), the lack of a literal female counterpart seems a prompt for the first of the film’s four suicides—revealed as a traitor he is forced to kill himself for a clearly patriarchal fatherland. Elsewhere, the Japanese doctor Matsumoto (Lupu Pick), seduced by the aptly named Kitty into giving up an essential peace treaty, is haunted by the memories of his deceased countrymen and comrades. This leads to an extended hara-kiri sequence, set in a minimalist temple before a stoic stone Buddha, which acts as a provocative companion piece to Jellusic’s quick, implicative death scene and further illustrates Lang’s facility in juxtaposing various narrative incidents for maximum profundity.

And what of the “I”? The duplicitous master-of-disguise Haghi (Rudolf Klein-Rogge), the puppet master of the piece? An early blackmail-in-miniature of the opium-smoking socialite Lady Leslane (Hertha von Walther) humorously reveals Haghi’s singular loyalty (“I’m richer than Ford, Lady Leslane, and I pay significantly less in taxes”) and foreshadows his tempestuous relations with Sonia, who slowly tears herself away from his increasingly misguided affections. Like many a Lang mastermind, Haghi must be ruler of all he surveys, his anxiety of influence exemplified by Spies’ third suicide wherein a lowly Haghi henchman, trapped by the police, swallows a cyanide capsule and calmly awaits the inevitable.

Haghi is a more streamlined (one might argue more courageous) version of that seminal Lang/Klein-Rogge creation, Dr. Mabuse, though where the latter descends into the survivalist comforts of madness, Haghi, quite sanely, makes a sacrificial political statement before a theater full of less-than-discreetly charmed bourgeoisie. Lang is thought of by some as a prognosticator of Germany’s fall into Nazism, and the confrontational ending of Spies (which ranks, in this critic’s opinion, as one of the greatest finales in cinema history) supports such a reading, a satirical suicide sequence filled with such audacious vigor and vitriol that—much like the film’s on-screen audience—one can’t help but to laugh with and applaud, even as a sobering sense of historical reality (in the proscenium-appropriate form of a theater curtain) comes crashing violently down.