



FRITZ LANG'S DESTINY

(DER MÜDE TOD)

Official Selection, 2016 Berlinale Film Festival

1921 / Germany / 98 min. / Color Tinted / Not Rated

Digitally restored 2016 version in 2K DCP

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Short Synopsis:

A young woman (Lil Dagover) confronts the personification of Death (Bernhard Goetzke), in an effort to save the life of her fiancé (Walter Janssen). Death weaves three romantic tragedies and offers to unite the girl with her lover, if she can prevent the death of the lovers in at least one of the episodes. Thus begin three exotic scenarios of ill-fated love, in which the woman must somehow reverse the course of destiny: Persia, Quattrocento Venice, and a fancifully rendered ancient China.

Long Synopsis:

A cloaked figure (Bernhard Goetzke) materializes on the side of a country road and boards a carriage occupied by a pair of young lovers (Lil Dagover, Walter Janssen). A flashback reveals that this mysterious figure had obtained a plot of property adjoining the local cemetery—a plot of land surrounded by high walls—walls without window or gate—at which he stands as a sentinel.

After arriving at a quaint village, the lovers drink a traditional toast to their relationship, but the specter of death emerges (a drinking glass transforms into an hourglass, alongside which is the shadow of the stranger's walking stick, capped by the figure of a skeleton). Soon thereafter, the young woman learns that her fiancé has been taken away by the stranger, who is now quite apparently the personification of death. As night falls, the young woman leaves the village and wanders to the stranger's property, where she beholds wandering spirits who march silently through its walls.

The young woman is discovered by a man (Karl Platen) gathering roots for his apothecary, and she obtains from him a vial of poison so that she may drink it and be reunited with her lover. At the moment of ingesting the poison, the woman is transported to Death's fortress, and is able to enter via a narrow Gothic-arched portal. There on an enormous staircase, she confronts Death and asks to join her fiancé. He takes her to a cavernous chamber filled with burning candles and explains to her that each candle represents a life, and that death occurs when one is extinguished. Death says to her, "I am weary of being the cause of people's suffering and of earning hatred for obeying the Lord."

He shows her three short candles, and promises to reunite her with her fiancé—if she can keep just one of the candles from going out.

There follows three sequences in which the woman must save her lover from death. First is a Persian tale, set in "The City of Believers" during Ramadan. When the young man (Janssen) is caught wooing the Caliph's sister (Dagover), he is condemned as an infidel and chased away. The sadistic Caliph (Eduard von Winterstein) lays a trap to catch the young man, and invites his sister to witness her lover's burial at the hands of the palace gardener (Goetzke).

The second episode occurs in Quattrocento Venice, where Girolamo, a swordsman for the Council of the Fourteen (Rudolf Klein-Rogge), jealously plots against his rival, Giovanfrancesco (Janssen), for the affection of Monna Fiametta (Dagover). At the Carnival, Giovanfrancesco and Fiametta are tricked into engaging in a sword fight (their identities concealed by masks). The young man is stabbed in the back by a Moor (Louis Brody) hiding in the shadows.

The third episode is a playful Chinese fantasy centered around the magician A Hi (Paul Biensfeldt). Via magic carpet, he takes his apprentice, Liang (Janssen), and the apprentice's beloved, Tiao Tsien (Dagover), to entertain the Emperor (Charles Puffy). But none of A Hi's conjurations can distract the Emperor's attention from Tiao Tsien, who demands she be given to him as a gift. The young woman realizes that A Hi's magic wand can be a handy means of escape, and she uses it to flee to the countryside. She transforms guards into swine, conjures an elephant to ride, summons demons of fire to block the path of her pursuers. But the Emperor still possesses an enchanted horse, and on it the Emperor's archer (Goetzke) flies to reach them.

The young man is killed a third and final time. The young woman has failed to protect him. Death compels the young woman to return to the land of the living but she insists on somehow redeeming her dead fiancé. Death offers to revive the young man if the woman will, within one hour, bring a life to exchange for his. She tries to convince others to sacrifice their lives—an old man, a hopeless beggar, a family mourning the death of a child—but they refuse. A fire breaks out in the village and, rather than allow people to die, the young woman alerts the inhabitants and saves them. Realizing there is an infant trapped inside—and that it represents the final opportunity to exchange a life for her lover's—the young woman reenters the burning building to retrieve it. But rather than hand it over to Death, she returns it to its mother.

Ultimately, the only life she can exchange is her own and, within the burning building, she comes face to face once again with Death. Having sacrificed herself to save the baby, the young woman is reunited with her dead fiancé, within the embrace of Death himself.

Director's Statement:

“The fight of the individual against destiny is probably the basis of all my films, the struggle of a primarily good human being against higher and superior forces, be it the power of a generally accepted social injustice, or the power of a corrupt organization, society or authority. Or be it the power of one's own conscious or subconscious drives.”
–Fritz Lang

About the Film:

This new 2K restoration of Fritz Lang's 1921 film *Destiny (Der müde Tod)* is a dizzying blend of German Romanticism, Orientalism, and Expressionism. Fritz Lang's *Destiny* marked a bold step for Lang, away from the conventional melodrama and into the kind of high-concept filmmaking that would culminate in such über-stylized works as *Die Nibelungen* and *Metropolis*.

Restored by Anke Wilkening on behalf of the Friedrich-Wilhelm-Murnau-Stiftung, this definitive presentation of *Destiny (Der müde Tod)* preserves the original German intertitles and simulates the historic color tinting and toning of its initial release. Accompanying the film is a newly-composed score by Cornelius Schwehr as a commissioned composition by ZDF / ARTE performed by the 70-member Berlin Rundfunk Symphony Orchestra under the direction of conductor Frank Strobel.

“In 1921 Fritz Lang set new standards with *Destiny (Der müde Tod)* and created a universally celebrated masterpiece of Weimar cinema”, says Ernst Szebedits, Chairman of the Friedrich-Wilhelm-Murnau-Stiftung. “For decades, the movie was only a shadow of its former self, because unfortunately no tinted copies from the 1920s had survived. Therefore, it is a great pleasure to introduce this outstanding movie from the Friedrich-Wilhelm-Murnau-Stiftung's archives in our 50th-anniversary year.”

“Kino Lorber is proud to continue its long association with the Friedrich-Wilhelm-Murnau-Stiftung, showcasing Lang's silent masterpieces in the best possible form,” says CEO Richard Lorber. “And now, with this highly-anticipated restoration, *Destiny* can finally take its rightful place alongside such films as *Metropolis*, *Spies*, *Woman in the Moon*, and *Dr. Mabuse*.”

Destiny (Der müde Tod) is a visually ambitious, cinematic allegory in which a young woman (Lil Dagover) confronts the personification of Death (Bernhard Goetzke), in an effort to save the life of her fiancé (Walter Janssen). Death weaves three romantic tragedies and offers to unite the girl with her lover, if she can prevent the death of the lovers in at least one of the episodes. Thus begin three exotic scenarios of ill-fated love, in which the woman must somehow reverse the course of destiny: Persia, Quattrocento Venice, and a fancifully rendered ancient China.

For Lang, *Der müde Tod* (literally, “The Weary Death,” so named because of the heavy heart of the reaper himself) was a milestone in his transition from a writer/director specializing in exotica—be it the adventure saga *The Spiders [Die Spinnen, 1919-1920]*

or the Orientalist drama *Harakiri* [1919]—into a filmmaker whose work explores deeper philosophical terrain. Likewise, with *Destiny* (*Der müde Tod*), Lang was granted the opportunity (by producer Erich Pommer) to work on a more broad canvas, and was provided the resources to direct more expensive and visually ambitious productions. This resulted in a series of masterworks that have come to represent the high watermarks of German silent cinema: *Dr. Mabuse: The Gambler* (*Dr. Mabuse der Spieler*, 1922), *Die Nibelungen* (1924), *Metropolis* (1927), *Spies* (1928), and *Woman in the Moon* (1929).

Destiny (*Der müde Tod*) is also significant as one of Lang's earliest collaborations with screenwriter and novelist Thea von Harbou (*Metropolis*), whom he would marry in 1922.

As Patrick McGilligan points out in his 1997 biography, *Fritz Lang: The Nature of the Beast*, *Destiny* (*Der müde Tod*) was produced shortly after the death of Lang's mother, and was rooted in Lang's personal psychology. "The director once said that the film was inspired by 'the childhood dream which most influenced my life and work'—which came to him 'on the threshold of boyhood and adolescence' as Lang lay in bed fighting a fever. He recalled envisioning the approach of 'the dark stranger' in a wide-brimmed hat, illuminated by the moonlight streaming in through a half-open window. 'I slept and dreamed—or was I awake?' He glimpsed 'the tear-stained face of my adored mother,' as she slipped from view. He raised himself up weakly, to be led away by Death. Helping hands grabbed him, pushed him down, saving him.

"The horror of the dream-experience combined with 'a kind of mystical ecstasy which gave me, boy though I still was, the complete understanding of the ecstasy which made martyrs and saints embrace Death.' Lang recovered, 'but the love of Death, compounded of horror and affection,' he said, 'stayed with me and became a part of my films.'"

Lang told interviewer Gene D. Phillips in 1975, "That was my first big success—but not right away. When it was first shown in Berlin the newspaper critics, for reasons that I have never been able to figure out, tried to kill the picture. One of them said the film made the viewer weary of watching it. After two weeks it was withdrawn from the cinemas in Berlin; but it went on to open to the most unbelievable reviews in Paris and elsewhere. One of the Paris critics said, 'This is the Germany that we once loved'—this was right after World War I, remember. Then the film was re-released in Germany and became a world success."

When it played in London in February, 1924, *The Spectator* called it "One of the most original and impressive films that have ever been made."

The influence of *Destiny* (*Der müde Tod*) was immediate and long-lasting. Paul Leni borrowed the three-act anthology structure (and the Baghdad setting) for his 1924 film *Waxworks* (*Wachsfigurenkabinett*). One finds shades of "The Weary Death" in Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Vampyr* (1932) and Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (1957).

American actor/producer Douglas Fairbanks saw the film and quickly purchased U.S. rights to the film, only to suppress it and use it as the template for his planned Arabian

Nights fantasy (though he borrowed more from the Chinese sequence of the film, rather than the Persian). Lang told Phillips, “Douglas Fairbanks, Sr. bought the American rights to the picture for \$5,000 but he had no intention of releasing it there. He liked the technical effects, and he had them copied for his famous film *The Thief of Bagdad*. Naturally, because he had more money and greater technical facilities at his disposal, he improved on the tricks and made them better than we were able to do.”

Fairbanks did eventually allow *Destiny (Der müde Tod)* to play in New York, under the title *Between Worlds*—in July, 1924, four months after the premiere of *The Thief of Bagdad*. As might be expected, Lang’s film was not compared favorably with Fairbanks’s. But a critic for *The New York Times* suspected that the film had been re-edited without the filmmaker’s involvement, noting that the “incoherent condition of the picture may have been accentuated by necessary cuts made in the production for presentation in America.”

Now, a full 95 years after the film’s original release, *Destiny (Der müde Tod)* has been restored, as accurately as possible, to the form in which the director intended it to be seen.

Credits:

Directed by...Fritz Lang

Produced by...Erich Pommer

Screenplay by...Fritz Lang and Thea von Harbou

Cinematography by...Erich Nitzschmann, Herrmann Saalfrank, Fritz Arno Wagner

Art Direction by...Robert Herlth, Walter Röhrig, Hermann Warm

Cast:

Bernhard Goetzke...Death

Lil Dagover...Young Woman

Walter Janssen...Young Man

Hans Sternberg...Mayor

Wilhelm Diegelmann...Doctor

Rudolf Klein Rogge...Derwisch / Girolamo