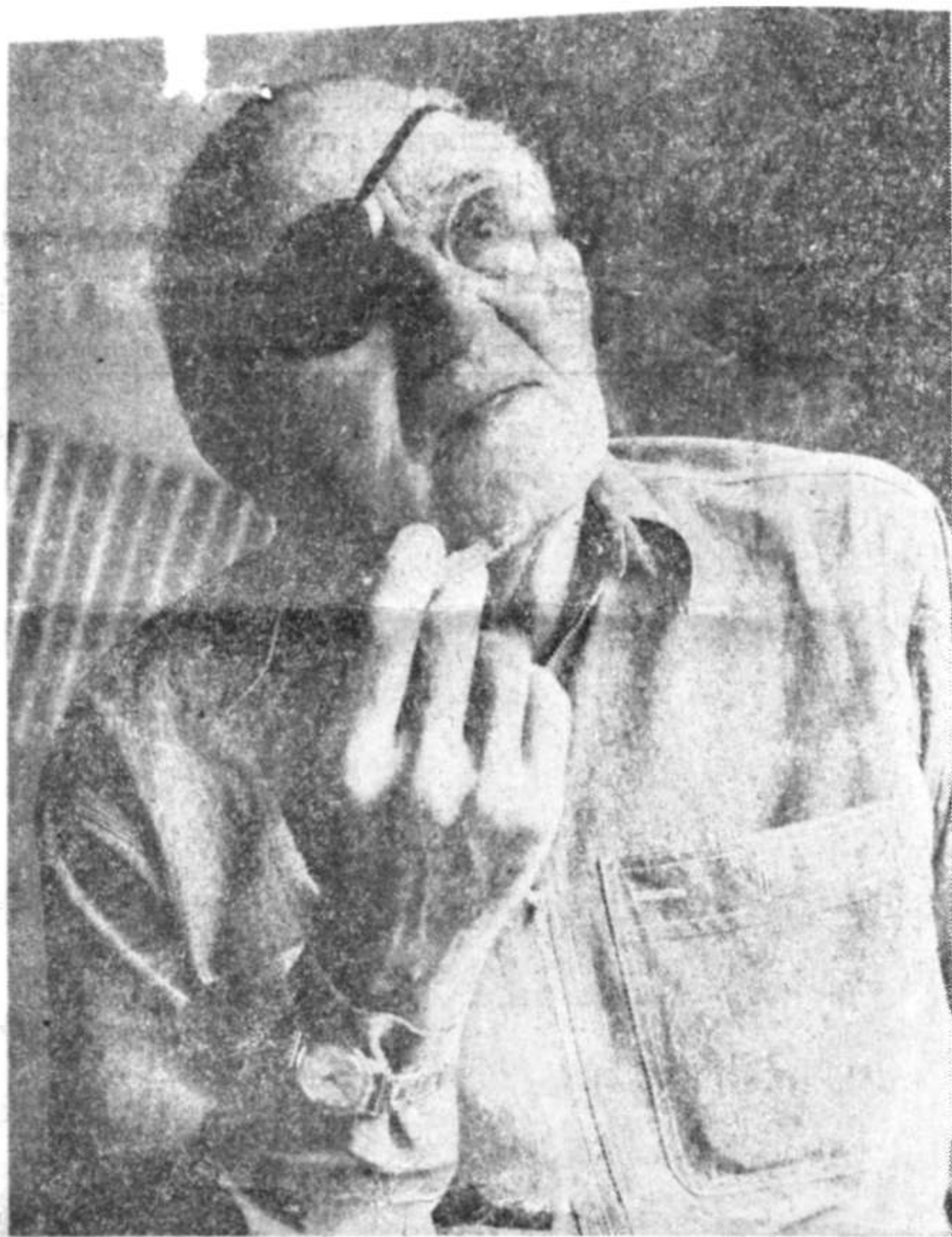


Document Citation

Title	How Dr. Mabuse's creator turned him on the Nazis
Author(s)	Kevin Thomas
Source	<i>Los Angeles Times</i>
Date	
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	Lang, Fritz (1890-1976), Vienna, Austria
Film Subjects	



DIRECTOR—Viennese-born Fritz Lang is the creator of the infamous master criminal "Dr. Mabuse."
Times photo by Harry Chase

How Dr. Mabuse's Creator Turned Him on the Nazis

BY KEVIN THOMAS
Times Staff Writer

A master criminal, a man of infinite disguises and a skilled hypnotist, is gradually taking over the world's currency. He is the infamous Dr. Mabuse.

In 1922-23 he made his first screen appearance in Fritz Lang's two-part "Dr. Mabuse," which will be shown here for the first time in its entirety at UCLA's Humanities Auditorium. (Part I, "The Gambler," will be screened today, Friday and Saturday; Part II, "Inferno," March 6-8.)

Having given life to Dr. Mabuse, Lang, no matter how hard he tried, never succeeded in killing him off and was subsequently persuaded to make "The Last Will of Dr. Mabuse" in 1932 and then "The 1,000 Eyes of Dr. Mabuse" in 1961.

"Dr. Mabuse" is the most amazing of museum pieces and anticipates Ian Fleming's "Dr. No." It is a film rich in exotic decor and has an array of superbly staged sequences, such as a frenzied stock exchange scene similar to the one in Antonioni's

"L'Eclisse." It has the striking composition, eloquent lighting and masterful climax that have characterized Lang's work throughout his 50-year career as a director.

Like most of Lang's films, it can be appreciated on several levels: as an indictment of post-World War I German decadence, a story of a decent, ordinary man challenging an evil genius or simply as a cops-and-robbers entertainment.

Today, Viennese-born Fritz Lang, who was brought to America 35 years ago by David O. Selznick, lives in a low, rambling house on a hill high above Picfair that he bought in 1943. He is a gifted raconteur whose anecdotes are underlined with gallows humor.

In the gemütlich atmosphere of his den—"Takes a long freight train with a red caboose to carry my blues away" is inscribed in brass on his bar—Lang will debate the merits of Andy Warhol, praise Roman Polan-

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Reminiscing With Fritz Lang

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and speculate about what Godard (for whom he played himself in "Contempt") will do next but hates to talk about himself and the films that have secured him a lofty position in the history of motion pictures.

Persuaded to talk once again about Dr. Mabuse, Lang begins with praise for the late Erich Pommer, who headed Berlin's famed UFA Studios in its greatest period.

"Erich Pommer, in my opinion, was responsible not only for me but many directors; he was responsible also for what has been called the Golden Time of the German film. He was not just a producer; he was an industry captain.

"I tell you something to show you what a wonderful guy he was. I was making the German saga ("Die Nibelungen"). There was a big scene in which 400 Asiatics should come over the hill.

"Erich called me. He said, 'It's very expensive. Think it over if it's necessary.' I think it was the 1922 or 23 — the height of the inflation.

'Fine Producer'

So I went home, gave it some thought. The next day I said, "Erick, I thought it over. You are right. We can't compete with the American companies in mass scenes." Erich said, 'I thought it over, and we're going to do it anyway.' In my opinion that's a fine producer."

"Mabuse" came from a novel by Norbert Jacques. In the book he's just a man who committed crimes. The end of the film had nothing to do with the book: Dr. Mabuse became insane.

"I was always very, very interested in the strange power syndrome of the Germans—even since inflationary times. The picture was a great success. For me the whole thing is over, the SOB was out of my life.

"Then one day I made a movie called 'M' " (Lang's masterpiece, which starred Peter Lorre as a compulsive child killer) "and I'm sorry I have to say it myself, but it was a

great success, too. So they came to me and said, 'Fritz, we want another Mabuse.' I didn't want to do it, but I said OK.

" 'What can I do,' I said. 'The guys is insane. I cannot make him healthy again. It is impossible.' So when I invented 'The Last Will of Dr. Mabuse' it gave the chance to put all the Nazi slogans in the mouth of an insane criminal, and then I killed him off.

"I had him say, 'I will create a reign of 1,000 years of crimes.' That's exactly what Hitler said—only he said 'Nazism.' We had to destroy the belief of the bourgeoisie in such authorities.

"The picture afterward was forbidden by Dr. Goebbels. He called me into the Ministry of Propaganda and offered me the leadership of the German film industry. I left the country that night."

Went to Paris

Lang went to Paris before coming to Hollywood, where he made his first American film, "Fury," an indictment of lynching starring Spencer Tracy, in 1936. Fritz Lang for the next 20 years maintained his style and integrity in such memorable films as "You Only Live Once," "Man Hunt," "Woman in the Window," "Scarlet Street," "Fanchon notorious," "Clash by Night," "The Big Heat," "Human Desire" and "While the City Sleeps"—all of which are characterized by heroes, everyday types, who struggle against implacable fate.

"In Europe where there may be an emperor, a king or a Hitler the hero may be a superman, but in a democracy he must be John Doe," explains Lang. "You have got to have the audience identify with the plight of the hero—make it feel 'Here for the sake of God go I.'"

Lang returned to Germany in the late 50s and in 1961 was persuaded to do still another Mabuse film. Although the English film journal Movie ranks it among Lang's best films, it has never had a general release in America, though a badly dubbed English version does exist.

"I was told that Goebbels planned after the war to

have the hotels in which diplomats and big industrialists would stay equipped with hidden microphones. I changed that to television cameras — "The 1,000 Eyes of Dr. Mabuse."

But hadn't Dr. Mabuse been killed off in the last film?

"The Germans, they are a peculiar people. They are very loyal," said Lang, by way of explaining that they would not let Mabuse die.

Mabuse does not appear in this picture, but its protagonists are in some way connected with him. Its success in Germany led to even more sequels, of the Son-of-Dr.-Mabuse variety, which Lang wanted no part of.

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