

Document Citation

Title	Old Lang zeit
Author(s)	J. Hoberman J. Hoberman
Source	<i>Village Voice</i>
Date	1993 Jan 05
Type	article
Language	English English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	Lang, Fritz (1890-1976), Vienna, Austria
Film Subjects	Dr. Mabuse, der spieler (Dr. Mabuse, the gambler), Lang, Fritz, 1922 Das testament des Dr. Mabuse (The testament of Dr. Mabuse), Lang, Fritz, 1933 Die tausend augen des Dr. Mabuse (The thousand eyes of Dr. Mabuse), Lang, Fritz, 1960

Old Lang Zeit

Lana Fritz

men can go to the...
leashing another world war over
the preservation of occupation
privileges in Berlin."

71

FILM



From the mad genius of juvenile trash: Fritz Lang's *Dr. Mabuse* series

By J. Hoberman

"Out of the Dark: Crime, Mystery, and Suspense in the German Cinema 1915-1990"

At the Walter Reade Theater
January 1 through 16

The notion of Hitler as master criminal underscores works as disparate as Brecht's *Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* and John Farrow's *The Hitler Gang*. It's another personality, however, who dominates "Out of the Dark: Crime, Mystery, and Suspense in the German Cinema," organized by Goethe House at the Walter Reade. The central figure in this 16-film series is Hitler's fellow Austrian and near contemporary, the painter-turned-filmmaker Fritz Lang.

Lang, whose centennial passed two years ago virtually unnoticed (at least in New York), was a pulp maestro—perhaps the greatest in movie history. His official masterpiece, *M*, is the original portrait of a serial killer, but there is scarcely a popular genre—sci-fi, sword and sorcery, espionage, gangster, horror—that did not pass through Lang's hands and does not bear his mark. (That was just in Germany. Once in America, Lang directed a proto-*Bonnie and Clyde* and helped invent film noir.)

Even more pop and less literary than his precursors D. W. Griffith and Louis Feuillade, Lang can scarcely be recuperated as anything other than the mad genius of juvenile trash. His worldview

seems eternal. As Stan Brakhage put it, Lang sought to fashion a religion out of his adolescent daydreams, the "sexiest simplicities... crudest power madness... meanest worship—that which effects masturbation most easily." Lang's silent films even have a built-in oedipal kick; they were mainly written by his then wife Thea von Harbou and often starred her ex-husband Rudolph Klein-Rogge in villainous roles.

The Spiders (1919), Lang's first success, concerned the megalomaniacal head of a clandestine organization. So, too, does the sumptuous and snappy *Spies* (1928), which opens "Out of the Dark" on New Year's Day. But the most celebrated of Lang's criminal geniuses—the one who, for him, personified the zeitgeist—was introduced in *Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler*, a two-part epic based on Norbert Jacques's bestseller, first released in the tumultuous Berlin of April 1922. Today we admire *Dr. Mabuse's* self-consciously "modernist" settings—the art nouveau nightclubs and art deco gambling dens populated by cocaine-snorting aristos. Early audiences were more impressed by the car chases through the Berlin night: "Speed, horrifying speed characterizes the film," one reviewer wrote. But even then, *Mabuse* was employed to epitomize the postwar period of political instability, social turmoil, and crazed hyperinflation.

In the person of *Mabuse*, Lang gave Germany's breakdown a sin-

gle cause. The gambler is a master of disguise and hypnotism, exerting his will over cabaret dancers and millionaires alike. Hidden yet ubiquitous, *Mabuse* is history's secret agent. It is he who masterminds the long-distance murder of a courier and panics the German commodity exchanges; he who wrecks the economy by flooding it with counterfeit dollars. According to Lang, the movie was originally introduced with a montage that skipped from the 1919 Spartacus uprising and 1920 Kapp Putsch through various disorders to the assassination of finance minister Walter Rathenau, to ask, "Who is behind this?" (Who, indeed? Rathenau was not assassinated until nearly two months after *Mabuse's* release.)

So *Mabuse* was responsible for the lunacy of postwar Germany; the movie fittingly ends with his confinement to a madhouse. But Lang was persuaded to resurrect, if not precisely spring, *Mabuse* 10 years later—in the aftermath of *M* and on the eve of Hitler's election. In *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*, the seemingly catatonic gambler takes control of the asylum doctor, who is soon ranting that *Mabuse's* *übermensch* brain will "smash our rotten world." Through mysterious recording devices and the pliant Dr. Baum (his study crammed with human skulls, primitive masks, and expressionist paintings), *Mabuse* plunges Germany into "an abyss of terror." His minions are everywhere, the normal world barely

exists.

As *M* was based on an actual case, so *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* was presented as the explanation for the "crime wave [that] swept over Germany in the early '30s," and the movies are further connected by the presence of the earthy, cigar-smoking commissioner Lohman (a kind of Berlin Kojack). Although less methodical than *M*, *The Testament* is brisk and often brilliant filmmaking. As a master of suspense, Lang is the bridge between Griffith and Hitchcock. *The Testament* opens in the midst of an unexplained incident—a frantic man concealed in a print shop, playing cat and mouse with his armed pursuers to the overwhelming pounding of the unseen press. "Life under a terror regime could not be rendered more impressively," observed Siegfried Kracauer in hindsight.

Reveling in rhapsodic destruction and purveying a universal fear of authority, *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* was scheduled to open on March 23, 1933—the same day, as it turns out, that the Reichstag voted Hitler dictatorial powers. But the movie was banned; its "presentation of certain criminal acts" was deemed "so detailed and fascinating," authorities feared it might inspire "similar" incidents of antistate terror. In an introduction written for the 1943 U.S. release (which was shown to coincide with Lang's anti-Nazi feature *Hangmen Also Die*), the director, now an American citizen, maintained that *The Testament* was made as an "allegory" of Hitler's terror: "Slogans and doctrines of the Third Reich [were] put in the mouths of criminals." But if *The Testament* attacked Hitler it may only be in retrospect. *Mabuse* represents disorder, not fascism—and von Harbou was a member of the Nazi party when she wrote the script.

Goebbels evidently banned *The Testament* sight unseen. After he saw it, he told Lang that the only thing wrong with the movie was the absence of a proper Führer to defeat *Mabuse*. It was at this meeting, by Lang's account, that Goebbels wondered if the director might like to head the German film industry. Lang closed out his bank account and left the Reich that evening.

In 1958, an elderly Lang returned to Germany at the behest of producer Artur Brauner to make *The Tiger of Eschnapur* and *The Indian Tomb*; the success of this two-part feature, based on a script Lang wrote in 1920, prompted Brauner to suggest another *Mabuse*.

Lang decided to make a "brutal" film, evoking "the cold reality of today." That icy world was, of course, the Cold War and its epicenter, Berlin—a still undivided city where the hallucinatory prosperity of the rebuilt Western zone was surrounded by desolation and misted in intrigue, where Allied military sedans daily cruised one another's sectors, and no one was sure who was counterspying for whom. As *The 1000 Eyes of Dr. Mabuse* went into production, the Soviets called for the withdrawal of all foreign troops: "Only mad-

According to a reminiscence published by Volker Schlöndorff, "Lang was past recognition. Since he couldn't go out without feeling like a stranger, he confined himself to the international anonymity of a hotel room... His only thoughts were of Germany, of what it had been, of what it had done, of what it had become." Almost ridiculously straightforward, *The 1000 Eyes* is a movie of studied geometry in which B-movie automatons glide through a constricted version of prewar Berlin, replaying incidents from the earlier *Mabuse* films (as well as *Spies*) in the zombie nightclubs and bunkerlike sets of the "Hotel Luxor."

Is it really the same map of the city splayed across the wall behind the jolly, *echt* Berlin police chief? (He's played by Gert Frobe, soon to embody the Langian figure of Goldfinger.) *Mabuse* is now pure *geist*. The megalomaniacal "genius of diabolism" who died in 1932 has been reincarnated as another hypnotist who plans to rule the world by gaining control of a millionaire American rocket scientist cum industrialist. Mobile spy units cruise the streets; the Hotel Luxor is not only a nexus of unsolved murders but an unholy relic of the Nazi era, designed by the Gestapo to monitor, as well as house, foreign diplomats. Every room is under constant surveillance through a combination of hidden microphones, secret cameras, and one-way mirrors (which allow the innocent Ami to observe the German mystery woman in her underwear). But, if much of the action is framed by TV monitors, nothing is exactly what it seems.

No less than his pre-Nazi German films, Lang's swan song is a trope of prophetic paranoia. A se-

Film

ance arranged by a blind clairvoyant in a chamber where constellations are marked in phosphorescent stars offers a bizarre foretaste of the Pentagon war room and title character from *Dr. Strangelove*. On May 1, 1960, an American U-2 spy plane was shot down over the Urals; on May 14, *The 1000 Eyes of Dr. Mabuse* opened in Stuttgart. The following summer, the Berlin Wall went up and an American defector named Lee Harvey Oswald applied to return home... The Lang century continued. ■

Note: *Spies* opens the series in a restored 35mm print with piano accompaniment and simultaneous translation of the German intertitles; it shows again January 6 and 7. Both parts of *Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler* are presented in 16mm with English intertitles and recorded music, January 3 and 4. (Alas, this is not the complete version shown in the 1973 New York Film Festival.) A 35mm German-language print of *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* shows, with subtitles, January 4, 5, and 6; with a 16mm, dubbed English print of *The 1000 Eyes of Dr. Mabuse* on the latter two days. The restored 35mm *M* has its American premiere January 9 and 10 with translation.

VOICE January 5, 1993