FRIEDRICH CHRISTIAN ANTON LANG WAS BORN ON 5 DECEMBER 1890 IN VIENNA - THE SON OF AN ARCHITECT. HE STARTED STUDIES IN ARCHITECTURE, BUT SOON CHANGED TO GRAPHIC ARTS. FOR A TIME HE EARNED HIS LIVING BY PAINTING POSTCARDS IN PARIS, BUT WENT HOME TO JOIN THE ARMY WHEN WW I BROKE OUT. WOUNDED, HE STARTED SCRIPTWRITING WHILE STILL IN HOSPITAL. IN 1918 HE MOVED TO BERLIN AND AS EARLY AS 1920 DIRECTED HIS FIRST FEATURE FILM DAS WANDERNDE BILD (THE WANDERING IMAGE). IT WAS CO-WRITTEN BY THEA VON HARBOU WHO WOULD SOON BECOME HIS WIFE.


IN HIS MABUSE FILMS, LANG EMPLOYED ADDITIONAL MOTIFS WHICH FASCINATED HIM THROUGHOUT HIS CAREER: “CLAUSTROPHOBIC FEAR OF ENCLOSED SPACES, MAGICAL COMMUNICATION THROUGH HYPNOSIS AND ITS DECIPHERING.”
(Michael Töteberg, nach Pflaum)

DR MABUSE DER SPIELER (1922) TODAY IN MANY RESPECTS BEARS A STRIKING AFFINITY TO CALIGARI. A LOT HAS TO DO WITH
the stylisation of set and decor in which we find all the prominent ingredients- like narrow medieval streets, sculpting of light, and expressionistic interior design. Likewise, the film is set in the semi-glamourous world of cabaret and gambling, with women the all too willing tools of Mabuse. But additional spices are thrown in, like spiritualistic seances and far-eastern magic. Mabuse is portrayed as a psychopathic gambler and grand-style cardsharp and cheat, who succeeds by using his unlimited hypnotic powers. Why Mabuse so feverishly accumulates money is never convincingly understandable - but maybe in times of raging inflation that need not be explained too much either.

However that he is a powerful danger is obvious when not just the police, but the army has to storm his headquarters. Mabuse cracks under pressure - the borderline between genius and madness is all too thin anyway as we have learned.

DAS TESTAMENT DES DR MABUSE has many links to the first film. Partly, because even some actors are the same. Some details of the narrative structure are repeated, like the explosion of the telephone on the desk of the inspector. Though the sound film was still very young, Lang uses its possibilities to improve the plot. Where in THE GAMBLER the forgers’ workshop foreshadowed the mighty plants of METROPOLIS, now their noise and rhythmical beating in the opening sequence becomes so intense that Hofmeister gets dizzy and has to cover his ears. Watch carefully the masterly use of sound as narrative device as in the murder of Lohmann.

Lang was by now at the height of his artistic career and consequently so is the evil, demonic power of Mabuse’s machinations. The sheer will of Mabuse is so powerful that even as a dead body he is able to force his will onto others. Now we are not simply dealing with misdemeanours or petty crime. Instead, a frontal attack is launched against the political system and its symbols, in order to destroy society. First the crown jewels from the National Gallery are stolen, then the power supply is cut by blowing up the gas works, and there is even talk of bringing down the entire monetary system by spreading counterfeit notes. All this in between assassinations, murders, and arson. Raging fire and erupting explosions almost seem to make Mabuse’s reign of terror tactile.
Indeed, the country may be declared a disaster area and a state of emergency imposed any minute by the government.

Lang is able to tame light and shadows - so important in b&w film - and bend them to his will. The nightly chase at the end, together with fire and explosions, all mixed with distortions, has to be considered a highlight in film expression. Throughout the film, eerie superimpositions, a dangling yo-yo (doesn’t this remind you of something?) as well as a desk of glass, all add to the constantly schizophrenic atmosphere. Not to mention setting many scenes in the grottos of a lunatic asylum, and the repeated depiction of bizarre grimaces and bleak skulls. The atmosphere is truly oppressive and tormented throughout the film. The tempo - speeded up by editing - is often breathtaking.

Mabuse (or rather his reincarnation Dr Baum, so willing to fulfil Mabuse’s legacy) remains anonymous to his obedient men. They receive their orders from a stage, where their master’s voice can be heard from behind a drawn curtain. The messages we can hear clearly ring a bell. “The individual is nothing, the machine is everything”. There is frequent talk about a leader, a superman, a genius. And domination by terror.

The film is often considered a decidedly anti-fascist film prophesying the crimes shortly to be committed by the Nazis. Lang himself explained in 1943 that his intention “was to illustrate Hitler's terror methods by comparison. The slogans and credos of the Third Reich are uttered by gangsters in the film. In this way, I hoped I might be able to strip the mask from these teachings behind which there is only the urge to destroy everything that a nation holds dear and Holy.”

Today, film historians doubt Lang’s own interpretation: “The strange thing is that the purported Nazi allegory was so well concealed that even the film’s scriptwriter Thea von Harbou (Lang’s wife at the time ... and a member of the National Socialist Party) had no knowledge of his intention” (Folke Isakson, Leif Furhammar: Politics and Film. Ravensburg 1974).

In fact: where the English dubbed version is full of references to Nazi philosophy coming out of the
loudspeakers behind the curtain, the German version is absolutely free of those. Here Mabuse’s commands are pragmatic and down to earth. It looks as if Lang at a later stage in his career tried to fabricate his past and stylize himself as a more ardent opponent to the Nazis then he actually was.

Anyway, dated 29.3.1933, the film was banned before its premiere screening, “for legal reasons of endangering public order and security” as Kinematograph reported. Morgenpost stated “The presentation of criminal acts committed against human society is so detailed and fascinating that it might well lead to similar attacks against lives and property, and terrorist actions against the state.” Goebbels is quoted by Lotte Eisner as saying “I shall ban this film... because it proves that a group of men who are determined to the last... could succeed in overturning any government by brute force”

Despite this new ban (even M. had been banned), Goebbels invited Lang to the Ministry of Propaganda and on behalf of the Führer offered him the new position as head of Nazi cinema. The reasons behind this offer are not clear. Maybe they had to do with Lang’s wife Thea von Harbou who was a dedicated Nazi. Maybe they had to do with promoting the welcome message of reconciliation between creative brain and working hands, so successfully put forward in METROPOLIS. The fact that Lang was half-Jewish obviously was no obstacle to Goebbels. “After all, neither Jannings, the idolised German actor, nor Leni Riefenstahl, the ideal of German womanhood, were quite Aryan” (Eisner p. 131).

It seems as if Lang was not too much flattered by the offer. The same evening, he took a train to Paris, never to return for the remaining 999 years of Nazi rule. According to Eisner, the film’s producer Seymour Nebenzal brought both the German and the French version safely into France when he, as a Jew, was forced to leave Germany. Other sources state that unassembled footage of the French version (shot simultaneously with the same technical crew) was smuggled out of Germany and edited in France by Lothar Wolff into a less complete version than Lang’s own (German) one. It was the French version which was released in the United States in 1943 for which Lang wrote a special foreword.
In a final footnote I like to point out that the Australian prints of the 2 early Mabuse films bear completely different titles: Dr Mabuse, the Gambler is called FATAL PASSIONS and shows the directors name as "Lange". The Last Will is called THE CRIMES OF DR MABUSE. It starts astonishingly with some shots of a Germany in ruins after WW II while a voice-over informs us that the following story - though one can not be sure that it is true - stems from before the war, and explicitly states the year as 1939.

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DIE 1000 AUGEN DES DR MABUSE (1960) was the last directorial effort ever by Fritz Lang. After more than 30 years away from Germany, he had returned and directed two rather mediocre films: THE TIGER OF ESCHNAPUR and its sequel THE INDIAN TOMB (1959). Both were actually remakes of a film directed by Joe May in 1921, but based on a script by Lang and his then-wife Thea von Harbou. The critical reception was divided. While some found them flawed by the absence of an internal dialectic, uninteresting script and characters, and mediocre actors, others in a Sight and Sound poll in 1962 placed them among the 10 greatest films of all time. Whatever the truth, in Germany they were extremely popular.

Impressed by this success, German producer Arthur Brauner suggested to Lang a remake of THE NIBELUNGS. But Lang rejected the offer, just as he had earlier refused a proposal for a remake of DESTINY for Erich Pommer - he obviously did not like to repeat himself. However, when Brauner came back with the idea of a remake of THE LAST WILL OF DR MABUSE, Lang was instead tempted to tackle a third variation on the Mabuse theme, almost 30 years after the second one. He was attracted by the idea of using a realistic modern style and the implications of advanced technologies.

After WW II, Lang had read of a Nazi plan to build a luxury hotel in Berlin as a residence for foreign diplomats. Each room was to have been equipped with an electronic listening device. For the film, shot in 42 days, he changed this into a system of closed-circuit television cameras. These artificial “eyes” of Mabuse are monitored from a basement control room reminiscent of METROPOLIS.
Film critic Lotte Eisner, forever waving the banner of German film, as recently as 1976 was enthusiastic about the result. “As a thriller, Lang’s last film is masterly: elated by his love of whirlwind adventure, Lang produced a film which stands up well against the work of his preceding American period. Yet it is more than a thriller: Lang was concerned with sounding a warning on dependence upon technology, the benefits of science that turn into a menace in an age when one maniac might press a button and set off a nuclear holocaust.

Lively, spontaneous, thrilling, the film has nowhere the appearance of an old man’s work. Lang himself feared that the opening was too long-winded; but his fears seem groundless: the present day spectator, to whom Mabuse is quite unknown, requires certain background information.” (Fritz Lang. New York 1976, p. 390)

But there are contrary voices as well, like Frederick W. Ott (The Films Of Fritz Lang. [Citadel] 1979, p. 275f): “The film is a curious melodramatic pastiche of his earlier espionage films. ...it is one of Lang’s most disappointing works. It never achieves the high standard of the earlier Mabuse films...” Others complain about “the inadequacies of his cast” or “a certain heaviness in the actual narrative style” (Fritz Lang - The Image & The Look. London 1981, p. 5f). Lang himself states in an interview with Charles Higham for The Celluloid Muse: “I would rather not have made it.”

There is, indeed, a lot in this film one finds disturbing.

For instance, Lang tries to establish Mabuse as a threat to the world. But the necessary international approach is more than superficial. Situated in Berlin, this location is never properly established. Instead, when Marion fakes her suicide attempt, the repeated shots from the high-rise down into the street canyons resemble New York and are strangely out of place. During the whole run of the film, locations are always empty - as if there was never enough money available to pay for extras during shooting. Even in the final car chase, normally choked German freeways are swept clean. Together with some rather wooden acting, the film looks more like a provincial melodrama than anything else. But what can you expect if a plot insists that an Irishman is named Peter Cornelius?
Take for instance the technology. Considering surveillance cameras in 1960 as a threat to humankind clearly has to be called prophetic. But the old-fashioned one-way bedroom mirror actually plays a much more important role in the plot than closed-circuit tv, which looks more like a technological gimmick than a tool with which to achieve power. The chance of depicting the dangers of nuclear power is also clearly missed. But what can you expect if a plot states that an Atomic Factory has exploded - with no other fall-out than a failed business transaction?

Or take the character of “Mabuse”. True, Lang for the first time really had to comply with the form of the “Whodunit” since Mabuse had died in THE LAST WILL OF DR MABUSE. But in maintaining suspense by keeping us ignorant about Mabuse’s heir, Lang is trapped because he can hardly develop a character for the mastermind/ villain. What gradually surfaces is far from convincing. Despite a lot of talk in the beginning of the film, the new Mabuse’s desire for power over the whole wide world is never motivated. There is never the psychopathic dimension of the lunatic mind which so dominated the earlier films. And there is never the hypnotic spell he is able to impose on other people, and the obvious sexual dependence of the female protagonists. In fact, his wickedness boils down to the activities of a petty marriage swindler - whose efforts fail because his female dependent falls all too eagerly in love with a stranger.

It would be absolutely unfair to thus dismiss the whole film. There are some wonderful cinematic quotations from the earlier LAST WILL, like the assassination of the TV journalist. Some aspects are even brilliant, most notably the editing. “The film is constantly kept on the move by Lang’s characteristic overlapping, ellipsis, rapid cutting. If someone mentions a person, an object or an event, the next shot will show us something about this person, object or event. A question is taken up and unexpectedly answered in the succeeding shot. The device produces a breathtaking pace and immediacy, which never sacrifices precision or clarity.” (Eisner, p. 392 f)

Still, the overall impression is of something lacking. The film never creates an oppressive/tormented atmosphere, so wonderfully achieved in the earlier Mabuses. According to scenarist Otto Wuttig, Lang fought like a lion for a comma and battled for seemingly unimportant nuances.
Yet there are never apparent any of the wonderful tiny gimmicks employed in the earlier films. Like the visual icon of German petit-bourgeois homes, the tacky roaring stag - which in DR MABUSE THE GAMBLER is shown on the wall of Countess Told’s apartment in Cubist style! The political implications of Mabuse’s crimes are often talked about but can never really be felt. But THE 1000 EYES OF DR MABUSE does not only lose in comparison to its predecessors. The diabolical grasp for power, based on technological advances, is so much more convincingly shown in the James Bond movies, which appeared only two years later in 1962. Where Lang once so powerfully evoked the underlying evil forces of the 20’s, a certain naivety on his part about the prevailing horrors of a later period can not be denied - starting actually as early as HANGMEN ALSO DIE! (1942).

Maybe Lang had lost his grip on the darker sides of the German soul during his emigration. Today it is hard to tell how much of the film’s look is due to the desolate situation of the German film industry at the time of Lang’s return. How much was he possibly hampered by the outpouring of unbelievably poor film versions of Edgar Wallace and Agatha Cristie criminal stories? Not even 3 years after the release of Lang’s last film, the German cinema was declared artistically bankrupt and dead in the famous Oberhausen Manifesto of 1962 which sparked off the New German Cinema.

But that’s another story altogether.