



Das Testament des Dr Mabuse

This article was written before the publication of Tom Gunning's book on Fritz Lang, which contains an extensive chapter on the movie (2000: 139-159). However, our analyses are substantially different. I have used endnotes to signal the occasional points of overlap.

Das Testament des Dr Mabuse was filmed in late 1932, and was in post-production when Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany on 30th January 1933. In his biography of Fritz Lang, Patrick McGilligan seeks to sort out fact from fiction in a story Lang told many times over the years: that the Nazis banned the film; that Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels nevertheless offered him the position of Head of the Nazi film industry and that his response was to flee immediately to Paris (McGilligan 1997: 169-184). McGilligan concludes that the most dramatic part of the story – Lang's nerve-wracking interview with Goebbels and his escape to Paris that same evening (see Lang 1962: 4-5) – was fiction. But *Das Testament des Dr Mabuse* was banned from exhibition in Germany, and Lang did get out of the country – if not as precipitously as he would later maintain. Thanks to the Nazis, it thus became his last German film until his return to the country in the late 1950s. Although his previous film, *M* (1931) is much more famous, I would argue that it is *Das Testament des Dr Mabuse* which represents the culmination

of his German work. It combines the formal brilliance of *M* with a plot which has quite striking contemporary resonances.

Narrative Threads

At the end of the two-part *Dr Mabuse der Spieler* (1921-22), the arch-villain Dr Mabuse (Rudolf Klein-Rogge) went mad. In developing another Mabuse story ten years later, Lang did not feel that he could change this, and in *Das Testament des Dr Mabuse*, Mabuse is incarcerated in the mental asylum of Professor Baum (Oskar Beregi), who observes him with fascination. In a lecture to his students early in the film, Baum reviews Mabuse's past – the subject of the earlier film – and brings us up to date. Although insane, Mabuse is compulsively churning out writings – his testament – which provide detailed descriptions of how to commit a whole range of crimes. As the film continues, we discover that Baum, using the name of Dr Mabuse, is in fact translating the testament into practice by directing a gangster network which carries out the crimes. But no one is permitted to see the boss: orders are given to the gang members in a briefing room, divided by a curtain, behind which can be discerned no more than the shape of a man at a desk. Mabuse himself dies about halfway through the film, but the gangsters are unaware of this: his testament continues through the agency of Baum, who gives them their orders as before.

This criminal organisation becomes the subject of a police investigation, led by Inspector Lohmann (Otto Wernicke) from *M*. The investigation is prompted by two early crimes carried out by the gang's hit squad, referred to as Section 2B: Hardy (Rudolph Schündler), the hit man, and Bredow (Paul Oscar Höcker), the chauffeur. They are ordered to silence two men who have uncovered something of the gang's schemes, which they do by driving Hofmeister (Karl Meixner), an ex-policeman dismissed for corruption, insane, and shooting Dr Kramm (Theodor Loos), a colleague of Baum's. As Lohmann investigates both these crimes, he is led repeatedly to Professor Baum's asylum.

The two organisations, criminals and police, set in structural opposition to one another evoke *M*. But, unlike *M*, the film also includes a love story. One of the gang members, Tom Kent (Gustav Diessl), wants to go straight, and his girlfriend Lilli (Wera Liessem) provides the inspiration for him to attempt this. The gang anticipate his going to the police and, in the second half of the film, kidnap the two of them. They are locked in the briefing room, and only at this point do we learn, with them, that the shape behind the curtain is a wooden cutout, and that the orders have been coming through a loudspeaker on the desk. The doctor's voice tells them that they have three hours to live, whereupon a time bomb begins ticking.

These are the film's three main narrative threads, and Lang weaves them together through the cross-cutting technique familiar from his earlier films dealing with similar types of story, e.g. *Spione* (1928) and *M*.

German Expressionism and Freudian Overtones

Although the German Expressionist movement had lost much of its force by the time of the arrival of sound, expressionist elements are used selectively in *Das Testament des Dr Mabuse* to convey mental states in a vivid way. The pounding in the storeroom where Hofmeister is trapped in the opening scene is so great that objects in the room shake: we deduce that the room is adjacent to a printing press, but the noise is enhanced to an intensity which suggests the terror of a man on the edge. After Hofmeister has then been driven insane, we see him in a police cell frantically miming an attempted phone call to Lohmann; the act he was carrying out at the moment he lost his mind. In front of him, Lang has placed an entirely imaginary desk: a representation in glass of Hofmeister's own desk, but with weird distortions, e.g. the miniature crocodile on the original desk has been transformed into a



dragon-like glass monster, with jaws gaping upwards. At this point, Lohmann and a doctor appear in the cell door but, from Hofmeister's point of view, out of their bodies emerge hallucinated images of Section 2B, advancing menacingly towards him. Hofmeister's terrified reaction is to back away, draw his legs defensively under him, and sing in a high-pitched voice about the pretty girls of Batavia. We did not see 2B's entrance when it actually occurred; this is a retrospective visualisation of the event which unhinged Hofmeister and triggered his obsessive 'compulsion to repeat'. Both the imaginary phone call and the terrified reaction are a part of the compulsion: the doctor tells Lohmann that Hofmeister switches from one to the other whenever he thinks he is being observed. Clearly, whatever 2B did to him, the effect was traumatic. I would suggest that, from the way Lang stages the hallucinated attack and from Hofmeister's reaction, the trauma implied was homosexual rape. The peculiar contortions of Hofmeister's defensive body language are one hint; another is the hysterical way he reacts when Lohmann, trying to communicate with him here, touches his leg.



In particular, expressionist effects are used in relation to Baum and his gradual 'possession by' Mabuse. Baum has a series of hallucinations of Mabuse, most impressively after the latter's death, when he sees a ghostly (semi-transparent) apparition of Mabuse sitting facing him across his desk. The

apparition is grotesque: Mabuse's eyes are enlarged and shaped like a chameleon's, his cranium is furrowed like a brain. The visual distortion can be seen as highlighting the two elements of Mabuse Baum both fears and is controlled by: Mabuse's hypnotic eyes and his 'genius' bursting through its cranial covering. As this ghostly Mabuse whispers to Baum his ideas for a 'Dominion of crime', Lang visualises the figure splitting, with one of the phantom



Mabuses crossing to Baum's side of the desk and entering Baum's body as if possessing it – at which point both phantoms disappear. Here the expressionist effect is used to convey Baum's mental and bodily experience of being subjected to the will of Mabuse. (Is it significant – in the light of Hofmeister's probable fate – that Mabuse 'enters' Baum from behind?) Later, in the film's climactic car chase,



the superimposition of Mabuse's 'ghost' above Baum's car, instructing him, is only one of a series of expressionist effects. The eeriness of the car's headlights on the trees, the rapid, fragmented editing of the trees rushing past, the music synchronised to the rhythm of the cuts, Baum's wild stare – all combine to suggest a journey into madness. When Baum arrives back at his asylum, the 'ghost' appears at strategic points, directing Baum to Hofmeister's cell. As Baum enters the cell, he introduces himself to Hofmeister as Dr Mabuse.

It is surely no accident that the three figures associated with the expressionist effects – Hofmeister, Baum and Mabuse – may all be related to key figures in the seminal expressionist film, *Das Kabinett des Dr Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1919).¹ Hofmeister is the Francis (Friedrich Feher) figure: a man who is under the supervision of a sinister doctor in a mental asylum and who strives to communicate his account of events. Baum is the equivalent of Caligari (Werner Krauss) in Francis's account: a doctor who leads a double life as head of a mental asylum and as director of a series of criminal acts. Mabuse is thus structurally the equivalent of Cesare (Conrad Veidt) in Francis's account: the doctor's prize patient, who, although almost catatonic, is the subject of his most intensive research. But here the doctor's relationship with this patient is in effect reversed from that in the earlier film: whereas Caligari manipulates Cesare into carrying out his perverted wishes, here it is the opposite: through his mysterious, hypnotic powers, Mabuse manipulates Baum. Lang's ending also reverses that in Wiene's film. Francis's story about a mad doctor is revealed, ultimately, as a psychotic fantasy, and Francis himself ends in a straight jacket, echoing Caligari's fate within the fantasy. In *Das Testament des Dr Mabuse*, because of his insanity, Hofmeister is unable to tell the story of the mad doctor. But, narrated by the film, the story ends with the doctor committed and the patient cured; the opposite of the outcome in *Das Kabinett des Dr Caligari*. At the end, Baum replaces Hofmeister in Mabuse's cell.

In other words, behind these three key figures in *Das Testament des Dr Mabuse* lies the ghost of *Das Kabinett des Dr Caligari*, with its own set of associations. The ideological implications of the links will be discussed later; relevant here is that the expressionist elements in *Das Testament des Dr Mabuse*, no less than those in Wiene's film, serve to convey mental states dominated by threat, menace, terror and madness. Indeed, we could speak of Hofmeister and Baum, like Francis, as suffering from paranoia, with symptomatic hallucinatory delusions. In his analysis of the Schreber case, Freud theorised paranoia as a defence against homosexuality (Freud [1911] 1979: 200-1), and thus the subtextual overtones to the key expressionist scenes concerning Hofmeister and Baum fit the Freudian paradigm.

Hofmeister's 'compulsion to repeat' also fits Freudian discussions of that symptom. In re-enacting his attempted call to Lohmann, Hofmeister is repeating what he was doing just before the attack by 2B unhinged him. On the one hand, he is thus implicitly appealing to the father-figure Lohmann to save him from the trauma; on the other, he is returning to the moment which triggered the trauma (he was just about to utter Mabuse's name), which suggests unconscious desire as well as fear. A similar ambivalence is implicit in the second stage of his compulsion. Hofmeister's singing marked the moment when Lohmann, listening over the phone, realised that he had lost his mind. But, if Hofmeister's posture here suggests his terror of a homosexual attack, his singing about the pretty girls suggests that he could well be, in some sense, identifying himself with them.

Lang's use of expressionist techniques for these three characters in particular relates to his covert political project. As I will seek to argue later, Mabuse and Baum on the one hand and Hofmeister on the other represent the two extremes of Nazi Germany: the maniacal oppressors and the terrified oppressed. Through the expressionist imagery, Lang suggests visual correlates for the mental states of these emblematic figures. It is this translation of the mental

into the visual which points to the particular relevance of a Freudian reading of the imagery. One can, however, contextualise this by reference to specific theories. The phenomenon of Nazism, and the psychology of those who embraced it, has been the subject of a number of studies: early, well-known examples would be Wilhelm Reich's *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* ([1946] 1972), and various works by Theodor Adorno, including the co-authored *The Authoritarian Personality* ([1950] 1969). The range of material covered in these works is vast, but both authors refer rather disparagingly to a linkage between the fascist (or authoritarian) psyche and repressed (or latent) homosexuality, which obviously has a bearing on the subtextual material here. (See Reich, [1946] 1972: 192. For Adorno, whose observations on the subject are more scattered, see the summary in Lynn Segal, 1990: 115-116). In key examples of the expressionist elements in *Das Testament des Dr Mabuse*, it's as if the film is registering the return of the repressed homosexuality these writers allude to.

However, the more or less sadistic way in which the homosexual material manifests itself in the film invites a somewhat different interpretation. Here I am following Klaus Theweleit who, in his two-volume work *Male Fantasies* (1987 and 1989) takes issue with Reich's and Adorno's pronouncements about the linkage of fascism and (repressed) homosexuality, which he considers too hostile to homosexuality. In Volume I, he criticises their statements (1987: 54-57), and in Volume II, he puts forward his own position:

What then constitutes the particular attraction of 'homosexuality' to the fascist male? My suspicion is that it is its capacity to be associated with power and transgression [. . .] As a homosexual, the fascist can prove, both to himself and others, that he is 'nonbourgeois' and boldly defiant of normality. His 'homosexuality' is strictly encoded; and for this very reason, it never becomes sexual. Like the opposite from which it flees, it is rigidly codified – as escape, transgression, boyish mischief, perverse game, or indeed ultimately as act of terror. In all these forms, it is far more likely to be definable in terms of the fascist system than in terms of such things as love relationships between men. (1989: 323-325)

Theweleit places 'homosexuality' in quotes in order to emphasise that, with the fascist male, he is talking of a perversion of the usual meaning of the term. It seems to me that this definition of 'homosexuality' is what is implied in the characterisation of Hardy, the main figure to enact the terror ordered by 'the doctor'. The only one of the gang members to dress in the natty, narcissistic manner familiar in Hollywood gangsters of the era, Hardy could be seen as suggesting the same 'homoerotic undertones' that Stella Bruzzi, writing of *Scarface* (Howard Hawks, 1932), associates with the Hollywood examples (1997: 75). These intimations in Hardy are strengthened by his persona: usually a refined, ruthless and cold-blooded killer, he becomes hysterical when cornered by the police, yelling at everyone and smashing an ornament in his frustration. His death scene is played out on a couch in the apartment of Anni (Camilla Spira), the girlfriend of one of the gang, and as he dies he is surrounded by fluffy feminine accoutrements: cushions; cuddly toys; a furry rug. It is as if the repressed material – his 'homosexuality' – returns in a displaced form in the décor at the moment of death. My

main qualification of Theweleit's observations in Hardy's case would be that the act of terror is foregrounded – hence the nature of the implied attack on Hofmeister – and that the sexuality is displaced into other elements, notably his gun, which is fetishised by the film (lovingly handled; a detailed description of its features) and which falls amidst the fluffy accoutrements as Hardy dies.



The 'possession' of Baum by Mabuse brings in different material. Here, the gay overtones are secondary: the primary point at issue is Baum's sense of having been taken over by the spirit of Mabuse. But this, too, may be related to ideas about the ways in which the fascist psyche functions. In his discussion of Adorno's theories, Anthony Elliott writes:

Following Freud, Adorno contends that, when in a large group, the individual tends to identify less with its own 'ego ideals' and more with impersonal 'group ideals'. This is said to discourage individual autonomy through the undoing of unconscious repressions, thereby releasing the powerful destructive energies necessary for the underpinning of any Fascist collectivity. The key mechanism for this release of violent and sadistic unconscious drives is identification. For it is through an identification with the Fascist leader that the follower is unconsciously able to introject desensitised and ruthless celebrations of brute power itself. This process of identification, which contains a strong narcissistic identification, is capable of making 'the beloved object part of oneself'. (1999: 56)

In the hallucinated way in which Mabuse enters Baum, we can see a visualisation of the final part of this theoretical formulation. In other words, here, too, the expressionist elements serve to illustrate features of the fascist psyche. Mabuse's 'Dominion of crime' is an excellent example of the release of 'powerful destructive energies' and the 'celebration of brute power' that Elliott mentions, and Baum instigates this reign of terror after the scene which visualises his possession by (identification with) the spirit of Mabuse.

Narrative Structure

As a number of critics have pointed out, *Das Testament des Dr Mabuse* has an unusual narrative structure. Successive sequences are connected by associative rather than

chronological logic: statements or actions at the end of one sequence are linked to the beginning of the next through a particular association. In a useful analysis of this feature, Lucy Fischer distinguishes three types of association. In the first,

a verbal statement made by a character [. . .] [forms] a kind of conceptual bridge to the content of the shot that follows [. . .] [e.g.] when Lohmann gets a telephone call from the frantic Hofmeister, he remarks to his assistant that Hofmeister ‘must have gone crazy’. Lang then cuts to an image of Dr Baum remarking to his medical students that ‘this type of illness is not so rare as you might think’. The subject of his lecture is insanity; thus the two sequences are related by the concept of madness. (1990: 23)

In fact, the subject of Baum’s lecture is insanity brought about by a sudden shock – which is what has just happened to Hofmeister – and Baum goes on to discuss ‘the most interesting case’ of this: Dr Mabuse. The associations go further than Fischer indicates.

This is the dominant type of association; the others Fischer isolates are much less prevalent. One is where a statement at the beginning of a sequence refers back to what happened at the end of the previous one, e.g. the explosion of an oil drum directed by the gang at Hofmeister is followed by a blank screen and Lohmann’s voice saying ‘*Feuer-zauber*’ (fire magic) and talking about the Valkyries. The other is where a sound effect supplies the bridge: when Kent and Lilli are locked in the room with the time bomb, the bomb’s ticking is echoed at the beginning of the next scene when one of the gangsters, Nicolai Gregoriev (Hadrian Maria von Netto), taps his boiled egg. In fact, these two examples seem to me essentially rhetorical: clever flourishes, but without any interesting resonances. By contrast, the first type of association, of which there are maybe as many as twenty examples in the film, merits further discussion.

A crucial feature of a significant number of the transitions is the way in which – as in the first example – they point to Mabuse. Some of these are straightforward. As Lohmann peers at some (as yet indecipherable) scratchmarks left by Hofmeister on the windowpane, he wonders ‘What’s behind it all?’. Cut to Mabuse in bed, scribbling frantically. (Deciphered later, the scratchmarks spell the name ‘Mabuse’.) When Lohmann comes out of the police cell where he has been trying to communicate with a fear-crazed Hofmeister, he says, angrily, ‘If I catch the bastard who did this, Heaven help him’. Cut to Mabuse, sitting up rigidly in his bed. Other transitions refer to Mabuse’s plans, or his power. At the end of his lecture to his students, Baum describes Mabuse’s scribbled writings as ‘Textbooks for the perpetuation of crimes, elaborated to the finest detail’. Cut to the scene which introduces Kent with other gang members, as Kent’s colleague says: ‘The doctor’s methods will ensure our complete safety’. In retrospect, we realise that he is speaking of the same doctor and the same set of plans as Baum. When Mabuse dies, an attendant muses that he’s nursed him for twelve years and now he’s in the dissecting room: ‘What’s left of a man?’. Cut to a typed note, signed Dr Mabuse, summoning the gang members to a midnight meeting. What’s left is Mabuse’s testament and, for the gang members, it’s business as usual.

Mabuse’s mysterious power is hinted at from the first scene in which he is mentioned.² During Baum’s lecture, he

shows a slide of Mabuse: the instant it appears, all the students sit up straight, as if reacting to the hunched posture of Mabuse with an involuntary straightening of the back which is also a sudden coming to attention. It’s an eerie intimation of Mabuse’s powerful effect on people. The collective gesture is also ironically contrasted with the moment later when Mabuse’s ‘ghost’ enters Baum’s body, and the latter signals the ‘possession’ by imitating Mabuse’s hunched posture. Even the name Mabuse seems to exert power. We see the first of the typed notes signed Dr Mabuse when Kent receives one in his apartment. Kent had been writing a love letter to Lilli; now he tears it up. Later, after being threatened with death if he tries to leave the gang, Kent writes a farewell letter to Lilli, signing it Tom. Cut to a police technician, puzzling over and then deciphering the window scratchmarks. On both occasions, it is as if Mabuse’s name ‘trumps’ Kent’s, threatening to destroy his relationship with Lilli. After Lohmann has captured some of the gang following a shoot-out, he asks the chauffeur Bredow who it was gave the orders to kill Dr Kramm. Bredow insists he’s never seen the man. This prompts Lohmann to refer ironically to ‘The mystery man: the shadowy figure behind the scenes’. Cut to the wooden cutout of Mabuse in the room with Kent and Lilli. Even here, where Mabuse is represented only by an object, his power is stressed: Kent and Lilli have taken active steps to neutralise the bomb’s blast by flooding the room with water, but they are still waiting in suspense to see if their plan will work.

The effect of all these direct and implicit references to Mabuse’s power is, in effect, to promote this power to a structuring principle within the film, one which determines much of its narrative patterning. Lucy Fischer draws an analogy here between Mabuse and Lang as the film’s creator: ‘an invisible, off-screen presence who wields a similarly “hypnotic” power [to] that of Mabuse’s mind’ (1990: 25). She supports this argument by reference to two additional parallels: 1) ‘Dr Baum, as Mabuse’s alter-ego, daily collects the mad doctor’s written plans for political sabotage and “casts” them with criminals who “enact” Mabuse’s “scenarios”’ (1990: 25), and 2) the layout of the room with the curtain, which evokes the experience of cinema itself (1990: 24). (Indeed, one could link the room’s layout to that of Plato’s Cave, which has been used as a metaphor for the cinema by a number of writers.) Although one should beware of taking the Lang / Mabuse links too far – obviously one would not wish to imply that



Lang, too, was mad – I am in general agreement with this argument for a self-reflexive aspect to the film. However, I also feel that it does not fully account for the sense of compulsiveness in all these references to Mabuse. It's as if Mabuse is directing much of the narrative, and, by extension, the lives of most of the characters. In a sense, the narrative's insistence on his almost supernatural presence echoes the hallucinatory expressionist effects which haunt Baum and Hofmeister. Baum's hallucinations are all of Mabuse; Hofmeister's of his 'traumatic event', brought about by Mabuse's agents. We could say that the paranoia implicit in these scenes in the film is also present in the film's narrative structure. *Das Testament des Dr Mabuse* thus becomes to a large extent a paranoid text, in which Mabuse haunts the film as a powerful, sinister presence, threatening insanity, death and destruction to the ordinary mortals who come under his sway.

The paranoid qualities to the narrative – deriving from the nature and pervasiveness of Mabuse's power – go beyond the intimations of a repressed homosexual discourse within the film. In *Soul Murder*, Morton Schatzman takes issue with Freud's reading of the Schreber case, and puts forward his own interpretation. Freud argues that Judge Schreber's paranoia was a defence against his unconscious homosexual feelings for his father, Dr Schreber. Schatzman points out that Freud ignores the appalling ways in which Schreber's father abused him as a child; on Schatzman's reading, Judge Schreber's adult paranoia was the direct consequence of this childhood abuse. To describe Dr Schreber's character, Schatzman coins the term paranoidogenic: one who generates paranoia in others (1976: 122). I would argue that this is a more appropriate term for understanding the sense of paranoia in the narrative of *Das Testament des Dr Mabuse* – Mabuse, too, is a paranoidogenic character, generating a sense of persecution within the characters he influences. The wider cultural relevance of Schatzman's argument lies in the fact that Dr Schreber was a child-rearing pedagogue, whose books on the subject influenced several generations of German (and Austrian) families. And he preached precisely the sort of repressive and brutal authoritarianism which Reich and Adorno argue paved the way for the fascist psyche.

Not all of the characters in *Das Testament des Dr Mabuse*, however, are subjected to Mabuse's paranoidogenic power. Lohmann, for example, is not only outside the paranoid framework, but is himself the subject of associative links in the narrative. These are by no means as extensive or as compulsive as those referring to Mabuse, but they do serve to trace out a counter-trajectory to Mabuse's: one dealing with Lohmann's dedicated attempts to solve the crimes perpetrated by the gang. A typical example is the end of the scene which introduces Kent: as Kent's colleague receives a phone call telling them that Hofmeister has been dealt with, he learns that Lohmann is already at the scene of the crime. As he repeats 'Lohmann himself?', a cut takes us to Lohmann directing the investigation in Hofmeister's room. The implication – supported by subsequent events – is that Lohmann is a force to be reckoned with, and the criminals are aware of this. In the later stages of the film, the associative editing is less in evidence. In part, this is because the narrative pace quickens, and a more conventional use of cross-cutting for suspense and plot development is appropriate. Also, Lohmann's activities have been gradually eroding Mabuse's power – only Baum is still subject to this power in the film's final scenes. In other words, the sense of the film as a paranoid text diminishes in the later scenes.

The love story – the film's third narrative thread – offers a different sort of qualification. The first scene which lacks any type of associative cut – either at the beginning or the end – is the one which introduces Lilli and Kent as the film's romantic couple. This emphasises that the scene is something Mabuse is *not* directing. Like an interlude from the intensity generated by the associative editing, the love affair is marked off as qualitatively different. But, as Lilli learns of Kent's involvement with the gang, and encourages him to go to Lohmann and inform, the lovers expose themselves to Mabuse's power: they are thrust, abruptly, into the nightmare of kidnapping and attempted murder. For the first part of their ordeal, Lang cross-cuts between the two of them trapped in the briefing room, trying desperately to get out, and a group of the gangsters trapped in Anni's apartment, shooting it out with the police. This neatly balances Baum / Mabuse as threat (the time bomb) and Lohmann as threat (he's directing the police) to those trapped inside. However, although Kent and Lilli's ordeal is prolonged, they do at least survive, whereas the gangsters – except for Hardy, who, badly wounded, shoots himself – surrender to the police. This marks the beginning of Lohmann's ascendancy over the power of Mabuse.

Overall, the film's three narrative threads can be seen to interrelate hierarchically. Mabuse's discourse, operating through Baum and controlling the lives of the criminals and their victims, is dominant. This is the paranoidogenic thread, and it echoes the effect Lang generates in *Spione* (1928) around the master spy Haghi (played, like Mabuse, by Rudolf Klein-Rogge). Lohmann's police investigation functions as the incursion of the rational (not just the law, but a sense of order and balance) into this feverish, paranoid world. At first it is markedly subordinate to Mabuse's discourse, but gradually Lohmann gains the initiative and, by the end of the film, he has reasserted control. It is, however, a measure of Mabuse's power that this occurs only after Mabuse's death and Baum's descent into madness. The love affair is at the bottom of the hierarchy, to the extent that Lang does not even bother to return to it at the end of the film, an almost mandatory feature of, for example, the Hollywood cinema. But, in Lang's German master criminal movies, he is far more interested in the fate of the evil genius and his legacy than in the mundane world of romantic love. (After twenty-odd years in Hollywood, this changed. In *The Thousand Eyes of Dr Mabuse*, 1960, Lang does indeed follow the death of his master criminal with a return to the romantic couple for a concluding kiss.)

A Lang Motif: Doors

The film begins and ends with a shot of a door from the inside of a room, with Hofmeister inside the room (and trapped) at the beginning, and outside (and free) at the end, his place inside having been taken by Baum. These shots draw attention to another structuring principle in the film. Time and again, Lang will begin or end a scene on a shot of a door, or stage a crucial meeting in a doorway, or present the door threshold as peculiarly significant – as in the hallucination Hofmeister has of 2B advancing towards him. In particular, doors function in different symbolic ways for the different characters.

The opening scene establishes the pattern for Hofmeister. He is hiding out in the forgers' printing works – later, he tells Lohmann he was there 96 hours – when two men enter through the door (their entrance marked by an even louder thumping from the unseen machinery) and notice his presence. From their gestures – nothing can be heard but the machinery – we deduce that they have decided

to wait until he tries to leave before doing anything. They collect some sheets of printing paper and exit. As Hofmeister goes to the door and listens for them, Lang cuts to the other side of the door where the two men are listening for him. The door is thus shown as the threshold of danger. Although, in this scene, Hofmeister escapes from the room and survives the two attempts on his life in the street outside, it is the door which marks the source of the really terrifying threat. Back home, he phones Lohmann, but keeps looking, fearfully, towards the door. Suddenly, the lights go out – all that is visible are the flashes from his gun as he shoots towards the as yet unseen threat. Shortly afterwards, we hear his voice singing: he has ‘gone mad’.

Here, the two forgers entering the storeroom are echoed in the two members of 2B entering Hofmeister’s room. These two in turn figure in Hofmeister’s later hallucination, when Lohmann and a police doctor appear in the doorway to his cell. This is the ‘door paradigm’ for Hofmeister, and it will not be corrected – and his sanity restored – until the end of the film, when Baum alone appears in the doorway to his cell and introduces himself as Dr Mabuse. What happens next is unseen – the camera remains in the corridor outside the cell – but some sort of struggle takes place, ending with Hofmeister being led out by two attendants as Lohmann and Kent arrive. Hofmeister now recognises Lohmann and says, dramatically, ‘Der Mann heisst Mabuse’. He can, finally, speak the name that was repressed when he lost his mind.



Hofmeister’s door paradigm deals with his need to escape, not just from the series of rooms which imprison him, but also from threatening men. In his case, the doors are viewed from the inside, and the threatening male figures hint at his fears of a bodily invasion, with the door, in oneiric terms, as the body’s point of entry.

The door paradigm for Baum operates quite differently. Almost always viewed from the outside, Baum’s office door marks off his own territorial space, and serves to bar the intruder: repeatedly, characters seeking entry are told by Baum’s voice from within that he does not wish to be disturbed. It is only when Kent – who teams up with Lohmann in the film’s later stages – recognises the voice as that of ‘the boss’ and the two of them force an entrance through the door that Baum’s deception is exposed: he has connected the door handle to a recording of his voice. On the one hand, the device provides Baum with a ready-made alibi; on the other, it acts as a control on those who seek to enter his domain. Baum’s study is where he ‘becomes’

Mabuse, putting the latter’s criminal plans into practice. Early in the film, Baum’s servant Victor (Georg John) lets Dr Kramm into Baum’s study whilst the latter is doing his rounds. Only on this occasion – the first time we see Baum’s study door – is the door seen from the inside, a spatial positioning which emphasises that Baum’s territory is being invaded. The consequence of Kramm’s entry is that he not only discovers and reads some of Mabuse’s testament, but also connects what he reads with a newspaper report of a recent jewel robbery. When Baum returns to his office, Kramm tells him what he’s found and says he’s going to the police. This prompts Baum (off-screen) to phone 2B and order Kramm’s murder. Here, unauthorised access through Baum’s door leads to death.

The curtain dividing the briefing room operates in the same way. It is never opened, and the gang members are not allowed to pass through it. A flashback shows the fate of an over-curious member who tried to do this: his body was found beside the curtain. Both the door to Baum’s study and the curtain are thus dangerous thresholds: to breach them is to risk death, but they have to be breached in order to solve the mystery. It falls to Kent, as the young hero, to enact the crucial transgressions here, first, by rupturing the curtain in the briefing room; second, by smashing his way with Lohmann into Baum’s study. But it is a measure of Mabuse’s power that all Kent finds on the other side of the curtain / door are the traces of the master criminal. The man himself is still elusive.

Kent is also implicated in the film’s two key encounters in a doorway: when he opens his apartment door and Lilli is outside waiting for him, and when, after the time bomb episode, Baum sees him through Lohmann’s door at the police station and reacts with shock – a reaction which he immediately seeks to deny. These are two of the film’s turning points: Lilli’s arrival at Kent’s flat will result in his decision to go to the police; Baum’s involuntary reaction reveals to Lohmann that he knows Kent, which prompts Lohmann to take Kent with him when he next goes to Baum’s asylum. Here, complementing the moments when Kent bursts through Baum’s thresholds to expose his secret, opening the door provides a fresh impetus to the narrative development.



Another dramatic use of the door motif occurs when the police trap four gang members – Hardy, Bredow, Gregoriev and Karetzky (Theo Lingen) – in Anni’s apartment. This is the scene which is cross-cut with the first part of Kent and

Lilli's ordeal in the briefing room, and at both sites the door marks the imprisonment of those inside. In the briefing room, the door proves impossible to break through; in the apartment, the door is the only way out, and it is soon scarred with bullet holes as police and gangsters shoot it out.

The latter may be seen, in oneiric terms, as another example of a sexualised door. Hardy is the gangster who insists on taking over its defence, and he effects this by shooting through the letter-box at the police on the stairs outside. If the overtones of repressed 'homosexuality', and a Freudian reading of (some of) the film's doors are both accepted, then we can see the letter-box in anal terms: Hardy is symbolically defending his back passage. Whilst I accept that this sounds outrageous, it is an image typical of dream displacement. I would also draw attention to the close-up Lang inserts of the gangsters' guns dropping out through the letter-box when they surrender: it is highly suggestive of defecation. (Here, to continue being outrageous, Lohmann is the toilet-training father, complimenting those within on the satisfactory performance of delivering up their pieces.) Finally, the police marksman shoots Hardy through the letter-box, as if this were, in symbolic terms, an appropriate manner to deal with the 'deviant'.

Doors, of course, are a familiar motif in other Lang films, associated with mystery (*Secret beyond the Door*, 1948), threat (the serial killer's penetration of 'locked' doors in *While the City Sleeps*, 1956) and imprisonment (the doors slamming shut behind the hero in *Metropolis*, 1926). But, in *Das Testament des Dr Mabuse*, they are elaborated into a narrative motif within the film, one which not only has a variety of associations but also helps characterise key figures. The fact that, although at first locked in a cell and subsequently dead, Mabuse metaphorically escapes the confinement imposed on him by the film's doors is a measure of his power. Indeed, in the final stages of the film, his 'ghost' is seen opening both the asylum gates and Hofmeister's cell door to Baum, so that he serves, in effect, to imprison Baum at the end in place of himself. Part of the power of the film's ending lies in the sense that the spirit of Mabuse eludes capture; that he is still out there, capable of 'taking over' someone else, a point Lang was able to pick up on when he made *The Thousand Eyes of Dr Mabuse*.

Lohmann is at first unsuccessful in negotiating doors: Hofmeister's early phone call prevents him getting out of his office door (and to the opera); when he enters Hofmeister's cell in the police station, the latter fails to recognise him. But this changes in the later scenes. It is Lohmann who stands outside the door to Anni's apartment and supervises the surrender of the gangsters as they exit, an act which shows him gaining control not only over the criminal elements in the film, but also over the sexual deviance embodied by Hardy. By the end of this scene, Hardy is dead and his Dreise pistol has passed safely into Lohmann's hands. Similarly, it is Lohmann who, in the two scenes when he shares the door motif with Kent, has the necessary intuitions: that Baum knows Kent, and that the scribbled testament and the maps on Baum's desk are a pointer to Baum's nefarious plans. The latter example extends Lohmann's control – if imperfectly – to an understanding of Mabuse's 'terror regime', the film's political dimension. Finally, it is Lohmann who greets a Hofmeister cured of his insanity as he comes out of his cell at the end. Hofmeister, the reformed ex-corrupt cop, thus joins Kent, the reformed ex-criminal as a figure who, through the agency of Lohmann, rejoins society cleansed of

past transgressions. In these scenes, Lohmann's growing control over the film's narrative events, articulated through the door motif, extends to encompass all the major aspects of Mabuse's terror regime: criminal, sexual and political. Only the issue of madness escapes Lohmann's control, a fact he acknowledges when, in the film's final words, he remarks about Baum's insanity: 'This is outside a little police inspector's province'.

The final figure to be associated with doors is the anonymous attendant in Baum's asylum who seemed to regret the death of Mabuse. He is the person who, following Lohmann's remark, ends the film by closing the cell door – in effect, shutting us in with Baum. When he and a colleague are first drawn by the noise of the struggle between Hofmeister and Baum, he comments with some agitation: 'Who opened the door?'. The figure we saw opening the door was Mabuse's ghost; he then directed Baum inside. We assume, of course, that this is an illusion: we are seeing what Baum is imagining. But this hallucinatory moment returns us to the question of madness, which has the mysterious power to escape normal confines. Not only has Mabuse succeeded in imprisoning Baum in his old cell, but Baum is last seen tearing up the testament, which could be read as destroying the evidence of Mabuse's responsibility for the crimes. The attendant closing the door on Baum is an image of finality, but only for Baum himself. The idea of Mabuse is not so easily contained.



Illustrating his thesis about two major contrasting styles in the cinema – open and closed – Leo Braudy suggests that the closed doors in Lang's films are emblematic of the director's 'closed' style, in contrast to Jean Renoir's rivers and Roberto Rossellini's streets, which are emblematic of their 'open' style (1977: 40). But the use of the doors in *Das Testament des Dr Mabuse* goes much further than this. They function in all sorts of ways, serving not just to structure the narrative but also to illuminate the fears (Hofmeister), the psychosexual peculiarities (Hardy), the differing degrees of control (Baum; Mabuse; Lohmann) and the dramatic moments of breakthrough (Kent) associated with the key characters. In other words, they are a richly elaborated motif, a further testament to the sophistication of Lang's narrative construction.

Nazi Ideology and Overtones

Although *Das Testament des Dr Mabuse* was filmed before Hitler became Chancellor, the Nazis had secured the most

votes in the July 1932 Reichstag elections and were already a potent political force. It would have been very dangerous at that time for Lang to make the film explicitly critical of Nazi ideology. Nevertheless, over the years he has made claims for the film as a covert attack on the Nazis:

In 1943, when the film reached New York audiences, Lang wrote a 'Screen Foreword', expounding his original intentions: 'This film was made as an allegory to show Hitler's process of terrorism. Slogans and doctrines of the Third Reich have been put into the mouths of criminals in the film. Thus I hoped to expose the masked Nazi theory of the necessity to deliberately destroy everything which is precious to a people. Then, when everything collapsed and they were thrown into utter despair, they would try to find help in the "new order"'. (Kracauer [1947] 1966: 248)

Kracauer comments: 'Even though this self-interpretation smacks of hindsight, it is nevertheless true that the film foreshadows Nazi practices' ([1947] 1966: 248). However, he says relatively little about this. Subsequent commentators have likewise tended to make only brief references to the film's relevance to the contemporary political situation. To what extent does the film work as an allegory?

Hitler wrote the first part of *Mein Kampf* whilst in Landsberg prison in 1924; it is not difficult to see Mabuse's testament – produced under similar conditions and with similarly grandiose ambitions – as an allusion to this. In Baum's impassioned defence of him to Lohmann, Mabuse, like Hitler (from the Nazi point of view) was 'the genius whose spiritual legacy would topple your police-protected world'. The essence of Mabuse's master plan is to create terror and chaos. Money is only a means to end: jewellery is stolen in order to buy addictive drugs – cocaine and heroin – which are then 'pumped into mankind'. People are blackmailed not for money, but for the fear the blackmailing engenders. Forged banknotes will be introduced into the banks to undermine the currency. Crops will be destroyed; water polluted. Epidemics will reduce people's resistance. In his apparition before Baum in the latter's study, Mabuse's 'ghost' explains what he means by the 'Dominion of crime' he wishes to create: 'The soul of man must be profoundly terrorised by seemingly senseless crimes – crimes that profit no one and serve only to spread fear and terror'.

Even the Nazis, for all the intimidation, persecution and brutality of their methods, did not go this far. But the film may still be read as an allegory. Lang's argument is that Mabuse's 'Dominion of crime' in fact serves to create the conditions the Nazis secretly wanted: if the people are terrified, they will embrace a totalitarian regime. On this reading, Mabuse's testament is like the Nazi's hidden agenda. But we could equally see the 'Dominion of crime' as an extension of the Nazis' hate-fuelled tactics. Amongst those they cast as enemies – Jews, communists, homosexuals – the Nazis did indeed spread fear and terror, to say nothing of torture and murder. In the film, this is extended to include everyone. Equally, there are elements of Mabuse's plans which anticipate the Nazis' future activities during World War II. In particular, the destruction of the chemical factory that is carried out at the climax looks like the consequence of a bombing raid, complete with the insistent noise of an alarm siren.

The nature of the reworking of *Das Kabinett des Dr Caligari* also invites an allegorical reading. In Kracauer's well-known analysis of Wiene's film, *Caligari* is the

authoritarian tyrant, Cesare 'the common man who, under the pressure of compulsory military service, is drilled to kill and be killed' and Francis the figure who seeks to challenge this authority (1966: 65). Kracauer argues that Francis's critique is undermined by the revelation at the end of the film that he is insane. (This was not the intention of the film's scriptwriters. However, Lang himself – involved in the project at an early stage – was involved in the transformation of their story into a subjective flashback fantasy, with explanatory framing sequences: see McGilligan, 1997: 61.) I do not share Kracauer's point of view. Even if the director of the mental hospital is not Caligari, in the closing shots of the film, as he declares he now knows what to do to 'bring (Francis) back to sanity again', he seems very sinister: Francis is completely in his power and looks at him with real terror. The question of what happens next seems to me unresolved.

However, because of the character links mentioned earlier, *Das Testament des Dr Mabuse* may be seen, in part, as a gloss on *Das Kabinett des Dr Caligari*. And here the insanity of Hofmeister, the Francis figure, is a direct consequence of the orders of Baum, the tyrannical doctor. But Lang also makes the doctor himself a functionary, a mouthpiece for the master criminal, Mabuse. This expands the rather parochial allegory of the earlier movie, suggesting a system of tyranny altogether more widespread and threatening. An obvious question posed by *Das Testament des Dr Mabuse* is why, after ten years, should Lang return to this figure? The sense that Mabuse is a symbolic representation, in some form, of Hitler as madman is a strong argument for Lang's decision.



When Baum is lecturing to his students, there are two moments when he bangs the bench with the flat of his hand, a strikingly Hitlerian gesture. The first is when he quotes what Mabuse had said when, ten years ago, he had been ordered to surrender: 'I am the state' (a typically Hitlerian conceit). The second is when he speaks of Mabuse's writings as 'textbooks for the perpetration of crimes, elaborated to the finest detail' (a subversive summary of *Mein Kampf*?). Animated by his excitement about Mabuse, Baum becomes an imitation Hitler, hectoring his audience.

In the subtext, then, the gangsters are indeed like the Nazis, directed by a 'criminal genius' who brooks no dissent. In *Hitler: 1889-1936: Hubris*, Ian Kershaw quotes a memorandum of 15th December 1932, in which Hitler declared of the Nazi party: 'The basis of the political

organisation is loyalty. Loyalty in obedience can never be replaced by formal technical measures, of whatever sort' (1998: 403). Mabuse, through Baum, demands the same loyalty of his gang. Kent's role in the gang is symptomatic in two senses: unable to find work, he joins out of economic 'necessity' (one of the groups the Nazis appealed to was the unemployed); when he wants to leave, he's threatened with death (reflecting Nazi ruthlessness to those considered 'traitors').

In the film's symbolic system, Baum / Mabuse is the Hitler figure, Kent the disillusioned Nazi, Lohmann the representative of the Law in Weimar Germany and Hofmeister the Nazi victim. If certain moments are isolated, we can see these characters in their symbolic roles. Mabuse sitting up in bed and furiously scribbling and Baum addressing his students are two examples. Hofmeister fleeing down the road in terror after falling masonry has just missed him is another instance; as befits a Nazi victim, Hofmeister spends the whole film in a state of terror. As the film's hero, Kent is less cowed, but in his first clash with another gang member, the latter pointedly looks like a Nazi



bully-boy: Hitlerian slicked hair and moustache, heavy build, aggressive stance. In the turbulence and chaos of this world, Lohmann is the figure of reason and relative calm, but it is perhaps significant that, just as death claims Mabuse before Lohmann reaches him, so insanity claims Baum before Lohmann apprehends him – in other words, the law succeeds only by default. If the film is read as an allegory, its ending would seem to suggest that Nazi excesses may indeed be so great as to escape the law – 'This is outside a little police inspector's province' – but that those who order the excesses are, clearly, certifiable. Quite obviously, Goebbels had to ban the film.

Michael Walker

Michael Walker was a member of the editorial board of the old *Movie* magazine, and contributed to *The Movie Book of Film Noir* and *The Movie Book of the Western*. His book *Hitchcock's Motifs* was published by Amsterdam University Press in 2005.

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¹Tom Gunning notes certain links between *Das Testament des Dr Mabuse* and *Das Kabinett des Dr Caligari*, but omits the Hofmeister–Francis connection (2000: 147-8).

²Gunning pursues the ways in which Mabuse's power is dispersed through the film in much more detail than I do here (2000: 145-154)