HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Burak Sevingen, MA

Spies 1928

Fritz Lang (1890-1976)

OVERVIEW

Politics in Disarray. "Throughout the World… Strange Events Transpire" declares the first intertitle that kicks off Fritz Lang's *Spies.* Accordingly, the introductory sequence signifies political turmoil: mysterious gloved hands crack open an embassy safe and purloin a sealed envelope; a grinning biker speeds away; the trade minister's touring car is approached by assassins who shoot him before snatching away his briefcase; radio stations broadcast the sensational theft of the classified treaty and newspaper headlines question the authorities' competence to protect vital secrets; bureaucrats struggle with heaps of paperwork and yell at each other in a frenzy.

The Originator of Chaos. Finally, a roadster pulls by the security office and the driver dashes inside to report to the senior official. Before the informant can reveal the identity of the criminal mastermind pulling all the strings, he is killed by a sniper. "What power is at play here?" the security chief helplessly exclaims, looking at the camera. "I" replies the all-knowing and enigmatic Haghi, also gazing at us. All these take place in no more than two minutes. What follows is nearly three hours of action packed espionage revolving around the menacing spymaster Haghi and his formidably stealthy organization.

Historical Context. Haghi recalls Lang's previous supervillain from *Dr. Mabuse the Gambler* (1922). Then again, he reflects a different historical context. The decade known as the Roaring Twenties is approaching its end and the Great Depression is imminent. Mabuse's interest in psychoanalysis is gone—the focus is on politics and Haghi's scope is international.

The cursory scene with the minister getting shot is exemplary of Lang and scriptwriter Thea von Harbou's penchant for referring to actual events. It is comparable to the high profile assassinations in that decade and particularly that of Foreign minister Walter Rathenau—who was gunned down under similar circumstances shortly after signing an economic treaty with the Soviet Union.

Outwardly, Haghi is the director of Haghi Bank which serves as a façade for his spy network. The climactic scene with the police officers storming Haghi's headquarters with drilling machinery parallels the ARCOS (All-Russian Co-Operative Society) **Affair**—the London office of the Soviet economic mission was raided by police the previous year.

Narrative. In *Spies,* Haghi and his agents strive to acquire the mobilization plans of a Balkan state and steal the secret treaty with Japan. These are two branches of the "chimerical" (Nice, 2020) storyline that are indirectly related—mainly due to being the villain's two exploits. *Spies' "*patchwork"(O'Donoghue, 2007) of fascinating episodes enhances the convoluted plot.

Some of the scenes could work as standalone short films—e.g. the stories of the honorable Japanese diplomat and the treacherous Eastern European Colonel. It is also possible to imagine some shots being reordered without fundamentally altering the storyline. Jonathan Rosenbaum explains this by the "Lego-like construction of almost interchangeable parts" (2013). A demonstration of this flexibility was made with the export version for the American market—whose editors retracted a later scene (the one that takes place at the post office) to the beginning.

Cast. Haghi is played by Rudolph Klein-Rogge (Etzel in Lang's *Die Nibelungen,* Rotwang in *Metropolis*, and the titular character in two Dr. Mabuse films—besides parts in *The Wandering Image*, *Four for the Woman,* and *Destiny* in 1920-1921). The rest of the principal cast would work with Lang in the following year's *Woman in the Moon.* As in the latter, Gerda Maurus plays a strong female lead. Lien Deyer's temptress Kitty is a secondary part (yet third billed in the credits) who hints to the femme fatales of the coming decades.

Legacy. *Spies* features high-tech gadgets, a supervillain orchestrating destruction with his private army, and the ultimate invasion of his lair. The influence of its concepts on James Bond films is obvious and that's only an example of *Spies*' lasting legacy. It is hardly outdated, as "we are not far here from the high wire sensations and baroque convolutions offered today by the *Mission: Impossible* films" (Martin, 2006). Critics have regarded it to present a "matrix for half of the movies ever made" (O'Brien, 1995) and offer "the very essence of an entire twentieth century of cinematic fiction" (Martin, 2006).

Spies still feels fresh—and relevant. In "Spies: Now and Forever" (1995), Geoffrey O'Brien considered the film in the context of 90s. For him, Haghi evoked images of the Oklahoma City bombing, Aum Shinrikyo cult's sarin attack on the Tokyo metro and various third-world dictators. Every era, it seems, has its own Haghis and viewers of today would not have trouble spotting them.

CHARACTERS

Haghi. Behind the façade of his bank, Haghi controls a powerful international espionage network. Seemingly disabled, he mostly sits behind his desk attended by his nurse. Information is channeled to him via high-tech devices and numerous functionaries. He commands a fiercely loyal and well armed gang and a cohort of female spies. Haghi sometimes changes disguise to assume other identities—bank director, (double) Agent No. 719 and Nemo the clown.

Sonya Baranilkowa. Sonya is Haghi's top operator. Originally from Russia, she is a devout Christian and her family was persecuted by the Czarist regime.

Agent No. 326. The secret agent is assigned to track down the powerful criminal mastermind who is wreaking havoc. He falls in love with Sonya. Interestingly, Willy Fritsch is billed sixth in the credits.

Dr. Masimoto. Head of the Japanese diplomatic mission and intelligence. Masimoto keeps Sonya under surveillance but Haghi hinders his plans to capture her. Masimoto also fails to protect the confidential treaty documents—Haghi's agent Kitty cunningly steals them from him. The diplomat is played by Romania born actor Lupu Pick.

Kitty. Another temptress employed by Haghi. Kitty seduces Dr. Masimoto and steals the plans of the secret Japanese treaty. The actress Lien Meyers is third billed in the credits, right after Haghi and Sonya.

Colonel Jellusic. **"**Colonel Extraordinaire of General Headquarters" of an unidentified Balkan state. He sells his country's mobilization plans to Haghi. Agent 326 follows his traces to get to the criminal mastermind—who eventually betrays the colonel by disclosing his identity. When his treason is learnt by his commanders, Jellusic commits suicide. Jellusic is another shady character played by Fritz Rasp (*Metropolis* and *Woman in the Moon*).

Jason. Jason is the chief of the Secret Service and Agent 326's supervisor. The bureaucrat is mostly confused and overwhelmed—clearly his wit and organizational skills are not on par with those of Haghi's.

Franz. Franz is Agent 326's resourceful and amiable chauffeur who doubles as a valet.

Morrier. Morrier is the saboteur who detaches 326's carriage. Previously, Haghi's henchmen had saved Morrier from the gallows with a daring raid. Morrier is absolutely grateful and proves his loyalty. Following the train sabotage—after he is cornered by the police—he commits suicide rather that betraying his master. It is a secondary part but actor Louis Ralph is billed fourth in the credits.

SYNOPSIS

Chief of Secret Service Jason summons Agent No. 326 to find out more about the scandalous crime wave and its elusive mastermind—Haghi, who, thanks to his spies, is already aware of the identity of the agent assigned to track him. With his bank serving as a front for an extensive espionage network, Haghi schemes to acquire the military mobilization plans of an unidentified Balkan country and getting hold of the secret documents about the pact that would soon be signed with Japan. He orders top agent Sonya Baranilkowa to get the plans from an officer named Colonel Jellusic. Sonya also tasked with finding out about 326; the two are mutually attracted. 326 learns that Sonya is an émigré from Russia and her family members were persecuted by the Czar. When the corrupt Jellusic hands Sonya the military plans 326 mistakenly assumes that he is her lover. Sonya is nowhere to be found and in a lonely night, 326 meets Japanese intelligence officer Dr. Masimoto, who tells him that Sonya was an important spy surveilled by his operatives.

326 pursues Jellusic, predicting that this could help him find out more about Haghi, who in return, sees to it that the colonel commits suicide in order to prevent him from compromising his own identity. Meanwhile, the treaty with Japan is signed and Haghi obtains the top-secret document by having another female agent named Kitty to seduce Dr. Masimoto—who, disgraced, performs hara-kiri.

Information provided by a mysterious operative with code name 719 prompts 326 to board a train. Unbeknownst to 326 and his supervisor Jason, agent 719 is none other than Haghi disguised as a double agent, who had planned this ruse to get rid of 326 aboard the train. 326 somehow survives the sabotage that wrecks the train. Soon, Sonja is abducted by Haghi's henchmen and confined to a cell in his stronghold. The police raid the compound; officers and 326 pull down the walls and save Sonya before Haghi can have the building destroyed. Jason and his boss reckon that the evasive Haghi is the same person as Agent 719—who is known to use the disguise of Nemo the clown. Officers soon swarm into the theater amidst the clown's number. Once Haghi/Nemo realizes that he has no way of escaping, he pulls out a gun shoots himself.

SCENES

"Throughout the World… Strange Events Transpire" declares the first intertitle that kicks off Fritz Lang's *Spies.* Accordingly, the introductory sequence signifies political turmoil: mysterious gloved hands crack open an embassy safe and purloin a sealed envelope; a grinning biker speeds away; the trade minister's touring car is approached by assassins who shoot him before snatching away his briefcase; radio stations broadcast the sensational theft of the classified treaty and newspaper headlines question the authorities' competence to protect vital secrets; bureaucrats struggle with heaps of paperwork and yell at each other in a frenzy.

The assassination of the minister in the opening sequence recalls the murder of Weimar Republic's Foreign Minister Walter Rathenau. Actor Theodor Loos' character in *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* would also be assassinated in his car at the stoplights.



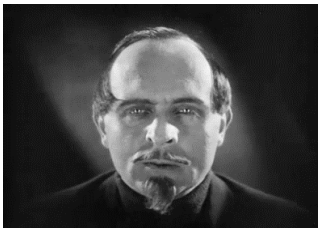
The chief of Secret Service Jason is helpless about the scandalous crime wave; he summons Agent No. 326 who happens to be on an undercover assignment posing as a homeless man. 326 is ordered to find out about its elusive mastermind.



The master villain's compound is presented with a distinct visual style and attention to geometry. The lair is composed of a complex network of stairs and floors. The Haghi Bank serves as a front for an extensive espionage network— information gathered by the spies is processed by countless clerks and served in digests to the boss.



Haghi's Lair and Operations. Thanks to his spies, Haghi is already aware of the identity of the agent assigned to track him. The supervillain Haghi sometimes gazes into the camera. Haghi's features resemble both Lenin and Trotsky (Rosenbaum, 2013). Haghi is played by Rudolph Klein-Rogge (Etzel in Lang's *Die Niebelungen,* Rotwang in *Metropolis*, and the titular character in two Dr. Mabuse films—besides parts in *The Wandering Image*, *Four for the Woman,* and *Destiny* in 1920-1921).



Haghi is featured on a wheelchair in front of his control panel. His personal nurse is often in the background. In Peter Bogdanovich's *Fritz Lang in America* it is stated that the nurse is revealed to be Haghi's mother. No such references are made in the film. Haghi commands a fiercely loyal and well armed gang and a cohort of female spies. He sometimes changes disguise.



Thanks to his high-tech surveillance network, apparently Haghi does not need to leave his office for information; it is supplied to him through various channels—Haghi studies the file about Agent No. 326 compiled by his spies.



Haghi's lair is guarded by a security detail armed to the teeth—it is accessible from the legitimate Haghi Bank and guarded by leather clad bodyguards armed with grenades. The fleeting shadow of a man with top hat about to enter Haghi's secret compound signifies the villain's connections to the corrupt bourgeoise and their complicity in high-profile criminal affairs.



He is currently focused on two unrelated operations. He is primarily interested in acquiring the military mobilization plans of an unidentified Balkan country. His second objective involves getting hold of the secret documents about the pact that would soon be signed with Japan. His first step is to blackmail a character named Lady Leslane with her secretly taken photos at an opium den and learn the basic facts about the confidential Japanese treaty. The corrupt aristocrat who compromises state secrets is depicted in an Orientalist composition. Similar to Haghi, security bureaucrats utilize modern technology and advances in communications: senior officials hold a teleconference call with the Chief of Secret Service.





Enter Sonya Baranilkowa, one of Haghi's top spies. Sonya sports a flapper style like most other women in *Spies*; she rushes to Agent 326's rescue with an express. Sonya is an early action heroine and possibly one of the strongest female characters in Lang's films. In the following year's *Woman in the Moon*, Gerda Maurus plays a strong female lead as a leader of a space expedition.



Haghi and his indispensable spy Sonya have an uneasy partnership. She is helping Haghi buy the mobilization plans of a Balkan country from an officer named Colonel Jellusic. Haghi assigns her a new task and instructs her to find out about Agent 326.



A Setup. 326 barely settles down in his hotel suite when a gunshot is heard. Sonya comes running and asks from his help. She says she had to shoot a man who was trying to rape her. 326 and his resourceful valet Franz hide her and manage to dupe the inquiring officials. Shortly after the police leaves, Sonya quietly vanishes.

Sonya's Story. 326 and Sonya were clearly mutually attracted. Although she is unwilling to harm the agent, Haghi persuades her to invite him to her house. Here, they have tea and she tells him a little about herself. Sonya is an émigré from Russia and a devout Christian; her family members were persecuted and executed by the Czar's police. Sonya's home is decorated to honor her faith and heritage.





Colonel Extraordinaire Jellusic. Sonya and 326 get along well and go to a dancing club. However, Haghi abruptly summons her for an assignment and she hastily leaves 326 once again. He trails her and watches as she meets Jellusic. The colonel hands Sonya the military plans and she makes the payment. 326 mistakenly assumes that he is her lover. He goes to her house and finds it stripped bare with no signs of her. Heartbroken 326 ends up drinking in a crappy bar. Here, he will have a faithful encounter.



A Japanese Diplomat. At the bar, 326 is approached by a Japanese diplomat and intelligence officer named Dr. Masimoto. He offers 326 his sympathies and by way of consolation, tells him that Sonya was an important spy surveilled by his operatives. Haghi was aware of them closing in on her and had tipped her at the last moment to get away. 326 and Dr. Masimoto part ways amiaby; a sensual moment follows as the latter feels the first drops of rain. The scene signifies Dr. Masimoto's sensitivity, loneliness—and vulnerability, as it foreshadows the trap he will soon fall into.



Meanwhile, Haghi and his indispensable spy Sonya square off about 326.



Following the Trail of Jellusic. 326 tells his supervisor Jason about the foreign colonel and identifies him to be Jellusic from the intelligence files. Realizing that this lead could link them with Haghi, 326 takes an airplane to catch up with Jellusic. Haghi is well aware that Secret Service's capture of Jellusic would compromise his own identity and consequently betrays the colonel by spreading the word about his treason. Jellusic finds that his superiors waiting for him in his apartment to for the colonel about his treachery. Confronted by them, Jellusic chooses to commit suicide. A hookah, his many trophies and a life-size portrait painting of himself point out to the colonel's vanity. Jellusic is another shady character played by Fritz Rasp (*Metropolis, Woman in the Moon*).



Japanese Treaty. Meanwhile, the treaty with Japan is signed. Dr. Masimoto is tasked with taking the top-secret document to his country. In order to mislead prying eyes, he dispatches three couriers separately while he prepares to take the treaty to Japan personally. However, a hidden microphone records the conversations in the Japanese embassy and Haghi's spy with earphones prepares a transcript.



All three emissaries are intercepted and murdered by assassins of Haghi who gets frustrated when he finds out that they were mere decoys.

A Temptress. The masterspy has more than a few tricks up his sleeve and is undeterred by the failure. He dispatches a female agent named Kitty to con the diplomat. Haghi instructs Kitty to seduce Dr. Masimoto and she prepares for her mission by studying his photo. Lien Deyer's character is a vamp that hints at femme fatales of coming decades' film noirs. On a rainy night, Kitty poses as a street urchin to attract his attention. He invites her to his house and is bedazzled by her beauty.





The compassionate diplomat is also moved by the vamp's fabricated story about her parents. In order to get Masimoto to pity her, Kitty recounts a quick story about her family, an abusive father and an alcoholic (and possibly prostitute) mother—visualized for a couple of seconds with two shots. The actress Rosa Valetti was a cabaret owner and performer who also played in *The Blue Angel* with Marlene Dietrich and appeared in Lang's *M* as a club proprietor.



Dr. Masimoto tries to resist her advances but after a while gives in. To fool Masimoto, Kitty acts like a subservient geisha…in reality she is anything but.
When he wakes up, he sees that Kitty has left and has taken the treaty dossier with her. Haunted and shamed by the apparition of his murdered emissaries, Masimoto kills himself by performing hara-kiri. The expressionistic scene features the Rising Sun Flag.





Dr. Masimoto's exit signifies the multicultural scope of *Spies* as Romania-born German actor Lupu Pick's character performs hara-kiri in front of a Buddha statue.



One of Haghi's trusted operatives named Morrier was previously saved from the gallows with a daring raid. Haghi summons him for a critical mission. The grateful Morrier will soon prove that he will remain loyal to the end. The scene with him on his knees, bowing to Haghi parallels Kitty's submission to Dr. Masimoto; with his unflinching loyalty, Morrier recalls Georg in *Dr. Mabuse the Gambler* and anticipates Hardy in *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*.



Hadgi in Disguise. 326 informs Chief Jason about the serial numbers of the bills that were paid to Jellusic. The chief instructs a mysterious agent—with code number 719—to find out the source of the payment made to the colonel. Oddly enough, 719 changes the serial numbers of the bills and relates a story about a



Russian courier who is expected to cross the border with the stolen treaty. Acting on this tip, Jason orders 326 to board the train to intercept this courier. The face of 719 is not shown but it is mentioned that as part of his undercover work he performs as a clown at a burlesque show. Unbeknownst to Jason and 326, agent 719 is none other than Haghi disguised as a double agent. Soon after boarding the train, 326 holds the amulet gifted by Sonya. The shot features two Lang motifs, the amulet and the hand, together. In Lang's Westerns, the amulet brings death rather than good luck. In this instance, it actually helps 326 survive an approaching catastrophe.



Train Crash. The tip about a courier is part of a ruse to lure 326 and get rid of him aboard the train. Haghi's henchman Morrier detaches 326's passenger car which is left stranded in a tunnel. Another train coming at full speed soon collides with it. The excitement of various technological advances are counterpointed with the wreckage of the train after the collision.



Sonya learns about the accident and rushes to the scene aboard an express locomotive. She is an early action heroine and possibly one of the strongest female characters in Lang's films.



Although 326's carriage was wrecked by the devastating crash, she is able to pull the lightly injured agent out of the rubble. Once again, the favorite Lang motif, the hand, comes into view. 326 is holding Sonya's gift in the wreckage of the train. It has brought him good luck, contrary to its role in Lang's Westerns—see *Rancho Notorious* and *Western Union*, where the amulet brings death rather than good luck. In *Spies*, it helps 326 survive the train crash.



Sonya and 326 spot the saboteur running away and go after him. A man with a movie camera happens to be preoccupied with shooting the accident site, so 326 and Sonya feel free to help themselves to his motorcycle. The cameraman—a filmmaker—frantically cranking his wind-up camera predates Dziga Vertov's experimental film *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). Vertov's film projects a belief in progress and so does *Spies.* Not without a reserve though—the breathtaking train scene ends with a terrible crash, turning this great symbol of modernity into wreckage.



Modern communications: Thanks to the policeman using the phone lines to issue an alert, the train saboteur Morrier can't get too far.



Police Raid. The high speed chase that ensues takes them through the city and ends up at a hotel where Morrier gets cornered. He evades capture by killing himself right after broadcasting a warning message to Hadgi. His private army is on standby, geared for combat. Shortly after, Sonya and 326's driver Franz are abducted by Haghi's hitmen and confined to a cell in his stronghold. Police raids the compound and officers ransack all the offices. The climactic scene with the police officers storming Haghi's headquarters with drilling machinery parallels the ARCOS (All-Russian Co-Operative Society) Affair—the London office of the Soviet economic mission was raided by police the previous year.

The police gather truckloads of documents and arrest all of the master spy's underlings but Haghi is nowhere to be found. He has quit feigning disability and walked out of the compound from a hidden exit. The police receive his ultimatum—unless they leave, the entire building would be filled with poison gas.

This prompts policemen to use drilling machines and oxygen tanks to crack vaults and rip apart walls. Sonya and Franz manage to loosen their ties and hold off their captors until 326 comes to their rescue.



Clown Nemo's Last Act. Concurrently, a clerk in the intelligence agency notices that the serial numbers of the bills had been changed to prevent them from being tracked to their source. Jason and 326 deduce that this could have been only done by Agent 719. They expect him to hide using his identity as Nemo the clown and head out to the cabaret to arrest him. Officers soon swarm into the theater amidst the clown's number. Once Haghi/Nemo realizes that he has no way of escaping, he pulls out a gun shoots himself. "Curtains!" is his final command just before going down. And thus ends *Spies* ends with the burlesque show of Haghi—In his demise, the clown Nemo prefigures the evil clowns of horror genre.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Haghi – Disagreeable (Omniscient and Diabolical, Player)
Sonia – Agreeable (Faithful)
Kitty – Disagreeable (Deceptive)

Haghi – **Disagreaable** *Omniscient and Diabolical.*

As Metropolis' Fredersen, Haghi utilizes state-of-the-art technology to monitor his organization and persons of interest (such as Masimoto). His organization is designed to conspire and his henchmen are geared for combat; yet, his ultimate objective is unclear. As Doctor Mabuse, he aims to incite chaos (for the sake of doing so); he may also have international connections.

Player. The supervillain Haghi frequently gazes into the camera; his features resemble both Lenin and Trotsky (Rosenbaum, 2013); Most of the time, Haghi is seen on a wheelchair in front of his control panel. Similar to the titular villain of *Dr. Mabuse the Gambler*, Haghi is able to change his appearance and identity. His position at his headquarters seems to be his main identity, yet it is revealed that his handicap was deceptive and the wheelchair was a prop. His final appearance is the clown; *Spies* ends with the burlesque show of Haghi in disguise. In his demise, the clown Nemo prefigures the evil clowns of horror genre)

Sonia Baranilkowa Agreeable (Faithful)

Sonia is a devout Christian; she has a corner at her apartment to honor her Russian legacy and family (who were persecuted by the Czar). Sonia is initially one of Haghi's top lietunants. After meeting Agent 326, her love turns her into a loyal and trusted comrade.

Kitty Disagreeable (Deceptive)

Kitty is a proto-femme fatale; she not only seduces Masimoto, also relays an elaborate story about her background and abusive parents to earn his sympathy. Kitty is Haghi's second best asset (after Sonia, it seems). Her trickery prepares Masimoto's doom and his subsequent suicide.

THEMES

Society – *(*Technology, Modernity, Surveillance, Code of Honor)
Politics – (Intrigue)

SOCIETY

Technology. Like Mabuse before him, Haghi has a keenness for advanced technology, especially machinery that benefits surveillance. For a large part of the film, he is mostly immobile, seated behind a

desk making executive decisions. His agents use miniature cameras and microphones to record information which is then processed by clerks and delivered in digests to Haghi. The instruments at his disposal are the pneumatic tube, teleprompter device, intercom, telephone and switchboard.

Modernity. With its advanced transportation and communication systems, *Spies* showcases a "model kit of modernity" (O'Brien, 1995: 68). In a scene, the modern city (unidentified) gets to be the backdrop of a high speed chase. The hero and heroine encounter a cameraman, frantically cranking his wind-up camera and shooting the accident site. This filmmaker predates Dziga Vertov's experimental film *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). Vertov's film projects a belief in progress and so does *Spies.* Not without a reserve though—the breathtaking train scene ends with a terrible crash, turning this great symbol of modernity into wreckage.

Surveillance. A blind man with his service dog, security chief's aide, a maid and any bystander—watchful agents are everywhere and everyone can potentially be a spy. Japanese spies tail Haghi's agents while he eavesdrops on their communications by way of a miniature microphone hidden in a vase.

Code of Honor. Whereas 1922's *Dr. Mabuse the Gambler* would at times turn gloomy, *Spies* for the most part has an upbeat tone. Still, the two films have matching suicide counts. The motivation of the three individuals to do so is their code of honor: Dr. Masimoto feels disgraced, Colonel Jellusic is ashamed of his own actions and Morrier is absolutely loyal to Haghi. Interestingly, no one associated with Haghi ever betrays him.

POLITICS

Intrigue. The assassination of the minister in the opening sequence recalls the murder of Weimar Republic's Foreign Minister Walter Rathenau. Actor Theodor Loos' character in *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* would also be assassinated in his car at the stoplights.

Discussion questions

In his seminal book *From Caligari to Hitler*, Siegfried Kracauer maintains that *Dr. Mabuse the Gambler* is a "premonition" (Kracauer, 2004: 84) about Nazism that foreshadows the rise of Hitler–as is the case with many other films of the Weimar era. How about *Spies*? Does it fit or contradict Kracuer's approach?

Top Nazis reportedly appreciated Lang's *Die Niebelungen* and were impressed by *Metropolis*. They disliked the 1933 Dr. Mabuse sequel so much that they banned it. Where would *Spies* fit in this spectrum?

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