HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Burak Sevingen, MA

Dr. Mabuse the Gambler 1922

Fritz Lang (1890-1976)

OVERVIEW

> Mankind swept about and trampled down in the wake of war and revolution, takes revenge for years of anguish by indulging in lusts… and by passively or actively surrendering to crime
>
> —1923 Brochure for *Dr. Mabuse the Gambler*

The original publicity brochure introduced *Dr Mabuse the Gambler* as a document of its era (Decla-Bioscop). So did the titles—plural because the film was screened in two installments: *The Great Gambler: A Picture of the Time* was released in April 1922 and was followed about a month later by *Inferno: A Game for the People of our Age.*

A glimpse at the historical context hints at the ambitious scope of Lang's project. These were turbulent times in the aftermath of World War I—the socialist Spartacist uprising had been crushed and the Weimar Republic officially declared in 1919. There were high profile political murders in the preceding years and the foreign minister Rathenau would fall victim to an assassination just a few weeks after the release of the second part of the film. Street fighting between paramilitary groups and attacks on striking workers by right wing militias would continue. War reparation payments were an important economic burden and would eventually lead to the French invasion of Ruhr. At about the same time, hyperinflation would kick in, paralyzing the economy.

Thea von Harbou's script was based on the popular novel of Norbert Jacques which was serialized in the *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung*. At first glance, the novel was a curious choice to represent such a loaded political context. It had darkly alluring and fanciful literary precedents. Sherlock Holmes's nemesis Moriarty was one. "The greatest schemer of all time, the organizer of every devilry" (Doyle, 355) was played by the German actor Gustav von Seyffertitz in a film adaptation released the same year. There was also Fantomas, the sadistic and elusive criminal mastermind. The murderous Fu Manchu and hypnotist Svengali both shared characteristics with Doctor Mabuse. A few years later, Lang would create another master criminal named Hadgi in the international espionage thriller *Spies* (1928).

Dr. Mabuse the Gambler starred Rudolf Klein-Rogge who would later play the mad scientist in *Metropolis* as well as Alfred Abel, the ruler of the city. Bernhard Goetzke the police investigator had played the lead as the gloomy Death in Lang's loss and mourning themed 1921 film *Destiny (Weary Death: A German Folk Story in Six Verses*).

Carl Hoffmann's cinematography is remarkable for the innovative special effects and outdoor scenes with high-speed car chases. Art direction and set design of Kettlehut and Volbrecht—who would also contribute to *Metropolis*—introduced a dazzling variety of styles with elements of art deco, cubism, expressionism, African tribal art and art nouveau.

The time was the early 1920s, and the decade known as the Jazz Age was in full swing. *Metropolis*' notorious *Yoshiwara* club scenes appear condensed in comparison to the five distinct entertainment venues in *Dr. Mabuse the Gambler—Folies Bergeres, 17+4, Schramm's, Palais Andalusia* and *Petit Casino,* all major settings. In one scene, Weimar era cabaret performer Anita Berber is seen performing in a tuxedo. Berber was known for her androgynous and provocative style and was the subject of a painting by Otto Dix (1925).

A street scene in *The Gambler* shows a group of radicals converging for protest. Behind them on the wall is a barely visible but prominently placed publicity poster of an American film—*Burnt Wings*, released by the Universal Films in the USA two years ago. It was an American drama that took place in Paris and New York, starring Frank Mayo (AFI). As for the blockbusters, Rudolf Valentino was all the rage the previous year with the *Sheik*. Its Orientalist theme is echoed in the collective hypnosis sequence in *The Gambler* with the screening of a short film within the film featuring a desert caravan. Another Valentino film, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* was among the popular films of 1921—and so was Charlie Chaplin's *Kid*. 1922 brought *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror* by F.W. Murnau*, Robin Hood* from Hollywood and it was the year that Alfred Hitchcock began directing in the United Kingdom.

About two decades later, Hitchcock himself would feature psychoanalysts as the main characters of his *Spellbound* (1945) with a Sigmund Freud lookalike actor. Freud at the time of *The Gambler* had recently published *The Uncanny* (1919) and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). That very year, Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) had also featured a psychiatrist as the titular character.

The last film and *The Gambler* were productions of Decla-Bioscop AG that later merged with Ufa film studio which would produce the very costly *Metropolis* (1927) by Lang himself and later the first sound film from Germany, Sternberg's *The Blue Angel* (1930).

Dr. Mabuse would end up being confined to a mental hospital. A decade later, Lang would revisit him in the *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*—only to have him die there with natural causes before the plot thickens. The chameleon's core skill illuminates his long film career—as a character he dies and reappears not by resurrection but thanks to other individuals assuming his identity. Regardless of the man himself, the concept has lived on. Lang's *The 1000 Eyes of Dr. Mabuse* (1960) triggered a series of Mabuse films directed by Reinl, Kingler, May and others. These came out at the time of popular Edgar Wallace adaptations and had themes in common with them. Later, directors with diverse and unique cinematic visions such as Jesús Franco and Claude Chabrol had their own takes on Mabuse respectively in 1972 and 1990. Mabuse has had a pervasive influence and contemporary pop culture villains are likely to have a bit of the evil doctor in them—Superman's Lex Luthor, Batman's Joker and James Bond's Blofeld are among the many.

"Ma-bu-se… wasn't he that doctor during the inflation crises?" asks the police detective in 1933's *The Testament*. And again in retrospect, this time almost forty years later, a lawman in Lang's *1000 Eyes* refers to Mabuse as a "criminal genius who wanted to shock the world with terrorist acts, undermining governments and establishing a fantastic reign of crime" but whose "activities were hushed as Hitler appeared on the scene and the whole Nazi nightmare…". "Cock and bull stories!" a skeptic intervenes. This is a totally different world, Post WW2—Cold War, atomic age, nuclear weapons, advanced electronics … Times had changed but it is as if with each reworking, Lang got more specific about the original historical context.

But once again, back to *The Gambler*. These are still the first months of 1922. NSDAP Chairman Adolf Hitler is little known outside of Munich where his thugs are brawling in beer halls, Hyperinflation is around the corner and the German Mark would be almost worthless by the end of next year. Even more social turmoil would follow with riots, political assassinations, putsch attempts. There would be an interlude in 1924 with the Dawes plan ushering in an era of the economic stability. Several years of calm would last until the 1929 World Economic Crises—but then those are issues of another decade which, among others things, would also bring about *The Testament of Dr Mabuse* in 1933 and the end of the Weimar Republic.

CHARACTERS

Dr. Mabuse. The arch villain is a master of disguise and hypnosis. As a gambler, psychiatrist, forger, larcenist, crime boss and market manipulator, Mabuse invariably aims for domination.

State Attorney Norbert von Wenk. The law enforcer is smart, pragmatic and resourceful. Wenk mostly relies on intuition and operates solo.

Cara Carozza, 'the Dancer'. "Am I no more than an instrument for you?" Carozza reproaches Mabuse whom she blindly loves. Popular revue performer is keenly perceptive and ruthlessly rapacious—which makes her his useful agent and informer.

Countess Dusy Told. Detached and disenchanted, the countess is hungry for genuine thrills and "strong sensations". She spends time at night clubs amusing herself by observing gamblers. She is obviously alienated from the count and yet remains faithful to him all the way through.

Count Told. When he is not playing cards with his circle of friends, the refined aristocrat is perfectly content spending time alone with his collection of figurines and has excellent taste in art—which the countess cares little about. In contrast to the domineering Mabuse, he is a weak character. The actor Alfred Abel had played the masterful patriarch of the city in *Metropolis*—a fact which may not be immediately noticeable thanks to the sharp contrast highlighted by the count's effeminacy.

Edgar Hull. Son of an industrialist, the wealthy playboy becomes a prey for Dr Mabuse who manipulates him first by hypnotizing and later by using Carozza the dancer. He is murdered in a plot orchestrated by the latter on the orders of Mabuse.

Other Characters: Dr. Mabuse's Gang

The master villain is formidable thanks in part to his team whose members are noteworthy because they illustrate the scope of his methods and source of power.

Spoerri. Make-up artist and assistant, Spoerri is frequently bullied by Mabuse who keeps him in the game by exploiting his cocaine addiction.

Georg. Driver and assassin, Georg is Mabuse's trusted and most loyal henchman. Captured during the climactic police siege, he proceeds to commit suicide in his cell.

Pesch. Another hitman who handles mechanical tasks—which in the Mabuse world corresponds to bomb making. He is the noticeably reluctant team member (Georg John later played the blind panhandler in *M*). What keeps him going is desperation; Pesch is murdered to prevent him from snitching to the police.

Hawasch. The counterfeiter is played by slapstick star Károly Huszár. Among the crew members, he is the one whose sociopathic tendencies are most clear. He is 'killed in action' fighting the security forces at the finale.

Fine. The only woman in the gang; she is initially based at the forgery. Mabuse later transfers her to his house where she assumes the appearance of a maid—Grete Berger later played one of the very few female parts in *Metropolis* as a working class woman. Along with Hawasch, she is killed while defending Mabuse's lair during the last stand.

SYNOPSIS

Dr. Mabuse's fraudulent psychiatric practice serves as a front for his criminal operation which rests on three pillars: playing the system by exploiting its weaknesses with well planned schemes as he demonstrates with his carefully orchestrated stock market manipulation; cheating at gambling to enslave and extort individuals; counterfeiting. Mabuse targets a young socialite named Edgar Hull, who is quickly entranced by the hypnotist's penetrating gaze. During the card game, Hull appears hazed under Mabuse's spell and loses a great deal of money. Mabuse later arranges that Hull is beguiled by his accomplice and girlfriend Carozza. Meanwhile State Attorney Wenk is investigating Mabuse's crimes and interviews Hull. The investigation takes him to couple of illicit venues, where he meets the aristocratic Told couple and ultimately gets to play cards with Mabuse himself—the latter fails to completely hypnotize Wenk.

Having realized that the net is tightening around him, Mabuse orders Carozza to coordinate the murder of her boyfriend, who is quick to learn about the scheme. Wenk persuades Hull to act as a bait; however, despite the assurance of police protection, Mabuse's assassin manages to kill him. Carozza is arrested on sight and placed in a cell. Mabuse orders Wenk's murder; when the bomb plot fails, he incites a group of radicals to revolt and during the chaos, has his hitman murdered. Also apprehensive about Caruzza's possible cooperation with the police, Mabuse has a cyanide pill delivered to her. She complies and takes her own life.

Mabuse attends a party at the Tolds' residence; he first ruins the Count's reputation by making him cheat with his telepathic powers and later kidnaps the Countess. The distraught Count consults a psychiatrist—who ends up being none other than Dr. Mabuse, whose vile and suggestions lead him to commit suicide.

Wenk attends a demonstration of one of Mabuse's personas, the hypnotist Sandor Weltman, who hypnotizes Wenk—instructs him to leave and drive to the cliff atop the Melior quarry. Wenk is saved at the last moment from falling to his death and leads the police to storm Mabuse's stronghold. After a fierce fight, the captive Countess is saved and Mabuse escapes from a trap door. He seeks shelter at the counterfeit shop—where he hallucinates until he is captured in a maniacal state.

SCENES



The Player. A meticulously planned heist is underway aboard a train carriage. A courier is mugged and robbed of a confidential document pertaining to an international commodity deal. Sitting by the phone, Dr. Mabuse oversees that his plan is minutely executed. His team swiftly delivers him the dossier and Mabuse's assistant Spoerri prepares him for the next phase of the scheme at the stock market. Putting on the disguise of a financial speculator, Mabuse joins the trading floor.

It turns out that Mabuse's intention is to make use of the sensitive information by withholding it. He takes full advantage of the panic among traders and rides the market's waves. He buys when prices tumble and then at a precise moment, he has the file released—only to start selling as the prices recover. The session ends with a shot of Mabuse superimposed on the vacant trading floor replete with litter like a devastated battlefield. He has taken the stock exchange by storm—all those speculators swarming like ants were clearly no match for his genius.

Meanwhile we get some insight into his operation. His cohort of five misfits make up a surprisingly efficient team held together by varying combinations of loyalty, exhilaration, desperation, fear of unemployment and his constant bullying—not least an abundant supply of alcohol and cocaine. They operate from a house in an upscale part of the city (presumably Berlin) where Mabuse's psychiatric practice serves as a front. Apart from fraudulent psychiatry, the crime network rests on three pillars: playing the system by exploiting its weaknesses as we just witnessed at the stock market; cheating at gambling, not so much for the cash but to enslave and extort individuals; counterfeiting—at a separate location where Hawasch the forger supervises a group of blind men who process fake currency, oblivious to the nature of their tasks or employer. The counterfeit print-shop is located in a dingy cellar at a poor neighborhood and is connected via the sewer system to the main residence. Dr. Mabuse's counterfeiting print-shop surreptitiously operates from a dingy cellar located in a decrepit neighborhood connected via the sewer system to the main residence. He uses various disguises (vendor, sailor) to go there. These scenes make heavy use of expressionism.

High life. The cabaret *Folies Bergeres* is the next setting where one of the central characters is introduced. Cara Carozza 'the dancer' is an immensely popular revue performer.





Carozza's risqué act at *Folies Bergeres* ends with her holding a baby doll)

Mabuse has changed disguise and is now here as a businessman named Balling who is residing at the *Hotel Excelsior*. Carozza is revealed to be an accomplice in crime and his girlfriend—hardly evident as he shows no signs of reciprocating her passion for him. She is not the reason of his visit anyway—the person that interests him is a young socialite named Edgar Hull. He has already been tipped by Carozza about Hull and his net worth. After the act, Mabuse approaches the young man. We get to see for the first time that he is not only a master of disguise and con operations, but hypnosis and mind control as well—Hull is quickly entranced by his penetrating gaze. On the latter's suggestion they move on to continue the evening by playing cards at the members-only gentlemen's club *17+4*.

Throughout the game at the club, Hull (Paul Richter who will later play Siegfried in Lang's *Die Niebelungen*) appears hazed under Mabuse's spell. He plays poorly and loses a great deal of money. The two depart, 'Balling' with an IOU slip and Hull with the address of the hotel where he has promised to deliver his debt.

It turns out that Mabuse is in no hurry to claim the funds as Hull is unable to find him at the Hotel Excelsior. Instead, Carozza the dancer has been instructed to wait there for the rich bachelor and beguile him. He falls into the trap and a seemingly happy romance ignites.

State Attorney Wenk. Three weeks pass and a major character (in a way, the protagonist) makes a first appearance—State Attorney Wenk visits Hull to talk about his investigation of a criminal who has been spotted swindling at gambling joints in various disguises. He gets interested when Hull mentions the encounter with Balling at *17+4*. Wenk has been authorized to carry out the probe with extensive powers and Hull volunteers to cooperate. The conversation is secretly observed by the watchful Carozza who reports everything back to Mabuse.

Decadents. The next scene takes place at *Scramm's Barbecue* (and its back room casino) named after the proprietor, a corrupt war profiteer who would be at home in a George Grosz painting. Wenk enjoys his dinner in the dining room with an expressionist design.





Just then, 1920's icon and radical dancer Anita Berber makes a brief appearance as Lang shows a bit of her performance.
It is at Schramm's that we meet the aristocrat von Told couple. Even though Countess Dusy Told is a regular of the nightclub scene, her nickname is the 'passive one'—because she likes to observe gamblers from a distance instead of joining them. The countess sparks investigator Wenk's interest (also of nobility with a 'von' prefix) and the two start mildly flirting. Her husband socializes unaccompanied by her and she furtively leaves the scene as soon as he shows up at the casino.

During an exciting game, Carozza calms down a greedy card player just cheated by Mabuse, the detached Countess Told merely observes the intense passions.



Later, Wenk visit the Countess at her home; the Tolds' lavishly decorated residence brings together different art styles.



As he waits for Countess Told, Wenk looks at Tolds' art collection which brings together various aesthetic styles—expressionism, modern, tribal African—like the film itself)



Knight Moves. Clueless about the identity of the evil doctor, Wenk decides to beat him at his own game by putting on a disguise. He starts touring the illicit game parlors of the city hoping to lure Mabuse. He is lucky and at *Palais Andalusia* he gets to play cards with the doctor himself—who is pretending to be a Dutch professor this time. The latter tries to hypnotize the investigator but fails as Wenk resists by putting up a fierce mental struggle. Special effects serve to underscore Wenk's desperate struggle to resist. First, "Tsi nan Fu" keeps popping up beneath the cards but Wenk manages to maintain his focus.



Mabuse starts running away and covers his tracks at the *Hotel Excelsior*. The confounded Wenk ends up trapped in Mabuse's car and is gassed unconscious by a hidden contraption. He later recovers in a rowboat and is rescued by some seamen.

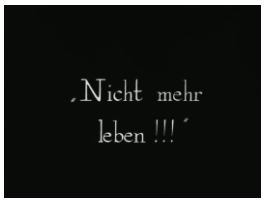
Having realized that the net is tightening around him, Mabuse orders Carozza to coordinate the murder of her boyfriend. Another underground club, the *Petite Casino* is to be the location of the trap. Even though Hull coincidentally finds out about her treachery, Wenk persuades him to go along and act as a bait. Later that night, despite the assurance of police protection, Mabuse's assassin manages to kill him while Carozza looks on. She is arrested on sight by the police and placed in a cell.

Wenk tries to get Carozza to talk but she remains steadfastly uncooperative. The investigator reckons that if Dusy Told were placed in her cell, she could win her confidence and get a tip about the identity of Mabuse. He entices the countess with the promise of lively sensations she so much craves. She agrees and moves into Carozza's cell as an inmate. The latter turns out to be loyal to Mabuse though—and smart too, she discerns the scheme right away and defies their intentions. Dusy is bewildered by Carozza's commitment and her declaration of love— she decides that she does not want any more of the adventure.

The Big Game. In a parallel scene, Mabuse attends a séance session at the Tolds. He meets the countess for the first time and takes a noticeable interest in her. She unwillingly mutters an invitation to a party at their home. This is the final sequence of the first part. Mabuse attends the party at the Tolds. Being given a cold shoulder by Dusy Told, he turns his attention to the husband. As a result of Mabuse's telepathic intervention, the count inadvertently cheats at the card game. He is immediately deserted by his friends who leave him in shame. Mabuse departs by kidnapping the countess. Mabuse imprisons Countess Told in an Art Nouveau inspired room.



The ostracized and distraught count is advised by Wenk to consult a psychiatrist—who ends up being none other than Dr. Mabuse. Told is unaware that his wife is kept captive by Mabuse who is pressing her to become the new Carozza. Despite being abused, she frustrates him by rejecting his demand and declares her loyalty to Count Told.



Desperate Measures. Mabuse schemes to kill Wenk and has his henchman Pesch plant a bomb in his office. The plot fails; Pesch is captured and scheduled to be transferred to a prison. Mabuse suspects his betrayal and decides to silence him. Together with his confederates, they visit a beer hall frequented by radicals and easily incite them by spreading a false rumor. The enraged mob blocks the passage of the prison van and Pesch gets shot on the spot by a hitman. Also apprehensive about Caruzza's possible cooperation with the police, Mabuse has a cyanide pill delivered to her. She complies and takes her own life. Count Told has become delirious and therapy sessions with Mabuse only worsen his depression.

Fascinating use of intertitles hint at Count Told's confusion and mental disintegration as Mabuse—using hypnosis and telepathy—drives him to suicide.

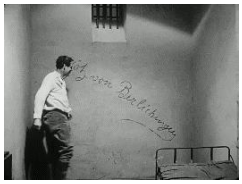
Count Told ultimately commits suicide as a result of the wile of the doctor and his subtle suggestions. The suicide draws Wenk's attention to Told's psychiatrist. Still ignorant about the fact that Mabuse is behind this facade, he has a talk with the doctor who tells him that Told was a victim of a case of mind control. In order to see such a mechanism at work, he recommends Wenk to attend a public demonstration of hypnotist Sandor Weltman.



Showdown. Later that night, Wenk is present at the theater for the performance of Weltman who is once again Mabuse in disguise. After an astounding demonstration of mass suggestion, Weltman singles out and effectively hypnotizes Wenk. Special effects serve to underscore Wenk's desperate struggle to resist. the word "Melior" leads Wenk to drive his car to his death.

Weltmann instructs the state attorney to leave and drive to the cliff atop the Melior quarry. Wenk heads towards the cliff in a trance and is saved at the last moment from falling to his death by fellow police detectives. As he wakes up from hypnosis, Wenk finally has a revelation about his adversary's identity.

The police prepare to storm Mabuse's house. The criminals retaliate formidably, which leads Wenk to call in the armed forces as reinforcement. A street battle ensues with uniformed soldiers closing in on the defenders who fiercely make their last stand. Two members of the gang are killed, the other two are captured and the countess is saved.



Mabuse's henchman Georg in his jail cell, just before he commits suicide. The loyal Georg scribbles the title of Göethe's drama "Götz von Berlichingen" on the wall as an act of absolute defiance of state authorities—the aristocrat's name is "famous as a euphemism for a vulgar expression *Er kann mich am Arsch lecken* ('He can lick my arse')"—from Götz von Berlichingen)

Mabuse manages to flee from a trap door and via an underground passage. He reaches the cellar and enters the counterfeit shop. Once inside the den, he finds himself barred from leaving the basement because of his own security measures. The blind employees hole up in a corner and Mabuse remains trapped until his pursuers catch up with him. He starts hallucinating about the ghosts of his victims and printing presses turning into anthropomorphic monsters—similar to *Metropolis*' Moloch. When the police finally arrive, they find the doctor in a maniacal state and he is confined to a mental asylum.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Dr. Mabuse – **Extrovert, Disagreeable, Unconscientious** (Metropolitan, Domineering, Somber,)
State Attorney Norbert von Wenk – **Rational** (On the Phone)
Countess Dusy Told – **Open, Agreeable** (Lounging, Active, Faithful and Redemptive)
Cara Carozza – **Open** (Dancing)

DR. MABUSE.

Power is his only motive and passion. Money and everything else are only means to that end. The nihilist is skilled at identifying the weaknesses of modern society and exploiting them for the sake of creating havoc.

Illustrative moments

Metropolitan. Mabuse thrives in the modern city. He needs to be in proximity to the nerve centers of the financial system as much as the casinos whose patrons he fleeces. Knowledge of railroad schedules, stock prices, international commodity deals are crucial for his schemes. The leech relies on the efficient working of the technologies of transportation and communication.

Domineering. Mabuse ensnares individuals by either directly hypnotizing or by mind control when they are unaware of his gaze. "There is no happiness, only the will for power" Mabuse tells Countess Told, more than a decade before Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will (1935).* Later, with the advent of sound cinema, Dr. Mabuse will get more descriptive in *the Testament of Dr. Mabuse* (1933) and his much anticipated voice will preach about humanity "subjugated" to an "endless empire of crime".

Somber. The ruse to kill Edgar Hull is partially successful as Carozza is captured by the police following the assassination. There is a lengthy and unusual scene where he walks around the house, looking lost as he steps into her room. With no sign of any of the previous outbursts of rage or his usual operatic exuberance, Mabuse for once looks museful. Is he missing Carozza or her admiration of himself? He will try to fill the void of her room by abducting and placing Dusy Told there—which will trigger the events that bring about his downfall.

Ubiquitous. "Always somebody different—One time a young gentleman, at another a respectable petit bourgeois, today a blond American, tomorrow a black haired Russian…" Wenk recounts his adversary—to which we can add drunken sailor, street seller, Dutch professor, and so on...

The opening sequence shows him by the phone, orchestrating a well planned robbery. He appears in full control as the phone gives him an ability to be omnipresent—even more efficiently than changing disguises. He is once again seen talking on the phone close to the finale. Inspector Wenk, who has laid a siege to his house, is threatening to move in. The moment Mabuse hangs up the phone he loses control. After desperately escaping through the sewer pipes, he loses his sanity in the cellar before the police catch up with him.

STATE ATTORNEY NORBERT VON WENK.

From the get-go, Wenk appears intensely committed to capturing Mabuse. He flirts with Dusy Told and tries to use her as a pawn to get Carozza to talk—not unlike Mabuse who uses Carozza to control Edgar Hull.

Illustrative moment

On the Phone. Wenk appears in tune with technological advance thanks to the two telephones in his otherwise snug room, surrounded by older and sluggish associates. His methods however, do not exactly resemble modern police procedures. He feels at home both in shady joints and high end clubs, uses

disguise and plays cards. On the other hand, the detectives in *M* (1931) and *The Testament of Dr Mabuse* (1933) are informed in forensics, study crime scenes and analyze photos. Wenk is separated from them merely by a decade but he looks like a prototype.

Less of a thinker and more of a man of action, he makes two fatal mistakes: Despite his assurance of protection, Edgar Hull is murdered, and with his advice the depressed Count Told seeks psychiatric help from Mabuse himself. Nonetheless, he successfully completes the investigation by capturing the master criminal.

COUNTESS DUSY TOLD.

With her long cigarette holder, ostrich feather fan and long strings of pearls, the countess is a flapper and a free spirit. As a modern woman she is often at odds with the life style of her own class—she keeps her distance to gambling, finds séance sessions laughable and has no enthusiasm for the art styles that are in vogue.

Illustrative moments

Lounging. When the enamored Wenk approaches her at the night club, “the passive one” as she is known in the nightclub scene, is lying on the sofa like the *Young Decadent* of Ramon Casas and amusing herself by observing the gamblers. She is cynical and worldly.

Active. The investigator subsequently invites her to join the criminal investigation as a cure for her boredom—and become an active player rather instead of a bystander. She is astounded by Carozza’s love for Mabuse and backs away from her commitment—Mabuse abducts her nonetheless. When she is freed from captivity at the end, with her fuzzy hair she looks shaken and dazed. Previously she was excited by the prospect of adventure—for which she seems regretful now.

Faithful and Redemptive. Dusy may be flirtatious but she is protective of her husband, since she is careful to spare the count from “the bitter discovery that his wife seeks relief from the dead atmosphere of his house in night spots and gambling dens”.

Wenk is not the only one who thinks he has a remedy for Told’s apathy. Mabuse develops an interest in her and seems to think that he can fill the void of Carozza’s room by kidnapping the countess. In contrast to Wenk who invites her to become one of the players, what Mabuse offers in return for her consent is the opportunity to join him manipulating other people like a puppeteer. She firmly rejects him.

Early on, the countess has qualms about inviting Mabuse to the party at their home. She tries to talk about the issue with her husband but the dupable count is unconcerned and just wants to be left alone with his figurines. Disheartened, she gives him a motherly pat on the head and leaves him alone with his collection. Dusy Told is more of an early version of the “nurturing woman” (Place, 60-61) in film noir, a caring figure who offers her man an opportunity for redemption—which often tends to be wasted.

CARA CAROZZA, ‘THE DANCER’.

Carozza is charming and intelligent—and potentially dangerous. Prior to the murder of her boyfriend Hull, Carozza is by his side wearing a ‘snake belt’ wrapped around her body. She is essentially a proto-femme fatale.

Illustrative moment

Dancing. That she is a complex character is hinted by the unusual choreography of her frenetic dance act at *Folies Bergeres*. In a fantastic scene, grotesque props that look like two human sized male heads with phallic noses stealthily approach her on the stage. A lecherous expression is carved on the gigantic figures. With what loosely resembles an improvised cancan dance, she performs a series of high kicks landing on the noses, keeping them at bay. Momentarily, she blends a risqué act with an

empowering performance—in the same vein as the robot Maria's erotic dance in *Metropolis*. After a short while, although not exactly cornered, she somehow capitulates and is seen happily sitting on a nose like a bench—when coincidentally the top part of her costume gets pulled off by invisible strings. Patrons—among them several women—cheer and applaud with delight. The bizarre act gets further convoluted as it ends with Carozza saluting them while holding a baby doll on her nap.

Carozza is an independent and strong character but chooses to be subjugated and aligned to Mabuse. Wenk is the only other character whose occupation is specified in the opening credits. "The dancer" is a cue for her public presence—also her seductress and manipulator persona, mirroring Mabuse being *the* gambler (player).

THEMES

SOCIETY – (Experience of Modernity, Psychiatry, Mass Culture and Cinema, Expressionism, Class)
JUSTICE – (Law and Order)
PSYCHOLOGY – (Hope and Despair)

SOCIETY

Experience of Modernity. Numerous shots of pocket watches, supplemented by clocks on desks, walls, mantels, etc. serve as constant reminder that the action is anchored at an exact moment in time. The Greenwich Mean Time had become the international standard just a few decades ago and in the early 1920s, the concept of synchronization must have been quite a novelty. The notion that time is experienced uniformly at different locations is central to the plot since Mabuse's entire operation depends on timing, punctuality and coordination.

Minutes and seconds matter, not only because of the homogeneous experience of time but also the need for speed. The opening train sequence, followed by the episode at the stock exchange, signifies that speed will be a recurring theme and time is of the essence. As Mabuse runs away from the *Andalusia Palace*, Wenk dashes after him but fails to grab him before his cohorts drive him away. The investigator does not even attempt to run after them, he looks around and is relieved when he spots an approaching vehicle. He is disappointed when it turns out to be horse-drawn. He simply uses it to find the nearest motorized taxi and resumes the chase.

Railway, automobile and phone obviously excite and inspire but not always: "I can't take this any longer, this pace of 200 km an hour! It's modern-day cannibalism!" cries out the doctor's henchman Pesch. Mabuse is a tyrant who keeps his crew on a tight leash but that's only part of the problem—the tempo of modern life is hard to endure.

Psychiatry. Doctor Mabuse's kitchen doubles as a laboratory with a caged guinea pig, glass beakers, a microscope and a mortar with pestle. This is a very crude version of the mad scientist's lab in *Metropolis*. The Mise-en-scène underscores that Mabuse is a man of science, but the lab is a sideshow—he is primarily a doctor of psychiatry. Indeed, among the many identities he assumes, the psychiatrist is the only one where he doesn't seem to be using a disguise.

Major characters in Lang's later Dr. Mabuse films in 1933 and 1960—along with the middle aged professor in his film noir *The Woman in the Window* (1944)—will also be psychiatrists. The subject was undoubtedly popular at the time; thanks in large part to Sigmund Freud who was interested in "thought transference" and had recently published *The Uncanny* (1919) and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). Freud's particularly relevant works, "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego", "Psycho-analysis and Telepathy" and "Dreams and Telepathy" had come out between 1921 and 1922.

Hypnosis and telepathy are critical tools of the power plays in the film and Lang uses an innovative device to convincingly represent the process of becoming entranced. Mabuse utters certain words at crucial moments in his two attempts to hypnotize Wenk—and playful special effects appear unexpectedly: First, during the card game, disguised as the Dutch professor he blurts "Tsi nan fu" (Associated with the trivial

fact that the professor's glasses were manufactured in Jinan, China). The investigator can barely resist the mind control attempt—he gets disoriented as the animated word keeps popping up from beneath the cards. The glimmering and elusive word provides us with a visual cue about his mental struggle.

In the second instance, Mabuse (this time as Sandor Weltmann) successfully hypnotizes Wenk who starts driving towards a cliff. He is chasing the word "Melior" which happens to be the name of the quarry that he is mentally programmed to go. The mystery word is another animation, jiggling and floating ahead of his car over the road. At both times the lettering emerges as an outside intervention, as if scratched on the celluloid. Lang plays with the boundaries of cinema and offers us a chance to reflect on the medium.

The enigmatic conjuror Sandor Weltmann's name sounds similar to a psychoanalyst and contemporary of Freud, Sándor Ferenczi (birth name, Sándor Fränkel). This brings us to the theatrical tour de force of Mabuse. His Weltmann persona proves that just like an individual, the masses too can be manipulated.

Mass Culture and Cinema

> *"Today! Today! Today!*
> *An evening of experiments*
> *Sandor Weltmann*
> *Experiments in mass suggestion, sleepless hypnosis, trance, natural magnetism, the secrets of the Indian fakirs, the secrets of the psyche, the subconscious in man and animal.*
> *In the main auditorium".*

Mabuse tells prosecutor Wenk that Count Told must have been a victim of mind control and "acted under the compulsion of some overpowering, but to him, hostile mind". In order to understand the dynamics of hypnotism and psychic trance, he recommends the investigator to attend a public demonstration performed by Sandor Weltmann and witness firsthand his "tremendous suggestive powers".

Early on, we watch Mabuse deliver a lecture on the significance and advantages of psychiatric treatment to a roomful of attentive academics. Whereas Mabuse pretends to be a legitimate scientist, the exact specialization of the sinister looking Weltmann is not clear. He looks like a quack, with physical features resembling the infamous mystic Rasputin—'the mad monk' had died only six years ago. Evidently he shares a core skill set with Mabuse—hypnotic suggestion and mind control. Whereas Mabuse "treats patients only at their homes" and uses therapy to gain power over individuals, Weltmann practices them for the sake of entertainment for a theatre audience.

Weltmann draws his audience's (and our) attention to the screen in the auditorium. What initially appears as the projection of a desert scene with palm trees and a caravan is suddenly transformed into three dimensional reality. The caravan approaches and ultimately transgresses the screen to intermingle with the audience. The people in the theater are mesmerized at the sight of horses and men wearing turban, who briefly seem like they share their space. With a snap of his finger Weltmann makes them vanish. The audience in the auditorium was under the delusion that the spectacle was not a film but actual reality. Their bafflement mirrors our own at the power of cinematic representation.

Expressionism and Beyond. "What is your attitude towards Expressionism, Doctor?" the smirking Count Told pops up the question at the party. Meanwhile the snobs in his company eyeball Mabuse with disdain. "Expressionism is a mere gimmick—but why not, everything today is a gimmick!" the doctor replies curtly. With this answer, the group moves away for a game of poker—not bothering to conceal their annoyance.

Characters frequently step into squalor in the back alleys of clandestine entertainment venues. Two assassinations—Pesch and Hull—take place on dark side streets. Mabuse dresses up as a street seller or drunken sailor to visit the counterfeiting print-shop which is surreptitiously located in a decrepit neighborhood. Unlike the spacious streets we get to see in the other scenes, the narrow passage with a flight of stairs is accessible only by foot. Fine, the only female member of the gang leads him to the

basement where he talks business with the forger Hawasch. During the finale, the counterfeiting machines turn into mechanical monsters and together with the ghosts of the victims, the basement turns into a fantasy space. During these moments, shadows, murky corners, strange angles come into view and expressionism prevails.

Art direction does not refrain from showcasing a variety of styles—most evidently at Tolds' spacious house which is packed with cubist and expressionist paintings, art deco furniture and tribal African sculptures; Young Edgar Hull has a more traditional living room, with a Russian samovar, drapery, stained glass art and bear skin rug by the fireplace; *Schramm's Barbecue* is expressionistic with slanted and sloped walls that reflect light variably; Wenk's office has a homely feel with a cozy wall paper, slim flower vase, charming table lamp and ornamentally carved chair. Two phones on the desk add a touch of the modern; Mabuse's 'home office' is appropriate for a MD with a stately desk, brass candle holders, large carpets and many books on shelves; *Hotel Excelsior* features an ornate floral pattern and an art nouveau theme—this style with its bold scrolls is most obvious in Cara Carozza's bedroom in Mabuse's house.

Aesthetic styles are featured distinctively in a balanced panorama of contemporary design. There is even room for realism. Mabuse's team may sometimes act like cartoon villains but they frequently appear in realistic mise-en-scène. Couple of times, we watch the henchman dine quietly in their own rooms and once they briefly chat about the difficult times. In stark contrast to the stylized settings of the Told and Hull homes, their rooms look shabby and modest.

Class. Is the pluralistic approach to different styles paralleled in the representation of social classes? The upper class in *The Gambler* is comprised of the nouveau riche, war profiteers and nobility. They are depicted as hedonistic and indolent. Gambling, cabaret shows, parties, fashionable art, indulgent dining and occultism are pretty much all they care for—their only non-leisure activity appears to be speculation at the stock market. Mabuse and his contempt for them may at times arouse sympathy.

On the other hand, working class is depicted more positively and with a touch of realism. Take for instance the scene in the aftermath of the botched plot to bomb Wenk's office. Mabuse uses a trick to get rid of the would-be informant while he is in police custody. With his cohorts, he enters a hotbed of radicals and they spread the word that an esteemed figure has been arrested by the police. They almost instantly mold a riotous crowd thanks to which they can stop the prison wagon and kill Pesch. When the camera zooms to their faces, they are revealed to be ordinary men and women. The problem is, they can be manipulated so easily—not unlike the workers of Lang's *Metropolis* led astray by the robot Maria. The protesters have a sense of justice but they unknowingly facilitate murder.

With unlikable elites and regular people who desperately need strong leadership, *The Gambler* maintains its political ambivalence. Where does the doctor himself stand?

JUSTICE

Law and Order. "I feel like a state within a state" says Dr. Mabuse just before the climactic gunfight at the end. Even when all is lost, Georg scribbles the title of Göethe's drama on the cell wall—"Götz von Berlichingen"—as a final act of defiance prior to committing suicide. With their contempt for the state, do the criminals represent revolutionaries or do they stand closer in spirit to reactionary paramilitaries?

With all the social tension between classes, *Metropolis* featured no police officers (let alone any soldiers). *The Gambler* has truckloads of police and even the military makes a strong appearance. The denouement with the spectacular confrontation is on a par with the graphic ending of *Scarface* (1932). This brief crisscross between genres unexpectedly resembles a war film—in a country which had restrictions placed on its armed forces following the defeat in the Great War.

Overwhelmed by the defenders, Wenk orders his subordinates to call in the "militär" for support. Troops in combat gear and steel helmets arrive promptly and storm Mabuse's lair with grenades and smoke bombs.

Since the Reichswehr was established in 1921, these could well be army units. Or just as likely, the Freikorps—which had crushed the 1919 socialist uprising and murdered its leaders Luxembourg and Liebknecht. According to Kracauer, "as so often with Lang, the law triumphs and the lawless glitters" (Kracauer, 250). Perhaps so, but not utterly—Mabuse has had a wild run, but at the end of the day he has turned into a wreck and forces of law are glorious—whoever they may stand for. *The Gambler* is ambivalent to the end.

PSYCHOLOGY

Hope and Despair. The film oscillates between manic and depressive moods. Lighthearted moments in bright and artful settings quickly switch to despondency. Carozza, Georg and Told commit suicide, the first two in bleak jail cells and Told at his home haunted by ghostly apparitions of his ancestors.

Times are tough and things will soon get worse with the deepening economic crisis. The outlook will show signs of improvement after a couple of years, to last until the 1930s. Where all this would end two decades later is attested by the fates of the actors (IMDB) who played the members of Mabuse's crew—John (Pesch) was reportedly killed in the Lodz ghetto; Schlettow (Georg), while fighting the Soviets during Battle of Berlin; Huszár (Hawasch) is believed to have died in a Soviet gulag; finally Berger (Fine) was murdered in Auschwitz.

Discussion questions

1) In his seminal book *From Caligari to Hitler*, Siegfried Kracauer maintains that rather than being a document of the times that it claims to be, *Dr. Mabuse the Gambler* is instead a "premonition" (Kracauer, 84) about Nazism that foreshadows the rise of Hitler–as is the case with other films of the Weimar era. Are there specific scenes in the film that support or contradict this thesis?

2) In her groundbreaking essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), Laura Mulvey has argued that patriarchal unconscious shapes viewers' film watching experience so that audience derives pleasure from film through voyeurism and identification with a male gaze. Are there examples or counterexamples in *Dr. Mabuse the Gambler* for such an argument?

3) Psychiatry is a central theme in *Dr. Mabuse the Gambler*. Since then, the psychiatrist has remained a popular protagonist in cinema. Pick a couple of contemporary thrillers such as *Final Analysis* (1992), *Color of Night* (1994), *Still of the Night* (1982) and discuss how the representation has evolved.

4) We know from the Goebbels anecdote that Nazis loved Lang's *Die Niebelungen* and were impressed by *Metropolis*. They disliked the 1933 Dr. Mabuse film so much that they banned it—it would not be released in Germany until 1951. Where would *The Gambler* fit in this spectrum?

5) The collective hypnosis sequence shows the conjuror Sandor Weltman 'screening' a short film about desert wanderers who briefly appear as real—then vanish. The episode recalls Gustave Le Bon's 1895 book the Crowd and finds expression in Raymond Bellour's view of cinema as a form of collective hypnosis (Bellour in Radner and Fox). In a way, it is an early and playful exercise in what film theory will later conceptualize as "suture"—the methods used by a film to make viewers forget that what they see is the camera's perspective. Think of examples from other films and consider how they are similar or different.

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