

## Dr. Mabuse, The Cliché

### *The Thousand Eyes of Dr. Mabuse*

We are precursors, running along outside of ourselves, out in front of ourselves; when we arrive, our time is past already, and the course of things interrupted.

—Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*



IF THE MYTH OF FRITZ LANG IS one enmeshed in paradox,<sup>1</sup> then few of his films have found themselves caught up in this situation as thoroughly as *The Thousand Eyes of Dr. Mabuse*. While a box-office success in West Germany (and popular enough to spawn several sequels, none of them directed by Lang but featuring a number of his original cast members),<sup>2</sup> the film achieved this popularity by being marketed primarily to adolescent audiences, as were Lang's two previous German-produced films, *The Tiger of Eschnapur* (1959) and *The Indian Tomb* (1959), both released two years earlier. However effective such a marketing strategy was in economic terms, it fueled the overwhelmingly negative critical response to these three films in West Germany: The legend responsible for *Metropolis* and *M* (1931) was now out of touch with contemporary cinema and reduced to producing absurd and recycled parodies of his earlier

successes. Although championed by auteurs and many of Lang's admirers, *The Thousand Eyes* (unlike Lang's earlier Mabuse films) has largely remained an object of cult veneration, a neglected and minor work within the larger history of cinema. Released two years prior to the Oberhausen Manifesto, and poised historically between the German cinema of its Weimar heyday and the New German Cinema to come, it would appear to supply evidence of Lang's irrelevance in relation to contemporary German cinema. A Lang biographer, Patrick McGilligan, for example, has characterized *The Thousand Eyes* as a film that "said less about the Germany of 'our time' than it did about a director stuck somewhat ambivalently in his own time."<sup>3</sup> But two years after the film's release, Alexander Kluge (who had worked as an assistant director on the Indian films) and other members of the Oberhausen group unsuccessfully attempted to recruit Lang for West Germany's first film school, the Institut für Filmgestaltung Ulm.<sup>4</sup> And Jonathan Crary has characterized *The Thousand Eyes* as being "precocious" rather than old-fashioned, a culminating point in Lang's attempt over the span of almost forty years to "chart the mobile characteristics of various perceptual technologies and apparatuses of power."<sup>5</sup>

The film appears at the beginning of a decade in which Lang's work was to become central to such major figures as Jacques Rivette, Claude Chabrol, Jean-Luc Godard, and later Wim Wenders and Jean-Marie Straub and Danielle Huillet, some of whom would produce work outside of the forefront of the commercial film industry—something that Lang himself never did. But the issues that his work raised would become fundamental to certain nonclassical filmmaking practices beginning to emerge in the 1960s. In their admiration for Lang, these younger directors did not work by pastiche or direct emulation. Lang's work and the issues it raised was the site of an epochal moment in the cinema, but it was a moment that, within certain discourses of the 1960s, was fading. The richness and complexity of Lang's work now became the site of an absence that allowed these later filmmakers to rearticulate, fill in, revise—a position seemingly unavailable to Lang, the product of very different historical circumstances.<sup>6</sup>

Within the context of the commercial film industry during this period, Lang's important role in elevating the spy and espionage thriller to the status of a major film genre (of which the Mabuse films and his 1928 *Spies* had been such seminal works) was being superseded by the enormous success of the James Bond films, which began to appear two years after the release of *The Thousand Eyes*. These films, expensively produced and fueled by the star charisma of Sean Connery, partook of the same fascination with visual and aural apparatuses of power and surveillance as Lang's earlier spy thrillers. But the Bond films were situated

within a contemporaneous Cold War framework absent from the more abstract historical and cultural realm of *The Thousand Eyes*. Furthermore, the Bond films were ironic in tone in which everything from eroticism to politics to violence was transformed into camp, the kind of sensibility far removed from Lang's. In comparison with *From Russia with Love* (1963) or *Goldfinger* (1964), *The Thousand Eyes* is a bit prim and proper, humorlessly exploring some of the same terrain but without a charismatic and sexual star at its center and without beautiful starlets in bikinis scampering about and peering through binoculars. The presence of the actor Gert Fröbe (who plays Commissar Kras in *The Thousand Eyes*) in the role of Goldfinger only reinforces this sense of both connections and fundamental differences between Lang's approach and that of the Bond productions. For the commercial espionage thriller, this is an era presided over by Dr. No and not Dr. Mabuse.<sup>7</sup>

*The Thousand Eyes* was produced by Artur Brauner, as part of a series of films Brauner put together during the 1950s and 1960s in an attempt to recreate the films of Weimar cinema's heyday. It was the second collaboration between Lang and Brauner after the Indian diptych. Lang's return to Germany and the nature of the projects he was involved in at this time were typical of the Adenauer period of West German filmmaking. During this time, its cinema was dominated by numerous recyclings of titles left over from the Nazi and pre-Nazi regime. According to Eric Rentschler, about 70 percent of films released at this time were produced by figures that were active during the Nazi era. (Fröbe, for example, had been a member of the Nazi Party.) The continued presence of such figures and the indifference of the government in attempting to establish any funding for an alternative production outlet (such as existed in France) led to a cinema dominated by historical myopia. "West German films of the 1950s," writes Rentschler, "offered few examples of critical will, of a desire to confront and comprehend the Third Reich. . . . At its best, West German film of the 1950s pursued a displaced dialogue with the past; at its most typical, it took an extended vacation from history."<sup>8</sup> This "extended vacation from history" in an industry still dominated by figures from the Nazi era created an unusually difficult working space for Lang. The larger cultural environment in which he was filming appeared resistant to investigations into the persistence of Nazi ideology in the way that Lang claims he had originally envisioned for *The Thousand Eyes*. In addition, he encountered repeated problems from a contemptuous cast and crew. The film bears these marks. It is not as technically polished, elegantly scripted, or well acted as his Weimar and Hollywood classics. And yet this awkwardness also gives the film much of its strange and, at times, hallucinatory power. The film may periodically stumble but it never falls, and

in this process articulates a particular vision of the relationship of the cinema to the postwar era that few other films of the same period matched. As Roger Greenspun has written, "From its audience, *The Thousand Eyes* asks both greater innocence and infinitely greater sophistication than most of us bring to the movies nowadays."

Few fictional characters from the cinema's first fifty years of existence carry such a potent metaphorical relation to the cinema as both a powerful lure and a sinister trap as Dr. Mabuse. However, this metaphoric relation that Mabuse has to the cinema is not one that has remained stable. Mabuse, hypnotic master of disguise, changes with every film, in each case bringing into play a different set of relations to the cinema, from the rapidly shifting identities of *Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler* (1922), to his role as an all-seeing voice that is effectively substituted for the body of the master criminal in *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* (1933), to his reincarnation in *The Thousand Eyes*. With each film, the sense of Mabuse as a specific fictional character declines, increasingly replaced by Mabuse as a concept, a signifier insinuating itself into the fabric of vision in the films. Furthermore, each of these alterations in Mabuse corresponds to shifting notions about the relations between power and vision that are taking place across the history of narrative cinema.<sup>10</sup> But one thread has remained constant and that is the notion of Mabuse as metaphoric double for the film director, the *metteur en scène* presiding over the work, controlling and manipulating other human beings, creating and staging scenarios of his own devising while often working through cinematic and proto-cinematic devices. In this regard, Mabuse has also functioned as a highly seductive and sinister double for Lang himself, the notoriously controlling, hypnotic, and manipulative auteur.<sup>11</sup>

However, only with *Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler* did Lang achieve a perfect balance between capturing the historical moment in which the film was made, employing the character of Mabuse as a melodramatic villain and as a metaphor of vision for that moment. As a result, the film succeeded as a thriller for popular audiences in Germany while also serving as a formidable instance of Weimar cinema as a newly emerging art form. Phrases such as "a document of our time" and "an archive of its time" recur in contemporary accounts, probably fueled by publicity surrounding the film that insisted on this parallel, by statements issued by Lang and screenwriter Thea von Harbou, and by the film's own subtitle: "A Document of Our Times." According to one reviewer, "Not one important symptom of the post-war years is missing." These symptoms included drug addiction, homosexuality, occultism, prostitution, gambling, hypnosis, jazz, and violence, and all of this appearing within the context of a narrative product that, in spite of a running time of more than four

hours, managed to “work at a breakneck speed.”<sup>12</sup> The popular press took the film’s pacing combined with its highly sophisticated editing as yet another sign of the film’s modernity.

Lang once stated that his idea for Mabuse in the first film was that he would be omnipresent but unrecognizable, a threat that could never be located. While characters in the film experienced this invisible omnipresence, the spectator does not quite have the same kind of knowledge about Mabuse. However disguised Mabuse is, the spectator is usually alerted to the nature of the disguise before many of the fictional characters concerned with detecting Mabuse’s control over the narrative events. Not until the second Mabuse film does the character’s insidious omnipresence begin to manifest itself more strongly. Crary has stressed the importance of understanding *Testament* in relation to early sound cinema, a moment in history when communications technologies (radio, television, and sound cinema) were opening onto broader fields of social influence and control.<sup>13</sup> In this second Mabuse installment, power has shifted from its origins in the visible to incorporating sound, as the now-insane Mabuse communicates by an ambiguous process of hypnosis to Professor Baum, who does Mabuse’s bidding for him. This continues even after Mabuse dies and what appears to be Mabuse’s ghost continues to speak to Baum. Under hypnosis, Baum assumes Mabuse’s identity through audio technology, dispatching orders for criminal activities via recording devices and hidden loudspeakers to assistants who never set eyes on him. By the time of *The Thousand Eyes*, Mabuse’s literal ghost no longer holds power. But his example continues to exert enormous control as it becomes reconstituted in his would-be inheritor, who assumes two primary disguises: Dr. Cornelius, the psychic, and Professor Jordan, the psychoanalyst. In Lang’s final version of the Mabuse myth, video surveillance insinuates itself into the fabric of modern life and becomes associated with the twin mainsprings of social fear that the character repeatedly instills within his narrative universe, control and chaos.

The central space of *The Thousand Eyes*, the film’s architectural, technological, and metaphorical centerpiece, is the Hotel Luxor. The idea for the Luxor was based on the Hotel Adlon, which the Nazis had planned to put into use after the war. This hotel was to contain an extensive surveillance system throughout its various rooms to monitor the activities of foreign diplomats and businessmen staying there. The film derives its title from this pervasive system. Out of the basement of the hotel operates Mabuse’s inheritor, surveying the rooms through a bank of video monitors. But a fundamental problem that Lang’s last film faced was that it was making use of a metaphor of ideological and state power in relation to acts of viewing and filming that, however apt it might be for the postwar

era, was largely defined and expressed in the film itself in ways that evoked not the present but the past. If Mabuse was already an anachronism in 1933, his reconfiguration in 1960 presented Lang with a major obstacle: His film must legitimately revive a figure that seemed to belong to another era and another way of seeing.<sup>14</sup> The problem was solved in 1933 by killing Mabuse as a flesh-and-blood villain of nineteenth-century melodrama and transforming him into an “invisible” system of domination.

But Lang does something close to the reverse in 1960: Mabuse returns in the flesh and reassumes his role as the master of disguise from *Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler*. This new Mabuse is a madman who is obsessed with repeating the original Mabuse’s criminal acts in the present day. Lotte Eisner justifies such a strategy by noting that “Lang was concerned with sounding a warning on dependence upon technology, the benefits of science that can turn into a menace in an age when one maniac might press a button and set off a nuclear holocaust.”<sup>15</sup> But this reliance on placing the source for these concerns about technology on one maniac threatens to give the film a rather quaint and naïve air, the feeling of an “old-fashioned” pulp thriller. Eisner seems to unwittingly reveal this when she writes that in the film Lang became “elated by his love of whirlwind adventure.”<sup>16</sup>

*The Thousand Eyes* opened in Paris in 1961. In marked contrast to the German response, Lang’s film was generally admired in France. Jean Douchet published an important essay on the film, following in the post-war trend for reading Mabuse as a metaphorical figure who embodies the role of the film director as an all-seeing, all-powerful metteur en scène, someone who does not fundamentally wish to understand the world but instead wants to control and dominate it.<sup>17</sup> Released the same year as Lang’s film was Rivette’s *Paris nous appartient* (1960), a meditation on political conspiracy and paranoia set within a labyrinthine environment of Paris in the late 1950s. Not only is the film obviously influenced by Lang, Rivette even reinforces the parallel by the use of an excerpt from the Tower of Babel sequence from *Metropolis*. But apart from its general mood of anxiety and its desire to capture (as Lang himself so often did) a vast and complex network of relationships in a nightmarish urban space, it has a tone and style markedly different from *The Thousand Eyes*. Rivette is obviously trying to extend and rewrite the cinema of appearances and paranoia that Lang was such a central figure in developing. As Jonathan Rosenbaum has noted, Rivette’s film negotiates its way between two seemingly antithetical approaches, the phenomenological and the formalist, and in such a way that the film seems to capture uncannily the mood of its historical moment.<sup>18</sup> At the center of the paranoid conspiracy theories imagined by the protagonists of *Paris nous appartient* lies nothing, no Mabuse, nothing behind it all except the feeling of paranoia itself. Instead

of a world of chaos set into motion by one sinister figure, we have a world that no one seems to be in charge of or to possess an ultimate power over everyone else.<sup>19</sup> For Jean-André Fieschi, Rivette's modernism is strongly bound up with his apparent passivity as an auteur in relation to these kinds of scenarios, his refusal to partake in the "power fantasies and hypnotic overtures of Mabuse (that caricature and definitive metaphor for the average film director). . . ."<sup>20</sup> Although average is hardly the word one might use to describe Lang, Fieschi's attitude toward Mabuse does suggest that this metaphor has reached an exhausted state by the time of *The Thousand Eyes*. As I maintain throughout this chapter, however, a strategy of pointing toward this exhaustion in Lang while simultaneously brandishing the audacity of the latest examples of modernist cinema is insufficient. A primary reason why this is so is because *The Thousand Eyes* implicitly contains within *itself* an awareness of its own limitations while simultaneously offering particular insights into the issue of political and technological power, which are both related to and different from the more fashionable works of modern cinema that surround it during the early 1960s.

In the literature on Lang, the standard approach for many years had been to place the director's Weimar classics (most of them produced on an ornate scale when he was at the height of his influence and importance on the international film scene) against his Hollywood work, where the circumstances of production gave him far less freedom and where he sometimes worked on assignment: Fritz Lang the Weimar art filmmaker versus Fritz Lang the Hollywood director-for-hire. Auteurist writings beginning in the 1950s attempted to correct this limited method of reading Lang, drawing important links between the German and U.S. films. But the mythology of Lang as a fallen god, exiled from the Valhalla of Ufa studios to the mortal environment of Hollywood, has been a powerful one.<sup>21</sup> The auteurist approach to Lang was, I believe, correct in stressing the thematic and moral continuity of Lang's work across more than forty years of cinema, even if its awareness of the essential formal and historical differences in the three important phases of Lang's career—Weimar Germany, Hollywood, and Adenaur Germany—was not always strong. These phases are most productively thought of not in terms of binary oppositions or master narratives of decline and fall. Rather, each of these phases needs to be understood in terms of their complicated relationship to one another, in which breaks, continuities, and returns continually manifest themselves. Coming at the end of his career, *The Thousand Eyes of Dr. Mabuse* is in a unique position for allowing us to understand this. As the final film from one of the great masters of the form, *The Thousand Eyes* acutely demonstrates the complicated and uneasy nature of the

relationship of Lang's work to classical and modernist cinema and its resistance to simple divisions between these two filmmaking practices.

One of Lang's assistants during the brief period of his return to Germany in the late 1950s was Volker Schlöndorff, and he has spoken of his impressions of Lang's historical and cultural otherness in relation to German cinema at this time:

Lang's Viennese accent, his monocle, his trench coat, his way of interacting socially—these belonged to a Germany that no longer existed. Lang was past recognition. Since he couldn't go out without feeling like a stranger, he confined himself to the international anonymity of a hotel room. His films were from a different world. . . . His only thoughts were of Germany, of what it had been, of what it had done, of what it had become. He had to return, to the émigrés in France and to the U.S., in order to get back the feeling for the country he had always loved. Lang came back to Berlin with all his natural vitality, full of the desire to connect once again with his youth; Lang left Berlin, older, but not an old man.<sup>22</sup>

What is useful about this anecdote is that it easily invites a modernist allegorical reading of *The Thousand Eyes* with Lang as the film's anguished enunciator: A film in which Lang's desire to connect with his past and with the culture that had once formed his filmmaking practice—while simultaneously updating and revising those strategies for the immediate historical moment—is strongly apparent throughout. At the same time, the impossibility of this desire is likewise apparent. Lang's age and his status as a Viennese-born Weimar director who fled Germany for the United States indelibly mark themselves on both Lang as a person and an artist. The man, like the film, belongs to "a different world." Both director and film withdraw into the "international anonymity" of the hotel, in the case of *The Thousand Eyes*, the Luxor, a hotel with many secrets.

Throughout this chapter, two closely related issues will be central, both concerned with the matter of space in *The Thousand Eyes*: space as it is related to architecture (in particular, that of the Luxor); and space as it is created through the film's editing strategies. In both instances, these spaces are profoundly historical, not only in terms of film style but in terms of the history that precedes and surrounds the film. In style and structure, in story and thematic material, *The Thousand Eyes* not only draws on but also implicitly measures Lang's entire body of work (particularly that of the Weimar period) against the immediate historical and cultural moment in which he is filming in Germany in the late 1950s and early 1960s. *The Thousand Eyes* is a film in which the past and the present,



the classical and the modernist exist side by side, all of them engaged in a tense relationship with one another.

### Skepticism and Renewal

*The Thousand Eyes* opens, as many of Lang's films do, with a death, one that nevertheless animates the film and sets its narrative into motion. In this case, the death is the assassination of a television news reporter, Peter Barter. The assassination takes place in the midst of heavy traffic in a commercial area of a major city, as Barter stops for a red light. In the back seat of an adjacent car, we see a mysterious man in dark glasses anxiously tapping his fingers on top of what appears to be a violin case as he nods in the direction of Barter to his driver. These activities are suddenly interrupted by a cut to the homicide bureau where Commissioner Kras takes a telephone call from the blind psychic Dr. Cornelius, who informs Kras of his premonition about the assassination of a man stopping at a traffic light. As Cornelius climaxes his description of this vision to the skeptical Kras, he utters the word "murder," which acts as a sound bridge to a shot that returns us to the back seat of the car (now stopped by a red light) of the mysterious man, who quickly removes not a violin from his case but a rifle and takes aim at Barter. He silently fires at the back of Barter's neck and Barter falls at the wheel. This death immediately sets



Figure 1.1



Figure 1.2



Figure 1.3

*The Thousand Eyes of Dr. Mabuse* (1960): Opening sequence, the assassination of Peter Barter.

off a chain reaction as we are shown the responses and investigations surrounding Barter's demise: an on-air announcement of Barter's death from his television station; a meeting between Cornelius and Kras; scientists analyzing the murder weapon used in Barter's death; images of a clubfooted man at a radio dispatch, identifying himself as Dr. Mabuse (his face concealed), who appears to have instigated Barter's murder and is now sending his assistants out to investigate an American millionaire arms dealer; a discussion among Interpol agents about the shooting and its possible relationship to a series of murders, all of them associated with the Hotel Luxor (where Travers is now staying); and a meeting at the Luxor with Travers and various businessmen about an arms sale. All of this culminates in an exterior shot of the Luxor showing a woman (soon to become the film's female protagonist, Marion Menil) perched on the ledge of a high window, threatening to commit suicide.

This listing of story events gives no indication of the actual feel and structure of the first minutes of the film, one of the most impressive openings in all of Lang's work. Each of these events is tightly organized and interwoven through Lang's editing methods, either through parallel editing, establishing a strong visual and aural associations from the final shot of one sequence to the first shot of another, or a combination of both of these devices. Moreover, the opening is fast paced and elliptical, establishing a general rhythm for the film that Lang will largely maintain throughout, leading Eisner to characterize *The Thousand Eyes* as a film that is "lively, spontaneous, thrilling" and has "nowhere the appearance of an old man's work."<sup>23</sup> I would certainly agree with Eisner that the film is, in its singular way, thrilling. But this does not quite explain the atmosphere of uncanniness that pervades these images and the ways in which they are linked. Contrary to Eisner, it seems to me that *The Thousand Eyes* is very much an "old man's work," provided we divest that term of its negative connotations.

For anyone familiar with Lang's cinema, what is perhaps most immediately striking about this opening is the degree to which it is haunted by sequences from other Lang films, particularly those from his first German period: Barter's assassination is very close in manner and execution to the murder of Kramm from *Testament of Dr. Mabuse*; the phone call from Cornelius has certain relations with the phone call from Hofmeister to Inspector Lohmann near the beginning of *Testament* (including a similar establishing shot of the sign of the Homicide Bureau); the surprise on-air announcement of Barter's death evokes the on-air announcement of the death of Walter Kyne from Lang's penultimate American film *While the City Sleeps* (1956); the smoke-filled meeting rooms evoke similar spaces in *M*; and the elaborate parallel editing structure

itself seems to be an attempt to duplicate the success of the opening sequences of *Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler* and *Spies* as well as certain elements of the parallel montage sequences detailing the investigation into the murders in *M*.

Throughout the rest of the film, we see additional revivals of famous Lang sequences: the séance that Cornelius holds in his apartment evokes the one from *Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler* (a setting Lang had already returned to in his Hollywood film *Ministry of Fear* in 1943); when Cornelius



Figure 1.4. *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* (1933): The shooting of Kramm.



Figure 1.5. *The Thousand Eyes of Dr. Mabuse*: The shooting of Peter Barter.



Figure 1.6. *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*: The death of Kramm.



Figure 1.7. *The Thousand Eyes of Dr. Mabuse*: The death of Peter Barter.

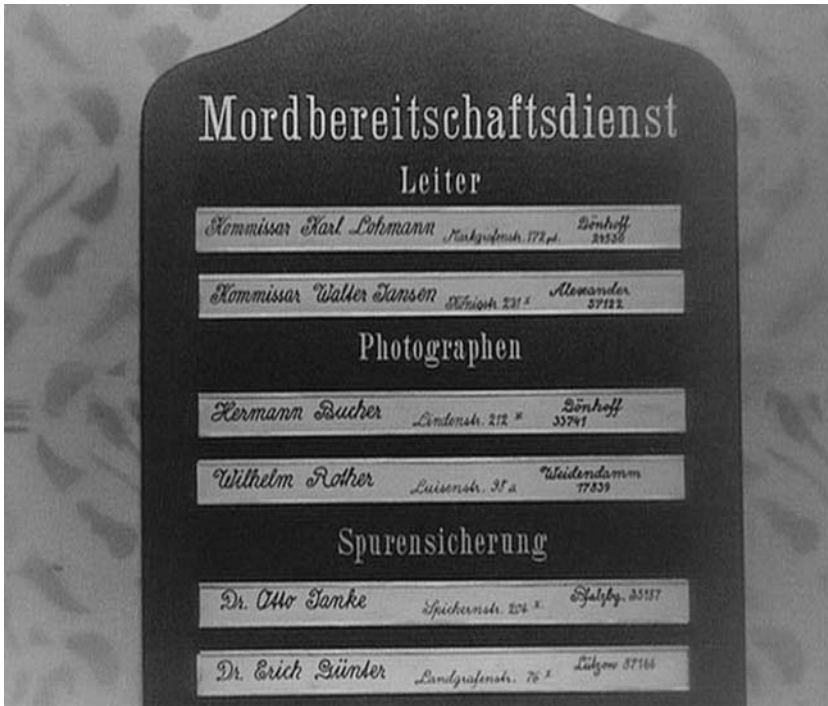


Figure 1.8. *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*: Signage for the Homicide Bureau.



Figure 1.9. *The Thousand Eyes of Dr. Mabuse*: Signage for the Homicide Bureau.



Figure 1.10. *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*: Inspector Lohmann with assistant.



Figure 1.11. *The Thousand Eyes of Dr. Mabuse*: Commissar Kras with assistant.

“accidentally” collides with Peter Travers’s car one is reminded of a similar false accident in *Gambler*; the staged rescue of Marion by Travers in the Hotel Luxor is a variation on the staged rescue of Sonya by Tremaine in the Hotel Olympia in *Spies*; the character of Commissioner Kras is a variation on the far more colorful Inspector Lohmann from *M* and *Testament*; the idea of Kras’s desk containing a bomb hidden within it and that explodes is reminiscent of the explosion of Inspector Von Wenk’s desk from *Gambler* (the explosions and the desks in both films even look very similar); the sequences of video surveillance through the “thousand eyes” are an extension and hyperbolization of the video monitor in *Metropolis*; and the film’s most famous set piece, the two-way mirror sequence through which Peter Travers observes Marion in her bedroom, is an idea that can be traced as far back as *Spiders* in 1919.

Why this constant duplication of effects from prior work? Why is Lang becoming an imitation of himself here? Although Tom Gunning argues that Lang’s return to Germany allows Lang to resurrect the elaborate montage structures found in his early German works that he “had been forced to tame in his Hollywood films,”<sup>24</sup> what emerges through this revival is not quite a triumphant return to form. The history that has taken place in between *Testament of Dr. Mabuse* and *The Thousand Eyes* creates enormous difficulties for Lang and a simple return to form is not possible. Instead, the intervening years insistently speak through and within these images. Of course, for Lang we find nothing terribly new here in this almost self-parodic strategy. One may even see it as the inevitable extension of his tendency toward what Thomas Elsaesser calls “the Langian uncanny, of a reality appearing as its own copy” and becoming (or threatening to become) kitsch.<sup>25</sup> Still, there is something very specific and significant about the way that Lang’s final film faces this issue of the uncanny. *The Thousand Eyes of Dr. Mabuse* is an extreme instance of Lang’s tendency not simply to repeat but constantly write over his earlier films, modifying and revising the implications of the issues with which his work had always concerned itself.

“Every film is a palimpsest,”<sup>26</sup> Serge Daney has written. The film that inspires this statement is *Contempt*, in which Godard realizes the impossibility of both using and being used by his pro-filmic material and instead exposes that impossibility rather than masking it. Lang sits squarely in the middle of *Contempt*, a physical reminder not simply of the golden age of classical cinema, but of its repeatedly dashed hopes, its failures, its aborted projects, and its inability to realize successfully all of its promise. Years before Godard, Lang had already begun the process of writing over one’s work and acknowledging its own provisional nature. By 1960, however, Lang is not simply writing over his prior work but expressing a certain

anxiety about it being no longer relevant. In this regard, *The Thousand Eyes* has a clear allegorical dimension: A desire to rescue outmoded forms and bring them into the light of the present but achieving this through reinterpretation of these earlier forms rather than simple recreation.

Although Lang does indeed revive some of his former strategies of formal organization here and repeats many of the basic narrative situations and character types from his earlier work, his attitude toward them is now marked by a strong degree of skepticism. Skepticism is not new to Lang's cinema. In many ways, it had always been a central element of his work. In the past, this skepticism had most often revolved around the issues of sight, knowledge, and belief, which are at the center of Lang's cinema and which continue to be central in *The Thousand Eyes*.<sup>27</sup> Such concerns are at the very heart of skepticism as a philosophical problem and it haunts much of modernism as well. As Jacques Derrida writes, "Before doubt ever becomes a system, skepsis has to do with the eyes. The word refers to a visual perception, to the observation, vigilance, and attention of the gaze . . . during an examination. One is on the lookout, one reflects upon what one sees, reflects what one sees by delaying the moment of conclusion."<sup>28</sup> Through this process of reflection in *The Thousand Eyes*, Lang questions the validity of his own cinema (particularly that of the Weimar period) and his own role as authorizer and organizer of these images, which are now threatened with the possibility of becoming clichés.

From the beginning of his career, Lang trafficked in standard genre material; his film recycled myths and drew on stereotyped characters and situations, often the more clichéd the better. It was a cinema that seemed to thrive on cliché because it was cliché that allowed Lang more fully to tap into what Freda Grafe calls "a visual idiom that bypassed the domination of language."<sup>29</sup> But by the time of *The Thousand Eyes* (as well as in the Indian diptych), this drawing on stereotyped situations has intensified in that these clichés are those of Lang's own cinema and that Lang himself is now recycling. The film clearly establishes in the first Interpol sequence that Mabuse is a largely forgotten figure: a cutaway zoom shot shows Mabuse's grave overgrown with weeds. The new Mabuse sets into motion a revival of the old Mabuse's acts that had previously been the stuff of (as one Interpol agent puts it) "old cock and bull stories." Like Lang, this new Mabuse does not attempt to create a completely new set of crimes and situations but instead repeats old ones, modifying and re-writing them when necessary in relation to changing times. If the old Mabuse was a metaphor for the kind of filmmaker Lang saw himself as in 1922, the new Mabuse suggests that if Lang sees himself in this figure at all anymore it is negatively or, at the very least, ambivalently, as a figure who can only repeat and who has run out of ideas.



In all of his later films, Lang's skepticism about the value of his work begins to manifest itself more clearly. *While the City Sleeps*, *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* (1956), *The Tiger of Eschnapur*, *The Indian Tomb*, as well as *The Thousand Eyes*, contain certain deficiencies of execution in comparison with his earlier films, from the casting choices and performances to some make-shift scenario construction along with apparently restricted budgets and shooting schedules. These ostensible flaws have long been noted and traditional film criticism has often regarded these works as stillborn objects. Whereas Lang's work in general makes unusual demands on the spectator, these later films go even further in that their perceived hollowness provides the spectator with very little in the way of conventional genre entertainment or narrative thrills—although to what extent Lang's work ever fully provided this is debatable. At the same time, these films are also prized among Lang aficionados, central texts within a certain auteurist, cinephile discourse, particularly for the degree to which they distill the very essence of Lang's cinema.<sup>30</sup> If *The Thousand Eyes* seems to me the most interesting of the later films in this regard, it is because Lang is reviving one of the great metaphoric characters of silent cinema. But *The Thousand Eyes* supplies us with neither Mabuse's ghost nor anyone who could furnish some kind of direct connection to the original. Instead, we have a copy, an imitator. Lang, who did not eagerly welcome the chance to film the character again, never convincingly revives Mabuse. As Lang himself said of Mabuse at this time: "The bastard is dead and buried."<sup>31</sup>

*Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler* has a séance that Mabuse, the Countess Told, and Inspector Von Wenk attend. The Countess disrupts the order of the séance by laughing at the solemnity of the occasion, her behavior particularly irritating the medium and her powers of concentration. *The Thousand Eyes* also has a séance. However, the medium presiding over this one does not possess any genuine contact with the world of the dead. The medium is Mabuse in disguise as Dr. Cornelius, and Cornelius has set up the séance ostensibly to convince Kras and Travers of his psychic powers to overcome their inherently skeptical nature. In fact, everyone at the séance is there under some kind of pretense. In the first Mabuse film, a single skeptic disrupts the proceedings. In Lang's final Mabuse film, the entire room is filled with skeptics and charlatans and an act of physical violence—a bullet fired through a window—disrupts the proceedings.

The word *skeptic* itself is directly used several times to describe characters in the film, particularly Travers, the nominal American hero, and Kras, the German inspector investigating Mabuse's crimes. In a sequence shortly before the séance, Travers and his secretary have a brief conversation about psychic phenomena. The secretary does not believe in any of it, whereas Travers, although identifying himself as fundamentally

skeptical, expresses his desire now to at least believe in someone. Is it Mabuse, then, who is a double for Lang in 1960, pretending (as Cornelius) to get in touch with the world of the dead? Or is it a combination of the film's two major skeptics: Henry Travers, the American caught up in a situation beyond his control in postwar Germany, but who retains a certain tentative fascination for these elements; and Kras, the inspector struggling to unravel a mystery set into motion by a criminal who takes his cue from the spirit of Weimar Germany, a mystery that stubbornly resists detection?

### What Does the Name "Mabuse" Mean?

In order to define this new Mabuse, it is best to begin by doing so in relation to what he is not, by what is absent rather than present.

First, this Mabuse has no face that clearly identifies him and no bodily wholeness. In *Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler* we see the "real" Mabuse and the disguises that he gets himself in to as he portrays other characters that circulate through the film's narrative world. Although the film never fully explains what drives this character or what causes him to create the kind of chaos he does, he has (at least in comparison with *The Thousand Eyes*) a stronger physical presence to him. He has a face that seems to be the "real" one from which he then constructs his other disguises—as the famous opening moments of Mabuse before the mirror trying on disguises demonstrate. *Testament* kills Mabuse and then ambiguously brings him back from the dead, as either a ghost or as a figment of Dr. Baum's imagination. In *The Thousand Eyes*, Mabuse makes a physical reappearance but in a highly displaced manner in which he winds up being little more than the sum of his two disguises, Cornelius and Dr. Jordan. The elaborate montage structure of the opening seemingly conceals Mabuse's face from us, suggesting that its eventual uncovering will be at the center of the film's fascinations. But we have, in fact, been looking at the face of the master criminal all along, in disguise as Cornelius and, a bit later, Jordan, while the face withheld from view is that of a minor figure. The clubfooted man, it turns out, is not Mabuse at all, and when we do see the clubfooted man's face near the end of the film—as he passes himself off as Marion Menil's husband and bursts into her hotel room—the uncovering is completely anticlimactic. Mabuse passes into the body and mind of someone who is, within the logic of classical narrative, never given a clear psychological profile, a set of drives and personality traits that would provide his duplication of Mabuse's criminal activities with some coherence.<sup>32</sup>

Second, he no longer possesses any real telepathic skills, any forms of extrasensory perception. Because the film must conceal Mabuse from

the center of the narrative action, his function in relation to hypnosis and the forces of magic is embodied in Cornelius who, from the moment of his entrance, is skeptically positioned as part charlatan, part genuine psychic in a way that the original Mabuse never was. The original Mabuse's power as an occultist was always very real. In *The Thousand Eyes*, Cornelius's power is initially rendered in an ambiguous manner, simultaneously dismissed by Kras as a fake but a fake who also accurately predicts the assassination of Barter.

Finally, this Mabuse is essentially nothing more than an empty vessel who desires to repeat the acts of a long-dead master criminal from Germany's pre-Hitler past. During the opening montage, the question a policeman poses to his colleagues is not whether they remember Mabuse as a specific individual but whether the name *Mabuse* signifies anything to them. It does not. Only one particular policeman remembers because he was assigned to a case involving Mabuse in 1932. That situation was hushed up, the policeman maintains, by the Nazis as soon as they took power. A question remains, however: Is the name *Mabuse* forgotten because it no longer holds any mythological sway over postwar Germany and Europe? Or is it forgotten because it has been repressed, literally (first by the Nazis) and symbolically (by postwar Germany, disavowing any relationship to such a mesmerizing and hypnotic figure)? In *The Thousand Eyes*, Mabuse becomes a way of naming something that ultimately resists being named. Indeed, the act of naming (having a name, assuming another's, remembering someone else's, uncovering an alias) is central to this film produced within an environment of the utmost uncertainty. As Carlo Ginzburg writes, "the more complicated a society, the more a name is inadequate to circumscribe an individual's identity unambiguously."<sup>33</sup>

Both of the great master criminals in Lang—the first Mabuse and Haghi—are more fascinating for the possibilities they offer for metaphoric readings than they do psychological ones, continually playing a game of presence and absence within the films. In this game (as in many crime and espionage melodramas), the face and the name are shifting and unstable markers of identity—always a new face to assume, a new name to adopt.<sup>34</sup> Strictly in terms of the master criminal scenarios, the positioning of Haghi in *Spies* had already begun the process that is strongest in *The Thousand Eyes*. While undergoing various disguises in the film, Haghi is also just another disguise with a false beard and even a false physical malady: he pretends to be wheelchair bound. In a related manner, both *Testament* and *The Thousand Eyes* rewrite this notion of the master criminal in relation to his unstable face and identity, building on the implications of Mabuse in the first film. Instead of a face behind the mask, *Testament* and *The Thousand Eyes* use the face of Mabuse as the site of a

fundamental enigma. In both films, Mabuse no longer ventures out into the world around him but instead he has all of his criminal acts performed by assistants under direct orders. But these assistants do not see him physically nor do they have any immediate face-to-face contact. All they know of him is his voice, a partial knowledge that creates their frustrated desire to set their eyes on him. In *The Thousand Eyes*, the man behind this disguise, the would-be master criminal, is once again someone who is strongly tied to notions of vision-as-power, to control over modern technology as well as control over older, more “primitive” methods of power such as disguise, hypnosis, and the occult. Once again, the master criminal causes death to circulate. But this master criminal in *The Thousand Eyes* is, in a sense, already dead before his plans are put into action—a death that is not physical (as in *Testament*), but cultural and historical.

### Who Is behind All This?

Lang’s departure from Nazi Germany in the aftermath of *Testament of Dr. Mabuse* has for years been enshrouded in legend: his refusal of Goebbels’s offer to direct Nazi films and his hasty departure by train for Paris that same day (an anecdote repeated as fact in *Contempt* but whose veracity in recent years has been legitimately questioned); the Nazis’ subsequent banning of *Testament*; and Lang’s later and debatable declaration of the film as a parable about the dangers of the rise of Hitler. But separating fact from fiction is of secondary importance here in comparison with the ways in which, within the mythology of film history, *Testament of Dr. Mabuse* (along with *M* from the year before, both sharing the same central character of Inspector Lohmann) has functioned as a culminating moment in Weimar cinema at the same moment when the future possibilities for the example the film sets were abruptly terminated. With the rise of Nazi cinema, modeling itself on Hollywood’s “art of the masses,” we find “not the masses become subject but the masses subjected.”<sup>35</sup> Classical American cinema, which perpetually connects physical states of movement to harmonious totalities, is something that fascist cinema now calls on to serve totalitarian ends.<sup>36</sup> Although certain stray aspects of Weimar cinema remain during the Nazi era, this cinema now becomes, in Rentschler’s words, “a vehicle to occupy psychic space, a medium of emotional remote control.”<sup>37</sup> It is, of course, emotional remote control that Mabuse practices as well. But such forms of control and overt methods of dealing with the nature of cinema and technology now become “hidden” in Nazi cinema in their emulation of Hollywood spectacle. Reading teleologically, one could say that the passage from Weimar to Nazi cinema is not simply one from (as Siegfried Kracauer has phrased