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Fritz Lang's cinema of interruption and the narrative of modernity

FRANCES GUERIN

A pair of anonymous hands draws photographs of various male faces from a deck, one by one. A fade and superimposition lead to a man (played by Rudolf Klein-Rogge) shuffling the same photos – the faces soon to be revealed as masks – from which he will choose an identity for his next escapade. We remain throughout the sequence in a world of intrigue, awaiting clarification. Following an exchange with a man named Spoerri, with whom he trades threats, the character pulls out a pocket watch, and the film cuts to an approaching train. Another cut takes us into a train compartment with a man who holds a document of some kind. He shares the carriage with another man who seems to be sleeping. Then, across a cut-in to a close-up, the fellow traveller opens one shifty eye to spy the documents lying on the opposite seat. Images of a car, more close-ups on pocket watches, a man having his hair done, a murder, a theft and a telephone call are edited together before the man we once thought was sleeping is seen in long shot jumping out of the train. A cut to Swiss bank notes being given to a legless man on the street. We understand that time is of the essence thanks to a repeated close-up of a pocket watch followed by a servant's tardiness and, in turn, an accident that holds up the car racing through the streets. However, we do not yet know the reason for the hurry.

Dr Mabuse, der Spieler/Dr Mabuse, the Gambler (Fritz Lang, 1922) continues at a frantic pace, introducing groups of blind workers manufacturing money, criminals donning disguises, and familiar Lang motifs such as handwritten notes and races against time. By the end of the opening sequence, the action has moved to the stock exchange where

the stolen documents are revealed to be a trade agreement that the character played by Klein-Rogge uses to manipulate the price of shares. This sequence is shown through alternating close-up and long shots across a series of cuts, creating frenetic movement. We see chalked numbers on the exchange board representing the plummeting stock. In a high-angle, overhead shot, human figures rush, push and shove, their hands feverishly waving small pieces of paper. The contrasting flurries of white against the bottomless black of the trading floor becomes an image approaching abstraction. The exposition sequence closes with Klein-Rogge's face superimposed over the exchange floor, littered with slips of paper in a display of modernist film wizardry.

The film's omission of details, its use of parallel editing, and the anonymity of a criminal gang led by an unidentified man whose face is copied from a photograph used like a playing card, hurl us into a world of unpredictability and unrest. The interspersal of an experimental aesthetic with a silent film crime narrative contributes to the volatility. We must wait approximately 20 minutes to be shown the connection between the disparate elements of the opening: the stolen documents will be used by the criminal, wearing a mask that replicates a photographic portrait, to manipulate the stock market in the interests of making himself a fortune. Yet this information gives us no insight into the narrative to come or the protagonist's motivations. We are led to assume that the Klein-Rogge character is amassing personal wealth, but after a further hour of the film showing him on a criminal rampage, we discover this to be a deception. Klein-Rogge's character, who is revealed to be Dr Mabuse, tells the mysterious, emotionally driven Countess Told – a regular onlooker at the high-society gambling parties he frequents – that his goal is to play with people's destinies. Money in and of itself is of little interest to Mabuse.

The film's viewers are not the only ones left scrambling for logic in this world of false assumptions. Mabuse himself must labour across sequences to establish his authority over both diegesis and narrative. As I discuss in this essay, Mabuse's image is taken out of the flow of the narrative, and his control often ceded to the disruptive potential of the cinema. Moreover, his frustrations also arise from the popular form of Lang's cinema as much as they do from its characteristic fragmentation and chaos. For *Dr Mabuse, the Gambler* is both a criminal detective serial narrative and a modernist cinematic play with time, space, form and audience expectation. Thus, while the film is striking in its interruptions and narrative imperfections, and in its characteristically modernist aesthetic, it also pursues the commercial success of a serial crime thriller.¹ As such it privileges connections – if not continuation – across acts, episodes and films. By extension, this form demands that Dr Mabuse, the film's malevolent anti-hero, is periodically stymied in his pursuits, ensuring that he never reaches his goal of autocratic reign. If he were to succeed, the chase would be over, narrative stability reinstated and thematic resolution reached. For Lang, it is imperative that this never

¹ The film was produced by Decla-Bioscop over 17 weeks under Erich Pommer. Lang was given artistic freedom and fully supported by Pommer. For more on the Lang-Pommer collaboration, see Patrick McGilligan, *Fritz Lang: The Nature of the Beast* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), pp. 54 ff.

eventuates: perpetuation of the mayhem and narrative open-endedness is vital to the film as a self-proclaimed 'Image of its Time'.

As *Dr Mabuse, the Gambler* settles down, the film nevertheless continues to be plagued by interruptions that disorient the unfolding plot until, eventually, it closes with an unfinished narrative. In the penultimate scene of Part Two, the state prosecutor von Wenk is hypnotized into doing Mabuse's bidding. Von Wenk is then rescued by his people, and Mabuse fails in his exploits. The film ends with Mabuse, now deranged, in the hands of his victims, being led by von Wenk out of the cellar from which he ran his counterfeit operation. We must await the next film in the series to discover where Mabuse will be taken. This cinema of uncertainty, of narratives destabilized by missed communications, deceptions and misjudgements, extends to the erroneous perceptions that marked modernity in Mabuse's and Lang's 1920s Germany. Many Lang critics cite the narrative interruptions and chaos of Lang's films as either their strength or their weakness, yet always as their idiosyncrasy.² Critics similarly indicate these features as constitutive of the uncertainty of post-World War I Germany. However, in a departure from scholars such as Thomas Elsaesser, Nicole Brenez or Raymond Bellour, I argue that the ruptures and interruptions not only stymie the narrative form, leading to unresolved sequences and, ultimately, an open-ended film, but also compromise the authority and mesmeric powers of *Dr Mabuse, the Gambler*.

In this sense the film is a modernist narrative, illustrating a vision of modernity that reflects what Theodor Adorno called a 'restlessness', when writing of the negative dialectic.³ For Adorno, this restlessness pervaded totality as a constitutive paradox, thwarting its inevitability. Through the narrative use of what Brenez calls 'failures, under the auspices of the incomplete', the film asserts its power and the camera its authority.⁴ Yet Lang uses off-screen space to conceal and surprise, to create a world in which nothing is reliable, despite what we think, in a film where continuity is only surface-deep. This paradox, or restlessness, created by conflicting narrative motivations in turn reflects the uncertainties of contemporaneous Germany. Moreover, this destabilized, interruptive aesthetic, medium and representation perform jolts and misconceptions in the narrative of industrial modernity far beyond 1920s Germany.

Consequently, in an extension to the claims of other Lang scholars, following the conception of a sociologist such as Anthony Giddens, I argue that Mabuse's and Lang's modernity pursues its trajectory into late modernity.⁵ Modernity is ongoing, but for Lang it is nevertheless marked by discontinuity, truncation, moving in fits and starts, like a chase scene from *Dr Mabuse, the Gambler*. In another twist, thanks to the narrative fractures that stymie *Dr Mabuse*, the film as a cinematic instantiation foresees an ongoing destabilization of modernity in

² Thomas Elsaesser, 'Fritz Lang's traps for the mind and eye: Dr Mabuse the Gambler and other disguise artists', *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imaginary* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 145–94. See also Nicole Brenez, 'Symptom, exhibition, fear: representations of terror in the German work of Fritz Lang', in Joe McElhaney (ed.), *A Companion to Fritz Lang* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), pp. 63–75; Paul Jensen, *The Cinema of Fritz Lang* (New York, NY: A. S. Barnes, 1976); Noël Burch, 'Notes on Fritz Lang's first Mabuse', *Cinetacts*, vol. 4, no. 1 (1981), pp. 1–13; Frieda Grafe, Enno Patalas and Hans Helmut Prinzler (eds), *Fritz Lang* (Munich: Hanser, 1976).

³ Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 2015).

⁴ Brenez, 'Symptom, exhibition, fear', pp. 70–71.

⁵ Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

- 6 While this has always been the preferred reading of Mabuse the charlatan, gambler and psychoanalyst, the reading of the 'destiny machine' society as represented by Lang's films (of which Mabuse and Lang himself are the 'grand enunciators') has, since Tom Gunning's magisterial work, been explicit. See Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Vision and Modernity* (London: BFI, 2000).
- 7 Walter Metz, 'Modernity and the crisis in truth: Alfred Hitchcock and Fritz Lang', in Murray Pomerance (ed.), *Cinema and Modernity* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), pp. 74 ff. Metz is interested in the later Lang films, but his and other chapters in this book are concerned to marry the capacity of the cinema as medium to the thematic issues explored by films of European and American modernism.
- 8 Gunning reads the inserts of close-ups of Mabuse's face as 'portrayal of the occult powers of his vision, his ability to hypnotize victims at a distance, bend them to his will through a focused stare [...] By his direct gaze, Mabuse stakes a claim over the visual apparatus of the film and its narrative destiny.' Tom Gunning, 'Fritz Lang's *Dr Mabuse, the Gambler* (1922): grand enunciator of the Weimar era', in Noah Isenberg (ed.), *Weimar Cinema: An Essential Guide to Classic Films the Era* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 106.

perpetuity. Thus the interruptive aesthetic as a representation and embodiment, as well as a vision of an ongoing fractured modernity, continues to resonate. In today's climate of war fuelled by political corruption, carried out by dictatorial power, the waning truth value of images, the crumbling of capitalism, and fear on the global diplomatic stage, Lang's film has never been more prescient. Indeed, the logical conclusion to my analysis of *Dr Mabuse, the Gambler* is that the current historical conditions are a continuation of, not a break with, early 20th-century industrial modernity. If we are in a post-industrial moment, it harbours lasting connections to the divisions of the industrial narrative.

Dr Mabuse is typically seen as a figure of authority with unbridled power to manipulate institutions, individuals, and narrative outcomes. This interpretation is read through the dynamics of Mabuse's powerful gaze. His facial disguises and physical absences mean that while he can see and wield power, he remains invisible and unknowable to other characters and the viewer. Similarly, the disarray that results from Mabuse's actions across Lang's meticulously controlled narrative is offered as evidence of this power.⁶ Nevertheless, all manner of obstacles also combine to thwart his path to omniscience within both diegetic and narrative worlds. Indeed, both the ongoing frustration of Mabuse's quest and the film's open-endedness are crucial to frustrating his actions and, in turn, his efforts to win back power through self-reinvention. Thus the narrative's challenge to his ultimate power is necessary to drive the disruption he causes. The havoc wrought on everyday life is not initiated by Dr Mabuse alone; rather, chaos derives from his altercations with other characters, the narrative and the film medium itself. Ultimately, *Dr Mabuse, the Gambler* also engages and reproduces the interruption of the cinema as medium, the technology of illusion and uncertainty that contributes to the redefinition of a fragile modern world. In other words, Lang's film embraces the medium through which industrial modernity best represented itself, exposing the *sine qua non* of the very medium – its mechanical reproducibility, motion across illusory times and spaces, deceptions, and deviations. The result is a film that reaches to the heart of the unfinished project of modernity.⁷

Within the stuttering narrative of *Dr Mabuse, the Gambler*, visual interruptions halt the flow of images. Objects, hands, rolling eyes, and other inserts add comment and tone, but not necessarily narrative information. In an oft-quoted example, Mabuse's face is repeatedly inserted in close-up, raising an eyebrow, gazing intently at another character, looking directly to the camera against a black background. Lang's use of close-ups has been the subject of much critical discussion, particularly of faces as they relate to vision, point of view, and the power of the look.⁸ However, if we attend to the moments when Mabuse's face is inserted in close-up, we find it gives the impression of narrative

information that is, in fact, empty of meaning. Perhaps more importantly, it functions to cut Mabuse himself out of the diegesis.

To give one example: at the gambling party hosted by Count and Countess Told, Mabuse is introduced in long shot, standing at a fireplace beneath an enormous painting of the devil. He stands alone with his elbow on the mantelpiece, staring at the fire as if plotting his next move. The film cuts to a medium shot in which Mabuse's look is impenetrable, but his clenched hand, slowly opening and closing as if in preparation for attack, indicates his mood. After approaching the host and a group of male guests, Count Told and Mabuse share their ideas on Expressionism. For Mabuse, who stands noticeably shorter than the other men, Expressionism, like everything else, is a game. Told uses Mabuse's assertion as a cue to announce that the group will move to the gaming table. The film cuts to Mabuse in close-up against a black background. His eyes are wide, the lighting is harsh, his look is opaque. We have no idea of what goes through Mabuse's mind; yes, he is angry, but his reasons remain ambiguous. The film cuts back to the group of men, including the smiling Count Told, as they head to the gaming room. The other characters do not visibly react to Mabuse's ire.

Bellour discusses the overriding ambiguity of point-of-view shots in Lang's films.⁹ In *Dr Mabuse, the Gambler*, the uncertainty of Mabuse's thoughts is underlined through the use of masks to create irises and pinholes for close-ups, a standard convention in early 1920s silent films. In an extension of Bellour's observations, it is not only the ascription of meaning to a point-of-view shot that comes with a caveat, but, as demonstrated, the reaction shots inserted into the flow of a conversation can create vagueness. Thus, while the film cuts twice more between Mabuse in his isolated frame against a black background and the jolly group of male guests, the others' reactions across edits give no indication of Mabuse's effect on them, and the shots do not reveal the reason for his anger. The close-up inserts of Mabuse interrupt the narrative: they do not communicate cause-and-effect information, but they do show his face being taken out of narrative continuity, and thus his disconnection from its events. Perhaps this explains his anger?

Lang's cinema of uncertainty continues as the narrative is repeatedly destabilized by missed communications, misidentifications and other trickery. In what might be the greatest deception of Lang's film, the master criminal is not always in control of the events he authors and the people therein. I have argued elsewhere that Mabuse is by no means the all-seeing, perspicacious manipulator.¹⁰ In an extension of those observations on Mabuse's blind spots, together with his exclusion from the diegesis, narrative interruptions constantly trip him up to ensure the continuation of the film from one episode to the next.¹¹ Elsaesser discusses Lang's use of parallelism to create a *mise-en-abîme* of action. He shows how the mirrors, doubles and split halves that punctuate Lang's *mis-en-scène* are echoed in the film form which is, in turn, filled with repetitions and counterpoints that work both to confuse the

9 Raymond Bellour, 'On Fritz Lang', *SubStance*, vol. 3, no. 9 (1974), p. 28.

10 Frances Guerin, 'While not looking: the failure to see and know in *Dr Mabuse, der Spieler* and *The Testament of Dr Mabuse*', in McElhaney (ed.) *A Companion to Fritz Lang*, pp. 43–62.

11 For my discussion of the serial format as a way of ensuring the open-ended narrative, and explaining the resistance to Mabuse's autocratic dominance, see *ibid.*

- 12 Elsaesser, 'Fritz Lang's traps for the mind and eye', pp. 145–94.

- 13 Martin Blumenthal-Barby, 'Faces of evil: Fritz Lang's *Dr Mabuse, the Gambler*', *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies*, vol. 49, no. 3 (2013), pp. 337–38. See also Erik Butler, 'Dr Mabuse: terror and deception of the image', *German Quarterly*, vol. 78, no. 4 (2005), pp. 481–95.

viewer, as well as to hide Lang's own place within the narrative. For Elsaesser, these strategies are a type of false exposure used to obscure information, giving Lang the ultimate control and power over the narrative.¹² In an extension of Elsaesser's insight, these strategies also create unforeseen obstacles to Mabuse's grand vision.

Other scholars have identified the gaps in Mabuse's so-called omniscient control of people, places and things in the diegesis and film narrative.¹³ Among them, for example, Martin Blumenthal-Barby cites Mabuse's servant's failure to hear Carozza's truth through the prison walls. This results in the servant mistakenly reporting back to his boss that Carozza has betrayed him. Yet it is not only Mabuse's acolytes and helpers who let him down time and again, ensuring that he fails to attain his narrative goals; rather, the narrative itself lets him down in the interests of the film's continuation.

After a series of failed attempts by Mabuse to kill his nemesis von Wenk, the latter leaves the Excelsior hotel in pursuit of the former. The state prosecutor climbs into a taxi that happens to be driven by Mabuse's man Georg. As he sits in the back, reviewing his notes, the film cuts to a medium shot of Georg in the driver's seat, slyly looking over his shoulder at his passenger. The film cuts to a close-up of a leather-gloved hand, the thumb of which pushes a lever, followed by a quick cut to a tight close-up of two cylinders releasing gas. Suddenly von Wenk gasps for air in the back of the cab, pulling on the curtains he struggles to open the window. He is too late. Von Wenk slumps down in the seat and into the black of the frame's background. On awakening, he finds himself in a boat on a lake. He must now seek help from local fishermen.

Always, in this cat-and-mouse game with the state prosecutor, there is a gap in Mabuse's knowledge, a note written or disclosed, a piece of information that allows von Wenk to take the upper hand. In this instance, the fishermen unexpectedly come to von Wenk's rescue. Back in his office, Mabuse flies into a rage, punching and yelling at his assistants Pesch and Spoerri, blaming them for von Wenk's escape. Every time his plans go awry, Mabuse explodes, revealing his weak spots: the people and events that are out of his control. At such moments even Mabuse's competence is questioned, his goals are misrepresented, and he is mistaken, leading both him and us further into the labyrinth. The outcome of this narrative is such that Mabuse cannot and must not be in full control if *Dr Mabuse, the Gambler* is to continue. Lang's anti-heroes from his German films never succeed outright. Hans Beckert, Mabuse and Haghi are never in full control because that would be inconsistent with the need for another episode. Similarly, the protagonists cannot succeed if the open-ended restlessness that defines these films and their time is to persist.

For Mabuse and von Wenk, and indeed for the viewer, any solution or closure offered by Lang's film is only ever temporary – an illusory image about to dissolve. We are always deceived by the finality of a scene or an action, by information disclosed. Nothing can close because it is inherent to

the form of the popular serial that the problems proliferate and multiply. Lang's cinema is itself a deception, a form of game-playing similar to Mabuse's estimation of Expressionism. While Mabuse wants to wreak havoc on people's lives, and von Wenk to put an end to Mabuse's exploits, we desire to equate seeing with knowing, to assume truth in the image. Such reassurances are never given in Lang's cinema. *Dr Mabuse, the Gambler* repeats the superficiality and interruptive qualities of film as a medium – fragments edited together into an illusory coherence – while repeating the uncertainties, forever perpetuating the lack of solutions, and ensuring that the end never arrives. As such, the film both represents, as well as embodies, the unending disruptions of modernity.

Dr Mabuse, the Gambler is not modernist simply because of its engagement with power, control and ownership of the image, as Gunning has argued. It is modernist because this power is shown to be vulnerable, through the fractures, gaps in knowledge, and discontinuous images buried in unpredictable turns of events. The susceptibility of power is also laid bare in punctuated narratives that both unfold, and, as Adrian Martin has argued, go around in circles.¹⁴ In turn, the ruptures to narrative continuity are characteristic of silent film in particular. If we accept the interconnection that Walter Benjamin claims between art (here film) as aesthetic and experience, a cinematic aesthetic marked by gaps and occlusions reflects the historical experience of modernity towards a never-to-be-realized telos. It is an experience hampered by blind spots, weaknesses and pursuits of power that are not yet fully realized.

Although they may not use the term, after Gunning, Lang's critics tend to insist that his films present a vision of anti-modernity. Human beings are thus cogs in the all-powerful, soulless machine of technocracy – what Gunning calls the 'destiny-machine'.¹⁵ Accordingly, through the lens of interruption, the breaks in continuity and realization are discursive claims towards an anti-capitalism, anti-state and anti-Law. This, however, is only one way to read the films. We must remember that a film such as *Dr Mabuse, the Gambler* is steeped in and indebted to popular culture, entertainment and escape. Even though the producers at Decla-Bioscop may not have insisted on economic success, Lang was always anxious for applause. Such production conditions were the very motors of modernity in Lang's midst. Like the cinematic medium itself, the narrative and its interruption, the quest and the investigation, Mabuse and von Wenk, the modernist aesthetic and popular entertainment are inseparable for Lang. In keeping with popular culture's desire to entertain, we are swept up in the thrills and spills of illusion that cover the narrative interruptions. *Dr Mabuse the Gambler* gives us the illusion of comprehension, of expectations met, and with them a triumphant anti-hero. In keeping with the medium of film, all success is a surface designed to proliferate the state of unease. As a modernist film *par excellence*, *Dr Mabuse, the Gambler* is as restless as the modernity it depicts and performs.

14 Adrian Martin, 'Machinations of an incoherent, malevolent universe: Fritz Lang's *Spione*', *Rouge*, no. 9 (2006), <<http://www.rouge.com.au/rougerouge/spione.html>> accessed 15 November 2022.

15 Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang*.