

Germany's Master Villain

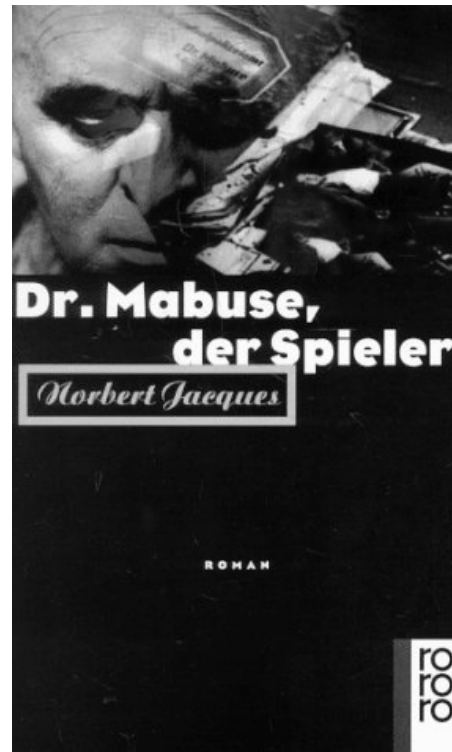
by Cora Buhlert

The history of Norbert Jacques' villain, Dr Mabuse

He was a true mastermind of evil, a villain on the scale of Fu Manchu or Blofeld. His criminal career spawned more than six decades, from the unrest of the Weimar Republic to the fall of the Berlin Wall, and even death itself could not stop him. Dr Mabuse, respected physician, crazed genius and master mesmerist, always plotting to plunge the world into chaos and usher in an age of crime.

Mabuse was the brainchild of writer Norbert Jacques. Jacques was born in Luxembourg in 1880. After studying law at the University of Bonn, he became a journalist and world traveller. His experiences led him to writing travel memoirs and adventure novels. His first novel, *Funchal*, appeared in 1909. It was followed by dozens of other novels in a variety of genres. Was Norbert Jacques a pulp author? He himself would probably have disputed that claim. After all Jacques never wrote for the German pulps, his novels were serialised in respectable newspapers of the day. And Jacques was hardly a hack, considering that even Thomas Mann lauded his abilities as a writer. Nevertheless, many of his works have a certain pulpy feel to them. This is particularly true for the novel that would make Jacques famous, *Dr Mabuse, der Spieler* (*Dr Mabuse the Gambler*), which was serialised in the newspaper *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* between September 25th, 1921, and January 29th, 1922.

In Germany, the early 1920s were a time of political and social uproar. The Weimar Republic, which had risen from the ashes of the old empire, was highly



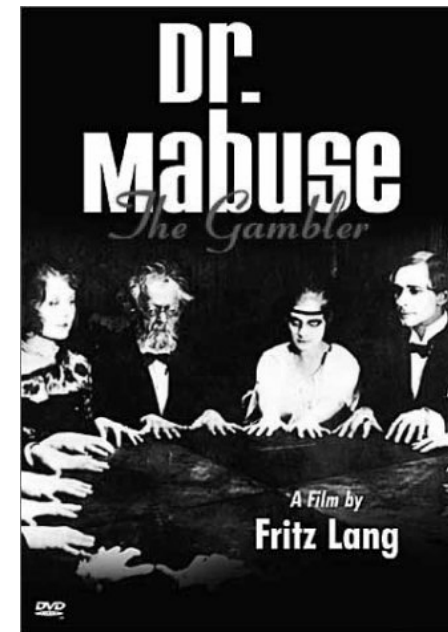
Above: Cover of the 1996 edition of *Doctor Mabuse, the Gambler*

unstable and had very little support among the population. Elections were frequent and majorities changed every few months. There was rioting in the streets and various uprisings both from the left and the right. Inflation reached incredible heights, even everyday items such as bread cost millions and billions of marks. The big cities, most notably Berlin, had developed a very active nightlife with all the attendant problems. Prostitution, gambling and

drug abuse flourished, as old moral restraints evaporated. This is the climate that bred Mabuse.

The novel begins with the young prosecutor Von Wenk investigating a series of gambling frauds, which have led the easy living Count Todd and his wife to their ruin. The trail leads to a criminal syndicate headed by Dr. Mabuse (who incidentally got his name from a 15th century Flemish painter). By day, Mabuse is a respected psychologist (psychoanalysis was only becoming popular at the time and was still viewed with suspicions by many people). By night, he controls criminal operations ranging from gambling fraud via prostitution, drug trading and counterfeiting to murder. Given the economic problems in Germany at the time, it is not surprising that Mabuse also sets his sights on the economy. He

Below: The cover of the DVD of Fritz Lang's *Dr Mabuse the Gambler*.



engineers market crashes and inflations (the belief that the great inflation of the early 1920s was engineered by nefarious powers was a popular conspiracy theory at the time) to create chaos and usher in a reign of crime. Mabuse also wants to found his own kingdom, called Eitopomar, in the Amazonian jungles. What makes Mabuse so dangerous are his hypnotic powers, which he uses to control his victims. Only Von Wenk is immune to Mabuse's powers, making him the only man who can take Mabuse and his organisation down. Von Wenk's resolve is strengthened when he falls in love with Mabuse's lover, the dancer Cara Carozza.

Modern day critics are not sure what to make of Jacques' novel. Is it a deeply conservative text and is the aristocratic prosecutor Von Wenk a symbol for the old German empire, beleaguered by the new republic and its vices as symbolised by Mabuse. Or is it a highly prophetic novel with Mabuse as a Hitler-like figure? One thing is clear however: Although a villain, Mabuse is the true star of the novel.

Norbert Jacques was good friends with Thea von Harbou, who worked as a screenwriter for the German film production company UFA. Thea von Harbou introduced Jacques to her husband, director Fritz Lang. Lang had just had his first big success with the jungle adventure *The Indian Tomb* and was looking for a follow-up picture. Thea von Harbou suggested an adaptation of *Dr Mabuse, the Gambler*, which premiered later in 1922. In the film, Mabuse was played by Rudolf Klein-Rogge (best known for playing the mad scientist Rotwang in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*). Bernhard Goetzke was Von Wenk. Norwegian actress Aud Egede Nissen played Cara Carozza. Somewhat overshadowed by the better known

Metropolis, *Dr Mabuse, the Gambler* is nevertheless one of the gems of German silent cinema. It can also be seen as a precursor to *M*, Lang's 1930 masterpiece about the hunt for a serial killer.

The film was a faithful adaptation of the novel. The only difference was the end. In the novel, Mabuse was killed. The final scene of the film shows Mabuse in his lair, playing with banknotes, beyond punishment, utterly mad. The film's ending has a much more sinister air than the tidy solution of the novel. Incidentally, it also left open the possibility for a sequel. And given the success of both the novel and the film, a sequel was almost inevitable.

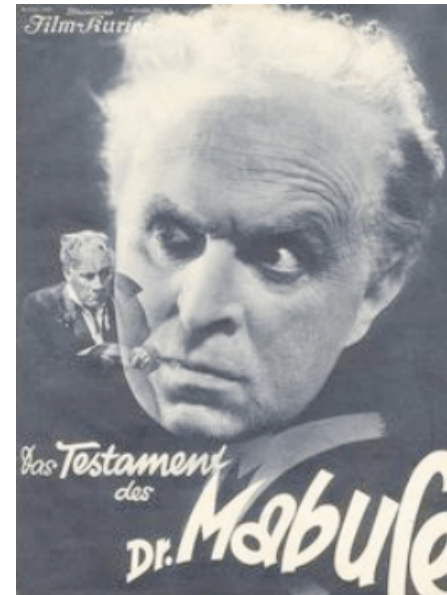
Norbert Jacques was the first to revisit the character in his 1930 novel *Mabuses Kolonie* (Mabuse's Colony), which remained unfinished. *Mabuses Kolonie*, which concerned the jungle kingdom of Eitopomar, was only published in 1997, together with Jacques' novellas *Ingenieur Mars* (*Engineer Mars*, 1923) and *Chemiker Null* (*Chemist Zero*, 1934).

Meanwhile, Fritz Lang himself was considering a sequel to the highly successful Mabuse film. He approached Norbert Jacques to write a second Mabuse novel. Instead of finishing *Mabuses Kolonie*, Jacques came up with an entirely new novel which was entitled *Das Testament des Doctor Mabuse* (*The Testament of Doctor Mabuse*). The sequel was finished in 1932 and adapted for the screen. However, *Testament* was not published, as it was feared that the book would hamper the success of the forthcoming film. Besides, Fritz Lang had promised Jacques a cut of the film profits that promised to be greater than the royalties from the book.

Testament was clearly written with the film adaptation in mind. Moreover, it

features one of the first crossovers in cinema history. Because Mabuse's nemesis in *Testament* is none other than Inspector Lohmann, a character who had first appeared in *M. Lohmann*, whose gruff manners and overweight body concealed a sharp mind, was a much more interesting character than Mabuse's previous adversary Von Wenk. Otto Wernicke played Lohmann in both *M* and *Testament*. Rudolf Klein-Rogge returned as Mabuse.

Testament begins with a man spying on a counterfeiting workshop, only to be brutally murdered soon after. Other murders follow. Inspector Lohmann is convinced that Mabuse is the mastermind behind the crimes. The audience is convinced as well. After all, they see and hear Mabuse — only appearing as a shadow on a screen — giving orders to his gang. But the real Mabuse is safely locked away in an insane asylum. Or is he? Upon visiting the asylum, Lohmann sees Mabuse sitting in his cell, tirelessly scribbling what he has termed his testament. A testament which accurately describes the very crimes Lohmann is investigating. Yet Dr Baum, the director of the asylum, assures Lohmann that Mabuse cannot possibly escape. The situation becomes even more baffling, when Mabuse is found dead in his cell. It turns out that Dr Baum himself has fallen under the influence of Mabuse's hypnotic powers and has been orchestrating the crimes as detailed in the testament. In a very impressive sequence, Mabuse's spirit literally rises from his body and enters Baum's. This is the moment where Mabuse turns from a larger than life villain into a supernatural menace. The film ends with Baum fleeing the police in a furious and brilliantly photographed car chase only to drive into a lake. Shreds of the



Above: Programme booklet cover for the 1933 version of *The Testament of Dr Mabuse*.

testament are floating on the water.

Testament was filmed in the fall of 1932 and set to premiere on March 24th, 1933. However, the situation in Germany had changed. For on January 30th Adolf Hitler had come to power. Although Fritz Lang had Jewish ancestors, both Hitler and Goebbels were fans of his work and listed *Metropolis* and *Die Nibelungen* (*The Nibelungs*) among their favourite films. But the parallels between the situation in described in *Testament* and the Nazi's rise to power were too close for comfort and so the film was banned a day before the premiere. *M* was banned as well, as the depiction of crime running rampant did not agree with the Nazi's vision of what Germany should be like. *Testament* finally premiered in Vienna. The French version of *Testament* — which had been shot back-to-back with the German version, using different actors — came out in France. But in Germany,

Testament would not see a cinematic release until after the war. And as the film was noticeably dated by then, it never had the success it deserved.

Even though two of his films had been banned, Goebbels asked Fritz Lang to stay in Germany and even offered him the post of director of the film production company UFA. However, Lang refused. He divorced Thea von Harbou, who supported the Nazi cause, and left Germany for Hollywood not long after. Lang would continue making films throughout the 1940s and 50s, even though he could never repeat his early successes. Meanwhile, Norbert Jacques continued working as a screenwriter for the UFA, a career launched by the success of the first Mabuse film. But Jacques too found himself increasingly at odds with the Nazi regime, because his Luxembourg citizenship made him suspicious. Nevertheless, Jacques stayed in Germany throughout the war years. His refusal to leave later got him in trouble with the Allied authorities and he was even briefly arrested.

It would seem that Mabuse had been forgotten, but that was not the case. And after the war, he quickly reappeared. In 1950, Norbert Jacques finally published *The Testament of Doctor Mabuse* under the title *Mabuses letztes Spiel* (*Mabuse's last gamble*). The film version also finally received a theatrical release in Germany. Meanwhile, the rights to the two Mabuse films had ended up with producer Artur Brauner. Brauner saw the potential in the character and approached Norbert Jacques to write a screenplay for a third Mabuse film. Jacques did finish a screenplay draft, but he died before production began.

In the late 1950s, Fritz Lang returned to Germany as well. He made three more films, all of which revisited to his pre-

war successes. In 1959, Lang directed *Der Tiger von Eshnapur* (*The Tiger of Eshnapur*) and its sequel *Das Indische Grabmal* (*The Indian Tomb*), remakes of Lang's 1921 film of the same title. Though lesser known than some other Lang films, *Tiger* and *Tomb* are beautiful pulpy jungle adventures in their own right.

Finally in 1960, Artur Brauner managed to convince Lang to return to the character of Dr Mabuse once more with *Die Tausend Augen des Dr Mabuse* (*The Thousand Eyes of Dr Mabuse*). Mabuse's nemesis in this film was Commissar Krass, a Lohmann-like character played by Gert Fröbe (best known to international audiences for playing Goldfinger in the eponymous Bond film). In later films, Fröbe's character would actually be called Lohmann again. He appears to be the inspector first seen in *Testament* and *M*.

The film begins with an inexplicable crime, as a man is murdered by shooting a needle into his brain. Krass is immediately reminded of Mabuse whom he helped to track down thirty years before. But nobody believes Krass, Mabuse is after all dead. However, Krass receives unexpected help from Peter Cornelius (Wolfgang Preiss), a blind fortune-teller, who believes that Mabuse has marked him for death. One of the film's most memorable scenes has all the players gathered for a seance with Cornelius, when suddenly a shot is fired through the window. A bullet apparently meant for Cornelius.

Meanwhile, Krass discovers that the murdered man was a guest at the Hotel Luxor where an unproportionate high number of guests meet an untimely end. But the Luxor is no ordinary hotel. Every room is equipped with hidden cameras, controlled from an impressive monitor room in the basement. The hotel was

built by the Gestapo to spy on foreign tourists and has now been taken over by Mabuse. His latest plan includes using a beautiful young woman (Dawn Adams) to set up businessmen staying at the hotel. The damsel in distress is supposedly on the run from her brutal husband who suddenly appears at the hotel only to be murdered by his wife's new protector. Thanks to the cameras, Mabuse has got everything on film and can now blackmail the businessmen. His aim is once again to cause economic havoc and get his hands on nuclear material. As in *Testament*, Mabuse only appears as a shadow on a viewscreen. His true identity remains a secret until the end, when he is revealed to have been Cornelius all along. It is never revealed how Cornelius came to be Mabuse. Presumably, Mabuse's spirit took over his body at some point before the film.

The Thousand Eyes of Dr Mabuse is an excellent film, yet Fritz Lang was not happy with it. He retired and never made another film until his death in 1976. Artur Brauner, however, was eager to continue the Mabuse series, as he hoped it would become a franchise to rival the highly successful Edgar Wallace series. Since Brauner was unable to convince Fritz Lang to make another Mabuse film, he instead hired Harald Reinl, a veteran of the Wallace series. *Im Stahlnetz des Dr Mabuse* (*In the Steel Net of Dr Mabuse*), the first post-Lang Mabuse film, was released in 1961. This time around, Mabuse has developed a mind-controlling drug and is trying to strike a deal with the Chicago mob. Any political or economic motivations are gone by now, making Mabuse just another mad scientist villain. Nevertheless, *Steel Net* is an atmospheric little thriller, which is largely due to the stylish direction by

Harald Reinl. Wolfgang Preiss starred again as Mabuse, Gert Fröbe played his nemesis, now finally called Lohmann. Joining them were Lex Barker as the FBI agent Joe Como and Israeli singer and actress Daliah Lavi as the beautiful daughter of a scientist menaced by Mabuse. The final scene of *In the Steel Net of Dr Mabuse* is especially chilling. Mabuse has clearly gotten away once again. Lohmann is staring out of a window, looking at a busy street with hundreds of people hurrying by, musing that Mabuse could be anyone.

As it was, Mabuse was still played by Wolfgang Preiss in the next film of the series, *Die unsichtbaren Krallen des Dr Mabuse* (*The Invisible Claws of Dr Mabuse*), which was released in 1962 and again directed by Harald Reinl. Lex Barker reprised his role as Joe Como. The gruff inspector was played by Siegfried Lowitz and Karin Dor (best known to international audiences for playing a villainess in the Bond film *You only live twice*) was the damsel in distress. This time around, Mabuse is attempting to gain control of a device which can turn human beings invisible. As a McGuffin the invisibility device is much less believable than the assorted hypnosis drugs and mindcontrol devices of the other films. However, it makes for a very suspenseful scene where the police attempts to protect an airplane from Mabuse's invisible assassins.

The next film in the series was *Das Testament des Dr Mabuse* (*The Testament of Dr Mabuse*), a virtual remake of the 1933 film with the political aspects edited out. It is here that Fritz Lang's genius becomes truly apparent, for while this version of *Testament* is an entertaining thriller in its own right, it cannot hold a candle to the original. Gerd Fröbe is back as Inspector Lohmann. Wolfgang Preiss

returned as Mabuse, before taking over the body of psychiatrist Dr Pohland (Walter Rilla). Like the earlier version, *Testament* again ends with Pohland crashing his car into the river, leaving behind pages of the testament floating on the water.

Apparently, both Mabuse and the testament survived, for in 1963 the next film, *Scotland Yard jagt Dr Mabuse* (*Scotland Yard vs. Dr Mabuse*), appeared. As the title suggests, Mabuse — still occupying the body of the psychiatrist Dr Pohland — is apparently fed up with having his plans thwarted by the German police time and again and moves his operations to Britain, where he plans to take over the country with the aid of a hypnosis machine. He is stopped by Inspector Vulpius of the Hamburg police, yet another Lohmann-like character played by Werner Peters, and Major Adams of the British Secret Service (Peter Van Eyk, who had also starred in *The 1000 Eyes of Doctor Mabuse*). In the end, Mabuse's spirit goes in search of a new host, leaving behind a distraught Dr Pohland who keeps on muttering "It wasn't me. It was Mabuse" over and over again.

With *Scotland Yard vs. Dr Mabuse*, the marriage between Mabuse and Wallace films was finally completed. The script was based on the Edgar Wallace story *The Device* and the cast included such Wallace film regulars as Klaus Kinski (playing a policeman for once), Agnes Windeck and Ady Berber (who plays a hangman hypnotised into hanging himself in the film's most memorable scene).

The final film of the series, *Die Todestrahlen des Dr Mabuse* (*The Death Rays of Dr Mabuse*) veered off into a completely different territory though. Instead of emulating the Wallace series, the 1964 film tries to cash in on the

growing popularity of the James Bond movies. It looks like a poor man's *Thunderball*, complete with "exotic" locales (here Malta), beautiful girls and underwater stunts. Peter Van Eyk stars once again as Major Adams of the British Secret Service. In the beginning, Mabuse is still in the body of Dr Pohland (contradicting the previous film), but Mabuse soon transfers himself into the body of the scientist Dr Botani.

At first glance, the idea of mixing Mabuse and Bond seems like a match made in heaven. After all, Dr Mabuse is clearly the stuff that Bond villains are made off. One can easily imagine him having a talk with Blofeld or Goldfinger and giving 007 more than a few nightmares. And Spectre embodies Mabuse's old goal of the reign of crime. Nevertheless, the move towards techno spy thrillers was probably what killed the series. The stylish black and white photography, which had lent so much atmosphere to the previous films, did not work for the many location shots in *Death Rays* and made the many

underwater scenes hopelessly murky. What is more, the film's scientific menace — death rays straight out of a 1930s science fiction novel — seemed rather anachronistic in 1964, four years after the invention of the laser. This flaw might have been forgivable, if we had ever gotten to see the death rays in action. But we don't and so they never manage to present a convincing menace. The lab from where the rays are controlled is one of the few impressive sets of the film, though. Another problem is that Peter Van Eyk, an actor used to playing straightforward heroes, never manages to pull off the detached irony required by his Bond-like character. The presence of the gruff inspector as played by Peters or Fröbe is sorely missed.

Given its shortcomings it is not surprising that *Death Rays* almost became the death knell of the Mabuse series. Yet Mabuse had evaded certain death before and he would return, at least in name, to German cinemas. Even in the late 1960s, the Mabuse franchise

was still so popular that the British horror film *Scream And Scream Again* would be entitled *Die lebenden Leichen des Dr Mabuse* (*The Living Corpses of Dr Mabuse*) for its German release in 1969. Watching the film in its German version, it is easy to forget that this is not an official part of the series. And Vincent Price makes a brilliant Mabuse. A pity that he never got to play the part for real.

In 1971, Artur Brauner made a final return to the Mabuse franchise. A leftover script from the 1960s became the basis for *La Venganza de Doctor Mabuse* (*The Vengeance of Dr Mabuse*), helmed by Spanish cult director Jess Franco. Incidentally, this was also the first Mabuse film in colour, not counting *Scream and Scream Again*.

Fans of Jess Franco's work seem to enjoy *The Vengeance of Doctor Mabuse*, but for fans of the Mabuse series the film is a huge disappointment. There is a mad scientist in *The Vengeance of Doctor Mabuse*, he is even called Mabuse, but apart from that he has nothing in common with the brilliant criminal mastermind of the past. And the plot is a hopelessly convoluted mess about striptease dancers, Frankenstein-like monsters and policemen inexplicably dressed like cowboys. Not surprisingly, *The Vengeance of Doctor Mabuse* never saw a theatrical release in Germany, though it occasionally shows up on late night TV. Even Artur Brauner preferred to disown this film and it credited as Art Bern for writing the script.

Following the disaster of *Vengeance*, Mabuse remained absent from German screens for more than a decade. In 1983 the character made a brief appearance in an episode of the Austrian cult TV-series *Kottan Ermittelt* (*Kottan investigates*). The episode was entitled, appropriately enough, *Mabuse kehrt zurück* (*Mabuse returns*).

Finally, in 1990 Mabuse returned once more to international cinemas in Claude Chabrol's film *Dr M.*, which was intended as a homage to Fritz Lang. In *Dr M.* Berlin is shaken by a wave of inexplicable suicides, which are traced back to a bizarre holiday camp run by a mysterious doctor. The evil doctor, who is called Marsfeldt here, is played by Alan Bates. Jennifer Beals is his adopted daughter Sonja and Jan Niklas is the young police detective sent to investigate. As the name Mabuse is not even mentioned in *Dr M.* it is disputable whether the film can be considered an official part of the series or not. What is more, *Dr M.* was not very successful and thus the possibilities of seeing Mabuse return to the big screen are slim at the moment.

But in the meantime, Mabuse's tentacles have reached out to other media. A journal for alternative medicine entitled *Dr. med. Mabuse* has been appearing in German since 1975 (somehow I believe that whoever chose the title had never seen the films). Somewhat truer to the source material was the six-part Mabuse comic book by writer/artist Isabel Kreitz, which was published in 2001. New editions of the original novels by Norbert Jacques (including the unfinished *Mabuses Kolonie*) appeared in 1996/97. In the same year, an audio play, based on the first novel, was released.

Even though it has been almost 40 years since the last official film, Dr Mabuse is still a household name in Germany. Through the novels and especially the films, the character has entered the German psyche. He is Germany's Moriarty, Blofeld, Fu Manchu. And he will never truly die? Mabuse is just biding his time, his malicious spirit waiting to take over the mind of a young writer or film director, so he can set out to build his empire of crime once again.

Below: Programme booklet covers for *The Thousand Eyes of Dr Mabuse*, the 1963 version of *The Testament of Dr Mabuse* and *The Invisible Claws of Dr Mabuse*

