**‘The Great Unknown’: Thea von Harbou’s script for *Dr Mabuse, der Spieler***

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When Fritz Lang first met Thea von Harbou at Joe May’s film production company in Berlin, she was already a successful and popular author in her own right. Under contract with Ullstein & Co. publishing house, von Harbou was making the successful transition from writing serialized novels for the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* to writing manuscripts for the burgeoning mass medium of film. Her debut film script *Die Legende von der Heiligen Simplicia*/*The Legend of Saint Simplicia* (1920) – directed by Joe May and based on the story of the same title in her *Legenden*/*Legends* collection of stories about Saints –had beenpublished by Ullstein in the previous year. The titles of von Harbou’s early film scripts for May, as well as for Robert Dinesen, such as *Die Frauen vom Gnadenstein*/*The Women of Gnadenstein* and *Der Leidensweg der Inge Kraft*/*The Ordeal of Inge Kraft* (both 1921), hint at the genre of *Frauenroman* or ‘women’s novel’, in which she specialized. Male critics of the calibre of Rudolf Arnheim, Herbert Ihering, Kurt Pinthus and Hans Sahl either professed not to read such books themselves, or dismissed them as *Gartenlauben* (‘shady bower’) novels, shorthand for the kind of outmoded sentimental kitsch published by Ullstein or Scherl.

Derided for churning out ‘Unterhaltungsromane’, ‘entertainment novels’ for the masses, Ullstein frequently serialized these novels in its news magazine, *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*. A condescending stance towards von Harbou’s undeniably flowery ‘Biedermeier’ prose – characteristically steeped in outdated views of traditional gender roles, laden with religious and patriotic rhetoric, and of a fairy-tale simplicity at odds with the complex social and political realities of post-war Germany – soon became a blueprint for those critics who sought to sideline von Harbou’s work with Lang, whose directing talent was broadly acknowledged by the Berlin press. Arnheim’s verdict that Lang’s films were no more than ‘parvenus, trashy novels that have come into money’,[[1]](#endnote-1) and Herbert Ihering’s comment that Lang was ‘wasting his talent on the scripts by von Harbou’,[[2]](#endnote-2) are representative of Berlin film critics’ dismissive attitudes towards von Harbou’s role in the working relationship between director and screenwriter.

Such a view overlooks von Harbou’s impact on narratively structuring the new medium of film in the tradition of the Germanic folk ballads, legends and myths that were frequently the source of her inspiration, culminating in *Die* *Nibelungen*/*The Nibelungs* (Fritz Lang, 1924), in order to create a ‘refined’ (and for von Harbou certainly a nationalistic) German film culture distinct from others, especially profit-driven Hollywood imports. Both *Das Wandernde Bild*/*Madonna in the Snow* (1920) and *Der Müde Tod*/*Destiny* (1921), co-written with and directed by Lang, mirror the narrative structure of these folkloristic genres. In his review of *Destiny*, Pinthus heaps praise on the ‘impressive directing talent’ of Lang, who ‘also penned the script’. Pinthus identifies the film’s three self-contained episodes set in the exotic locations of ‘Mohammedania [sic], Venice and China in which a lover tries to save her sweetheart’ as evidence of Lang’s ‘unflagging inspirations and his use of the tremendous potentials offered by photography’.[[3]](#endnote-3) Not only does Pinthus fail to mention von Harbou as collaborator on the manuscript, he crucially makes no connection between the exotic locations linked by the story of doomed lovers in the clutches of Death (played by Bernhard Goetzke) – so characteristic of the phantastic and fairy-tale worlds created by von Harbou – and the visual potential, the smorgasbord of exotic locations, they offer the director seeking to render these scenarios visible on screen.

The critical success of *Destiny*, particularly outside Germany, led to von Harbou and Lang’s next project, *Dr Mabuse, der Spieler*/*Dr Mabuse, the Gambler* (1922), one of their few collaborations based not on von Harbou’s own scenarios but on a popular, serialized Norbert Jacques novel. Produced by Uco-Film GmbH, a sister company to producer Erich Pommer’s Decla-Bioscop, the aim was to turn successful Ullstein novels into equally profitable films, thus limiting (then as now) the financial risk for the film company. It is generally accepted that a script of the film no longer exists, and therefore von Harbou’s contribution is inevitably speculative; there is, however, evidence from other films where the script *has* survived. Guntram Geser’s detailed analysis of the existing von Harbou script for *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927), for example, offers an illuminating insight into von Harbou’s working methods. Her scripts can indeed be regarded as an illustrative template for the extraordinary images found in Lang’s films until his exile from Germany in 1933.

Geser identifies three types of von Harbou’s ‘image templates’ in her manuscript for *Metropolis*, ranging from single words and fragments of prose that leave the staging of a given scene largely to the film’s set designers, to precise instructions that outline every aspect of a sequence’s action and mise-en-scene.Significantly, a third method involves von Harbou giving precise editing instructions, including the use of dissolves and superimpositions (*Überblenden*) and instructions for trick photography. [[4]](#endnote-4) Reinhold Keiner observes that von Harbou’s manuscript for *Metropolis* contains ‘concrete technical framing instructions for the camera’,[[5]](#endnote-5) while Vsevolod Pudovkin even includes a scene of von Harbou’s script of *Spione*/*Spies* (Fritz Lang, 1927) in his 1928 film textbook *Filmregie und Filmmanuskript*,commenting that ‘The author’s [von Harbou’s] focus is always on the cinematography and its possibilities, not on the psychological characterization of the novel, or the play’.[[6]](#endnote-6)

The following critical analysis of the various changes von Harbou made in her adaptation of the novel into the film script for *Dr Mabuse, the Gambler* seeks to offer an insight into her significant contribution to what critics at the time of the film’s production, as well as more recent scholarship, identify as the film’s greatest accomplishments, namely the creation of the emblematic Dr Mabuse figure on screen and the film’s reputation as a modernist self-conscious ‘image of its time’.

Following the first intertitle, ‘HE and His Day’, a close-up of a set of portrait photographs, stacked like a set of playing cards, reveals Mabuse (Rudolf Klein-Rogge) as the ‘HE’ who is holding the cards, in a slow dissolve from the disembodied hands picking and holding the cards to Mabuse in a medium-shot facing the camera. As Mabuse collapses the fan of cards, the myriad portrait masquerades are superimposed on his unemotional clean-shaven face, lingering on the screen for a blink of an eye as he begins to shuffle the cards, picks his first disguise, and thus sets the action in motion. The image of these various disguises superimposed onto Mabuse’s face, visible only to the spectator, deserves closer inspection. It could be regarded as a major structural change to the novel, born out of the necessity to reveal the ‘Great Unknown’ to the audience immediately; in the novel Mabuse’s ‘real’ identity, his name and occupation as a neurologist, and a description of a man ‘of massive build, covered by a fur coat’[[7]](#endnote-7) without false beard, wig and make-up, is not revealed to the reader until the fifth chapter.

Von Harbou’s decision to introduce the audience immediately to Mabuse could be based on the simple fact that ‘the story’ of Dr Mabuse was already well known to readers of both the novel (published shortly before the premiere) and its serialization in the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* between September 1921 and January 1922 (the final instalments overlapping with the beginning of the shoot), and that any suspense in the subsequent unmasking of the ‘unknown’ gambler and master criminal would thus have been difficult to achieve. The idea of the stranger with multiple identities is put into play in the second chapter of Jacques’s novel, and revealed over weekly instalments:

At one time the stranger was a young sportsman, at another a worthy provincial; now he was a fair-bearded man looking like an artist, and again a robber and murderer who had escaped from justice. Some said he was a de-throned prince, others that he was a Frenchman […] There was endless variety in the descriptions, but the imagination put the various forms together and made one personality out of them.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Unfortunately the English translation in this case cannot do justice to the German original, which describes the collective imagination (*Phantasie*) of those who catch sight of the stranger collating the various impressions (*Bilder*) of the stranger to create *one* image.

The imaginary construct of separate images dissolving into one complete picture, as depicted in the novel, becomes the superimposition in the film’s opening moments. In the introduction to his book *The Gorgon’s Gaze*,Paul Coates draws attention to the use of dissolves and superimpositions in the cinema of the 1920s, arguing that ‘As one scene emerges through another, it indicates that nothing is substantially itself; in the society governed by Identity, a separate identity is denied to all its component parts’.[[9]](#endnote-9) The superimposition, which collates fragments of seeing and partial knowledge into an omniscient whole, grants the audience an enticing glimpse into the modern ‘atomistically fragmented’[[10]](#endnote-10) world viewed through Mabuse’s all-seeing eyes, a seductive offering of omniscience that, despite its promise, Lang ‘associates […] with villainy’,[[11]](#endnote-11) as Gilberto Perez observes.

The opening’s invitation to share Mabuse’s perspective has prompted scholars such as Tom Gunning to suggest that the image of Mabuse holding all the cards ‘as master of appearances and role playing, as controller of other people’s destinies, works out an analogy with the film director or author’.[[12]](#endnote-12) It is impossible to ascertain who in this Lang–von Harbou collaboration is ultimately responsible for the film’s perceptual and cognitive opening gambit. It is, however, worth remembering von Harbou’s method of giving clear technical instructions, as evidenced in her manuscript for *Metropolis*, to create an ‘image format’ for the director that has, in divergence from the novel, led to notions of Mabuse as controller, and manipulator, of the *cinematic* gaze and thus a self-conscious reflection on the power of the cinematic apparatus to conjure up ‘photographic innovations never seen before’.[[13]](#endnote-13)

A key difference between Jacques’s novel and von Harbou’s script is the decision to emphatically align the film audience with Mabuse for most of the action of Part One, *Der große Spieler – Ein Bild der Zeit*/*The Great Gambler – A Picture of the Times*, and to provide a more evenly balanced spatio-temporal alignment with Mabuse and his nemesis, the state attorney von Wenk (Bernhard Goetzke), only in Part Two, *Inferno, ein Spiel von Menschen unserer Zeit*/*Inferno, a Play about People of Our Times*. The novel, by contrast, alternates more evenly between the perspectives of von Wenk and Mabuse to offer the reader a more conventional fight between ‘good and evil’, characteristic of the detective genre. Curiously it is von Wenk’s admiration for his foe in the novel that seems to guide the characterization of Mabuse in the script: ‘the lawyer saw the criminal no longer as a being of an inferior order. He envisaged him as a man whose pulses raced madly along, senses stirred by the power of hell; a man whose lusts and appetites, demon-fed, should overreach themselves.’[[14]](#endnote-14)

Von Wenk’s pursuit of the ‘Great Unknown’ provides the novel’s narrative arc, and Jacques grants the reader access to Mabuse’s inner thoughts and feelings only in line with the Doctor’s growing awareness of the threat posed by the state attorney closing in on him. Von Harbou’s script thus shifts the focus of the narrative away from von Wenk’s investigation, always one step behind the master criminal. Mabuse’s criminal endeavours, such as the trading in stocks and foreign currencies (printed by his own slave workers in the film), are condensed into the film’s bravura opening, the pace of which was described by contemporary critics as ‘fervently’ capturing, as Pinthus puts it, the ‘suicidal madness’ of its time.[[15]](#endnote-15) Lengthy sections of the novel that describe Mabuse’s crimes in people-trafficking and the illegal smuggling of goods across Lake Constance are omitted from the script in order to focus instead on the city’s secret gambling clubs. In the novel von Wenk is handed a list of clubs, which in the script von Harbou embellishes with exotic passwords. Knowledge of the right password opens doors to the city’s vices – ‘cards, or cocaine’, a waiter politely inquires of von Wenk in the film.

The most prominent change, however, lies in von Harbou’s decision to shift the novel’s setting from Munich (with only the final chapters set in Berlin) to an unnamed metropolis that critics nonetheless recognized as Berlin, not least because it featured landmarks such as the Hotel Excelsior, itself a symbol of the restless and transitional character of the time.

Although the theme of decadent duplicity is prominent in Jacques’s novel – where ‘the wearing of a fur coat could conceal any calling, and a diamond scarf-pin shed lustre on any character’,[[16]](#endnote-16) and restaurants such as Schramm’s Grill, or the Varieté ‘Fort’ (the Petit Palais of the film) act as facades for the gambling dens hidden in backrooms – by shifting the site where Mabuse’s crimes are played out to the ‘hectic, tense atmosphere of Berlin in the post-war years, caught between despair, hope and terror’,[[17]](#endnote-17) von Harbou is able to embellish the characters of the novel to represent social types. These range from the social ‘rise’ of Emil Schramm from pre-war street vendor to post-war racketeer and proprietor of ‘Schramm’s Palais’, depicted in a self-contained episode, to the diminished aristocratic class of Countess Dusy Told (Gertrude Welcker), the ‘Lady Passive’ and her feeble husband Count Told (Alfred Abel). Mabuse’s secretary Spoerri, a provincial Swiss national slavishly devoted to the Doctor in the novel, becomes an emaciated heroin addict in von Harbou’s adaptation.

Reviews at the time of the film’s premiere illustrate how accurately von Harbou’s adaptation depicts post-war Berlin’s decadent and fraudulent milieux in the eyes of many critics who perceived the film as a *Zeitbild*, literally and symbolically a ‘picture of its time’, as promised in the programme accompanying its spectacular premiere at the UFA Palast am Zoo on 27 April 1922. An anonymous review in the *Film-Kurier* praises the film as the ‘incarnation of our zeitgeist, borne from the post-war years […] an accurate portrayal of the life in our urban nightclubs, with female dancers, those and others, secret gambling clubs, cocaine dens etc. […] and over the top of all that Dr Mabuse hovers in his manifold appearances.’[[18]](#endnote-18)

Von Harbou’s script stays close to the novel in its depiction of the city’s various gambling dens, and the ‘Tsi-nan-Fu’ episode in the Palais Andalusia matches the novel closely; Mabuse’s use of his ‘Chinese glasses’ in his attempt to hypnotize von Wenk offers great scope for the film’s use of trick photography. Von Harbou’s instinct for the cinematic ‘possibilities’ of a given scene, as noted by Pudovkin, can be seen in the analysis of a moment in the film, which also matches events in the novel precisely. Following Mabuse back to the Hotel Excelsior, von Wenk arrives outside a hotel room inhabited, according to the bell boy, by a ‘Dutch Professor’. In both novel and film von Wenk refrains from entering the room because he catches sight of a pair of ‘elegant high-heeled shoes of the latest fashion’,[[19]](#endnote-19) which prompt him to enquire about the room occupancy with the hotel manager before returning to the room and finding its occupant vanished.

In the film, the scene takes on an enjoyable playfulness with the themes of cunning and deception. With the camera positioned behind von Wenk’s back, we watch as he walks down the corridor, but only attentive spectators will notice a pair of distinctively coloured boots placed outside a door just moments before he stops to check the room number. The next shot depicts von Wenk reaching for the door handle, glancing downwards. He suddenly hesitates, withdraws his hand and turns away from the door. His consultation with the hotel manager about the guest in this room in the following shot is cross-cut with a shot of Mabuse descending the stairs. In reference to the hotel manager’s assurance that the Dutch Professor is the only guest in the room, the intertitle ‘How come that …’ is followed by a close-up of the shoes, revealing them as the reason for von Wenk’s hesitancy in entering the room. By the time the state attorney returns to the third floor, his Browning drawn, the audience already knows that Mabuse, disguised as the hotel’s office manager, has fled the scene. The withholding of important narrative information leads to a moment of revelation, when the reason for von Wenk’s retreat from the door is belatedly shown to the audience, who may have failed to notice the shoes being put outside the door right before their eyes. The linear narrative structure of the novel contains no such moment of surprise, nor, in the case of the film, satisfaction for any viewer who has paid close attention to the action on screen.

In the novel, the incident arouses von Wenk’s admiration for Mabuse’s shrewd plotting but leaves him none the wiser as to the identity of the criminal mastermind. In the film, the scene turns out to be a moment of what Thomas Elsaesser calls Lang’s ‘traps for the eyes and the mind’,[[20]](#endnote-20) the use of visual strategies such as framing or camera movement to guide the audience’s attention, only to reveal how easily clues are missed – a lesson, in the medium of film, that seeing does not necessarily equal knowing. The director’s ‘importance for a history of the cinema as the history of “seeing-knowing-believing”’[[21]](#endnote-21) has long been acknowledged, but von Harbou’s own awareness of the ‘suggestive’ powers of film is equally palpable throughout the film, particularly in the changes to the ‘Sandor Weltmann’ sequence compared to the source material.

The Sandor Weltmann sequence in the novel focuses on Mabuse playing a final cat-and-mouse game with the state attorney, using his hypnotic powers to restage, with hypnotized volunteers, all of Mabuse’s card games with his victims, from Hull (Paul Richter) to the Count Told. In the film the sequence begins with a shot of a poster advertising an evening of ‘Mass Suggestion, Sleepless Hypnosis, Trance’. The caravanserai scene, which fools the audience in the auditorium who have come to witness Weltmann’s ‘experiments’, exists only in the film, a self-conscious comment about the medium’s capacity to create ‘images never seen before’,[[22]](#endnote-22) to blur the demarcation line between reality and illusion for a sensation-hungry urban audience. As the Countess Told explains to von Wenk at their first encounter in the gambling den of Schramm’s ‘inner circle’, those in the audience ‘are of weary blood and need sensations of an all too peculiar kind to be able to endure life’.

Von Harbou’s ability to create scenarios, such as the caravanserai, for the enjoyment of not only the baffled audience in the film but of the spectator in the cinema, and the medium’s potential to produce – with the help of architects and set designers, trick photography and editing – the futuristic yet archaic visions, myths and fairy-tales that she absorbs throughout the Weimar years, make her, in the eyes of Frieda Grafe, Lang’s perfect collaborator:

At the beginning of his career he wanted material for the new medium that had as little as possible in common with traditional cultural values. Popular inventions, accessible to the masses, cast in a visual idiom that bypassed the domination of language. Von Harbou’s ready-made figures of speech and a-personal formulas, where the Id speaks louder than it does in situations or stories that want to appear original: it was exactly what Lang needed to build up the things he could communicate via the cinema.[[23]](#endnote-23)

That the film version of Mabuse has a very different ending to the novel, where Mabuse falls to his death from an aeroplane, comes as no surprise. More remarkable is von Harbou’s omission of a key theme, namely Mabuse’s fierce longing to establish his own empire in the form of a colony in Brazil called Eitopomar. Mabuse’s hatred of European civilization in the novel, where ‘he felt as if he were confined in a pasture, eating grass like dumb, senseless cattle ate their predestined, accustomed grass’,[[24]](#endnote-24) resonates with the antisemitic pamphlets of Bernhard Förster and his wife Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, and their failed attempt to set up a ‘pure Germanic’ colony in Paraguay in the late 19th century. The analogy in both novel and film is of Mabuse as a modern-day Zarathustra, whose ‘will to power’ and rejection of all moral values, beyond good and evil, not only conjures up Nietzschean ideals of the *Übermensch* but raises questions of the film’s attitude towards the idea of a superior being in the Nietzschean sense, or by extension a ‘superior’ Aryan race in Nazi ideology. The fact that the Eitopomar theme, so critical to the characterization of Mabuse in the novel, is not present in the film suggests that von Harbou’s own partisan nationalist political beliefs did not get in the way of her scriptwriting instincts. Yet she did not follow Lang into exile, and went on instead to become one of the Third Reich’s most highly paid scriptwriters.

1. Brenda Benthien (ed. and trans.), *Rudolf Arnheim: Film Essays and Criticism* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), p. 152. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Herbert Ihering, ‘Frau im Mond’, *Berliner Börsen-Courier*, no. 484, 16 October 1929; reprinted in Gero Gandert (ed.), *Der Film der Weimarer Republik: 1929* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997), p. 200 (my translation). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Kurt Pinthus, ‘Films worth seeing’, in Rolf Aurich et al. (eds), *Fritz Lang: Leben und Werk*. (Berlin: Deutsche Kinemathek and Jovis, 2001); originally published in *Das Tage-Buch*, no. 42, October 1921, pp. 69–70. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Guntram Geser, *Fritz Lang: Metropolis und Frau im Mond: Zukunftsfilm und Zukunftstechnik in der Stabilisierungszeit der Weimarer Republik* (Meitlingen: Corian, 1996), pp. 26–31(my translation). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Reinhold Keiner, *Thea von Harbou und der deutsche Film bis 1933* (Hildesheim, Zurich and New York: Olms, 1991), p. 95 (my translation). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Vsevolod Pudovkin, *Filmregie und Filmmanuskript* (Berlin: Verlag der Lichtbildbühne, 1928), p. 212; reprinted inFred Gehlerand and Ullrich Kasten, *Fritz Lang: Die Stimme von Metropolis* (Berlin: Henschel, 1990), p. 83 (my translation). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Norbert Jacques, *Dr Mabuse*, trans. Lillian A. Clare (Eugene, OR: Bruin Asylum Books, 2015), p. 50; originally published in 1921 as *Dr Mabuse, der Spieler*. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., p. 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Paul Coates, *The Gorgon’s Gaze: German Cinema, Expressionism and the Image of Horror* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Kurt Pinthus, ‘Dr Mabuses Welt’, in Rolf Aurich, Wolfgang Jacobsen and Cornelius Schnauber (eds), *Fritz Lang: Leben und Werk* (Berlin: Deutsche Kinemathek and Jovis, 2001), p. 78; ooriginally published in *Das Tage-Buch*, 6 May 1922. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Gilberto Perez, *The Material Ghost: Films and their Medium* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), p. 132. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Tom Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Vision and Modernity* (London: BFI Publishing, 2000), pp. 98, 104. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Pinthus, ‘Dr Mabuses Welt’, p. 74. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Jacques, *Dr Mabuse*, p. 35. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Pinthus, ‘Dr Mabuses Welt’, p. 74. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., p. 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Heide Schönemann, *Fritz Lang: Filmbilder-Vorbilder* (Berlin: Filmmuseum Potsdam and Edition Hentrich, 1992), p. 45 (my translation). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Anonymous, ‘*Dr Mabuse, der Spieler*’, *Film-Kurier*, 28 April 1922; reprinted in Norbert Jacques, *Dr Mabuse, der Spieler* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1996), p. 297 (my translation). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Jacques, *Dr Mabuse, der Spieler*, p. 43. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Thomas Elsaesser, ‘Traps for the mind and eye: Fritz Lang’, *Sight and Sound*, no. 8 (1997), pp. 28–30. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Thomas Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany’s Historical Imaginary* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 147. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Pinthus, ‘Dr Mabuses Welt’, p. 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Frieda Grafe, ‘Für Fritz Lang: Einen Platz, kein Denkmal’, in Grafe et al. (eds), *Fritz Lang: Reihe Film 7* (Munich: Hanser, 1976), p. 25; cited in Thomas Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany’s Historical Imaginary* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 160. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Jacques, *Dr Mabuse, der Spieler*, pp. 53–54. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)