

## Sound, Text and Identity:

### A Reading of Fritz Lang's *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*

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As a combination of photographic image and recorded sound, of drama, music and visual art, film has often been considered a synthesis of different art forms. From Sergei Eisenstein to Christian Metz, in aesthetics as well as in semiotics or media-oriented theory, the impure and mixed quality of film has always been an important issue.

In my opinion, it could be fruitful to place the theory of Friedrich Kittler in this tradition, because he focuses on the relationships between film (as moving images), writing and recorded sound. Since film contains all these parts, it is an art form that could be used as a theoretical tool to analyze the relations between different media. According to Kittler, the multimedia quality is not limited to film as an aesthetic or semiotic object, but determines the whole discourse of the 20th century and transforms artistic creation into technological inscriptions.

I use the diversity of the film language as a starting point to analyze the intermedial relations in this technological discourse. Through an analysis of Fritz Lang's *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* (1933) I aim to discuss the relations between media, between human senses and between the mind and the creation as a result of a larger discursive change, a change described by Kittler in *Discourse Networks 1800/1900* and *Telephone, Film, Typewriter*.

Lang's eclectic style, and his sensibility to new technology and art, opens to discursive readings. From the early interpretations by Weimar scholars like Lotte Eisner or Siegfried Kracauer, to the recent works of film historians like Tom Gunning, — expressionist aesthetics in Eisner's case, German mentality in Kracauer's, or by theorizing the concept of modernity as Gunning does — Lang's films are seen in

relation to a broader context of the modern.<sup>1</sup> My aim is to follow Gunning's main idea concerning Lang's work as a reflection of the modern in a broader sense. Gunning defines Lang's films as allegories (in the sense evoked by Benjamin) of modernity. By using the theory of Kittler, I hope to bring new light on this issue.

Made in 1933, *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*, is Lang's second sound film. In the early sound film, the relations between the different expressions of the film body are brought into light within a broad, mainstream, context. Basic technological and formal problems such as synchronization, or how to deal with written intertitles in the film narrative, made filmmakers conscious about the fact that film is a construction of different technologies arbitrarily brought together. Therefore, films of the late 20's and the early 30's create a historically unique field for exploring the already existing relations between writing, music/reading recording, and moving images.

Being a part of the Weimar tradition, known for the fears and obsessions of man in the era of modernity, Lang develops a film language where sound, text and image are connected with questions of the unconscious, madness and genius. In doing so, he deals with problems concerning the role of the subject in the era of mass media. In Lang's work, modern media is always seen as an aspect of the human experience, or in some cases, vice versa.

### The Technological *Doppelgänger*

*The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* is especially interesting concerning the transition to sound. The film is a sequel to the silent film *Mabuse the Gambler* (1922), and the addition of sound is integrated into the story, more specifically in the relation between Mabuse himself — a silent film personality — and Dr. Baum, the young doctor who takes over the criminal line after Mabuse. Mabuse is, after the first film, mad and locked up in a psychiatric hospital and Baum is his doctor. To illustrate the development from silent images with text signs to talking pictures, Mabuse is mute and

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<sup>1</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1947); Lotte Eisner, *Fritz Lang* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1986); Tom Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Vision and Modernity* (London: British Film Institute, 2000).

can only communicate by writing, while Dr. Baum's acts are accomplished through recorded sound on a gramophone.

Playing with identity, the main theme of the whole Mabuse-serial, becomes more complex with the addition of sound. Lang uses different media to show different strategies of acting anonymously. By giving orders through the technology of recoding, Dr. Baum can carry out the plans *written* by Mabuse. Baum and Mabuse both commit a crime, but neither of them is present neither at the time nor the place where the crime is committed. Writing and recording become two ways of putting a function of the body elsewhere, to deconstruct the self in time and space.

The deconstruction of man in the modern society is strongly linked to technological development of media in general, and to sound media in particular. Radio, records and telephone, may be considered as the most apparent technologies to displace a part of the body: the recorded voice is often, in film theory and elsewhere, understood as an index rather than a symbol, a trace of the "real" when compared to film pictures, or even more to written words.<sup>2</sup> When Kittler connects recorded sound with a discourse of "the real", he makes an historical approach to show how a specific technology creates the idea of registration or recording in order to divide the body.<sup>3</sup>

The relation between Mabuse and Baum, between writing and recording, between the mad man and the brilliant doctor, is a variation of the classical theme of the *doppelgänger*, common in the German cinema of the 20's. The characters are opposites as well as two aspects of the same personality. As in stories like *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *The Student from Prague* or *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, the Mabuse figure incorporates the division between the "bourgeois", the respectable doctor and the dark side — the unconscious, criminal and mad dimension of modern man. Since the Mabuse/Baum character is transferred into a media discourse, where the "other" can be seen as a technological inscription, the relations between the two aspects of

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<sup>2</sup> See for instance: Christian Metz, "Aural Objects", *Cinema/Sound, Yale French Studies*, nr. 60, 1980.

<sup>3</sup> Media seen as a simulation or replacement of a part of the body is a common idea, theorized by Marshall McLuhan in *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man* (Corte Madera, CA: Gingko Press, 2003). Kittler's most important contribution to this idea is the focus on the recording.

modern man, become not only more complex, but also less clear. The transition from one side to another, from doctor to patient, from conscious calculating to unconscious madness, is floating. The difference between the levels of consciousness is about controlling the technology that incorporates the other part of the self. If you lose control, if technology itself takes over, you pass from one side to the other. Mabuse and Baum can be seen as two poles of the dichotomy of the *doppelgänger* figure (Baum as respectable doctor, and Mabuse as his mad patient), but they also incorporate the dichotomy in themselves. The *doppelgänger* has become multiple, the writing of Mabuse, and the recording of Baum, are two parallel aspects of “the other”, two parallel technologies working together not only to hide, but also to question, the concept of identity.

### Discourse of Separation

Using the combinations of media in the figure of the *doppelgänger*, Lang shows the alienated relation between sound, text and moving images that characterizes the early sound film. In this period, the strategies of how the entities of the film body were to be synchronized were not yet established. (For instance, how to deal with the distance between the seen and the heard in a talking close-up or how to use off-screen or non-diegetic sound.) The fact that sound and images are technologically separated — in the movie theatre and in the recording situation or afterwards during the mixing — created synchronization problems, as well as opening up to a multitude of combinations. Sound was an unfamiliar element in the films, and because of the liberty of expression and the technological problems, often shown as being separated from the image. As Michel Chion shows in his famous essay about *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*, the mysterious voice coming from nowhere can be understood as a reflection on this basic sound film phenomenon, the “acousmatic” figure, where we hear a sound without seeing its physical source.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Michel Chion, “Mabuse – Magie et pouvoir de l’acousmètre”, *La voix au cinéma* (Paris: Edition de l’Etoile, Cahiers du Cinéma, 1982).

The same alienation is to be found concerning the written text plates, which are a part of the film narrative as a rest from the silent era. Written dialogue is non-synchronized *per se*, and often seen as a replacement of the voice. In the early sound film, filmmakers used different strategies to deal with the integration of the written word into the film narrative, suddenly being more conscious about synchronization as a problem. (The aversion in silent film aesthetics to text plates, which is manifested in films like *The Last Laugh* (1924), where the narration is constructed only by images, can be seen as a variation of the synchronization problem before the sound film.)

As mentioned, in Lang's case, this aesthetics of non-synchronization is analogous with the modernist idea about the deconstruction of identity and the fragmentation of the body. The same analogy between man and film technology is to be found in the early writings on film sound, and especially in the theoretical work of the directors of the Soviet montage school, who were the first to theorize the opposition between sound and image. For instance, V. I. Pudovkin advocates an asynchronous montage between sounds and images when he proclaims that human perception is divided in time between the acts of seeing and hearing. Even if the world *per se* is a whole, where every sound is connected to its source, man does not perceive it in that way. Our perception works by selection as we separate one impression from another, and link them together by association of thought.<sup>5</sup> The imaginary dimension of the link between different perceptions — as a development of thought, it only exists on a conceptual level — the connection between a sound and a vision, is not necessarily the same as the “true” connection between a specific sound and the physical source of that sound. Like in a film montage, the different impressions of senses can be put together in any way. The only “real” logic between the senses and the technological or semiotic dimensions is the logic of separation.

So, where can we trace this logic of separation? To the philosophical conception of man, or in the technological fact? According to Kittler, there is no difference between these two levels. At the end of the 19th century, the inventions of film and gramophone

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<sup>5</sup> V. I. Pudovkin, *Film Technique and Film Acting* (London: Vision Press, 1954), 183-193.

created a new media situation, a situation dominated by a concurrence between different means of recording human experience — which had up to that date been dominated by one expression, the expression of writing. Together with the scientific practice of analyzing human writing and speech as isolated acts, divided from the subjects consciousness (practiced even before psychoanalysis) the fragmentation of human identity and the separation of media are linked together.<sup>6</sup> The separation between means of expression brings the material level of the media into light. Media inscription of writing or recording divides the word into two — just as Mabuse does into writing and speaking. Bringing these sides together has, since Edison's experiments with sound recording and film in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, been a part of the discourse of separation. With the sound film, the compilation of various media becomes a necessary material base.

### Materialization and the Symbolic

The fact that the multimedia discourse in the 20th century materializes the sign as such is a crucial point in Kittler's theory.<sup>7</sup> In Lang's case, the processes of materialization of the sign and its meaning create a complex pattern. For instance, in one of the introductory scenes, we see Dr. Baum explaining Mabuse's case to his students by showing the written testament on a big screen. The visualization of the documents materializes the word as sign. The screen on the screen indicates the relation between the silent Mabuse and the aesthetics of written inter-titles as a replacement of the voice. Starting from his later silent films, Lang has shown a great interest in graphic text plates. In *Woman on the Moon* (1929), the words are sometimes even written on the photographic images. In *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*, the writing is integrated into the story, and the separation between text and body creates a tension between the material aspect of writing and the sense of the word. At first we see words and phrases without connection, they are inscriptions cut out of their context. Then, little by little,

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<sup>6</sup> For an analysis of the change of discourse see Friedrich Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900* (Palo Alto, Cal.: Stanford Univ. Press, 1990). For an analysis of the media discourse of the 20th century, see Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Palo Alto, Cal.: Stanford Univ. Press, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> See for instance his analysis of modernist poetry in *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, 253 ff.

sentences take form and create a comprehensible structure. This means that we go from a purely graphic indexical aspect of the written word — through Dr. Baum's interpretation — to a symbolical, more classical reading of the text.

The same dynamic between the visual and the conceptual can also be seen in another sequence with the inscription of the name Mabuse. The letters are written backwards on a glass plate, which means that we do not even recognize them. The word as symbol appears when the plate is shown from its right side. When the glass plate is turned, and the graphic inscription is transformed into meaning, or when the sentences are put together, the former visual understanding, which did not make any sense in the first place, disappears. There is no real coexistence between the two levels — they replace one another. The testament we see on the screen is an image of Mabuse's madness, an image of unconscious automatic writing. Baum understands the conditions of writing by rendering, transforming, the graphical dimension symbolic. By this process, the mind of the creator is controlled and can be re-used.

It is interesting that the spoken, recorded word, works in the opposite way. Dr. Baum uses the technology of recording to give orders to people working for him without revealing his identity. The words they hear, through a loudspeaker or a telephone, are interpreted as symbols, not inscriptions. That is, they follow given orders without understanding the technology behind the procedure and act only on the *sense* of the spoken words. But Dr. Baum's criminal identity can only be revealed by the technological process of recording — the recording itself is his secret. This means that the displacement of the speaking body into a gramophone is located in the purely *tonal* differences between the variations of the voices — because of the simple fact that sound changes with recording. As the film's hero recognizes the evil voice of the unknown criminal through a door, enters and sees the gramophone playing, he catches the source of the sound through the acoustic, material dimension of the words — not their meaning. The symbolic aspect of speaking is used by Baum to control others and through the comprehension of the technology of the recorded voice he himself can be controlled.

Lang plays here with the oppositions “index and symbol” and “non-sense and meaning” within each form of expression, by writing as well as by recording. The mediated technological side, as pure inscription, is always present in the dynamic tension between content and media, the self and the appearance. But he also establishes a dichotomy in the relation between the two media: writing is transformed into symbol, recording into technological trace. When compared to Lang’s first sound film, *M* (1930), where the murderer’s identity is revealed through two parallel forms of *material* inscription — the graphic aspect of handwriting as well as the tonal aspect of voice — in *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* he also stresses the differences between media.

The graphic writing stands for the non-sense of inscription, while the material side of recording becomes a way to reach the “real”, to go beyond the abstraction of the symbol. With the help of sound technology, the sense-making process of interpretation is replaced by a tracing of the source of inscription. *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* as a story about transition to sound with the loss of the informative function of the inter-titles, brings a larger change of discourse into light: the transition from transparent words to material media — determined by the invention of sound recording.

### Recording the Self

The materialization of the sign is also decisive for the re-conceptualization of the role of the creator in the era of modernity. Kittler’s rather narrow definition of media, an apparatus to *record* human data (not to transfer), is explained by the importance of disconnection between the creator and his creation in time as well as in space.<sup>8</sup> The registration gives anyone the possibility to control “the other” (“the other” as text). When the text is separated from the speaker or the writer and transformed into a purely technological body, the romantic idea of the work of art as a mirror of the soul is replaced by ideas like “the death of the author” in poststructuralist theory, or earlier, the automatic writing of the surrealists. It is significant that *Mabuse’s* writing is

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<sup>8</sup> Kittler, *Discourse Networks*, 115ff.



similar to graphic poetry at the beginning of the century, thought of as automatic writing, and therefore containing a graphic quality. The genius of Mabuse's work is a textual product disconnected from the mind of the creator.

In another sequence, concerning sound, not writing inscription, the disconnection between the self and the text appears as a purely psychological phenomenon — without the body itself being absent. It is when Hofmeister, one of Mabuse's former workers, simulates a phone call in a state of madness. The simulation is a repetition of a former situation, when Hofmeister tried to call the police and denounce Mabuse. Before he delivers the information, he is interrupted by Mabuse himself and goes mad. When we see him, his madness is manifested by a maniac repetition of the call to the police office. His subconscious voice gives the madness a machine-like character as he mechanically repeats the former situation. The investigating police officer, who never got to talk to Hofmeister on the phone before he got mad, is now present and tries to recapitulate the situation in order to get the information. But in this state, Hofmeister is only able to repeat, not continue the conversation. What we hear is his desperate call for help, an insignificant fragment of the message he was supposed to deliver — a fragment that works as an image of the non-sense of inscription.

The simulated telephone call is used in the scene not only to stress the technological aspect, but also to show a fusion between recorded and simultaneous sound communication. The telephone disconnects the body from the voice only in space, while the recorded sound is always separated from the speaker in time as well as in space. It is the recorded voice that (in Kittler's theory) can be seen as text or as pure technology, that can then be analyzed, controlled and re-used. And it is only the recorded sound that can compete with the written word or the filmed body in issues concerning the registration of experience.

In this case, the transformation of madness into technological inscription ends up as a paradox. The telephone with its direct communication, that is to say, directly connected to the speaking body, is replaced by a real body not communicating through a machine, but acting like one instead. The repetitious voice works as a recording of communication, as a registration and fragmentation of an otherwise non-controllable

reality. It is through the technology of sound, considered as a non-symbolic inscription of the real and as an inscription of a function of the body, that man can be turned into media. This scene shows clearly how the recorded inscription is controllable only at the expense of the loss of an intelligible level. Therefore it is significant that the information is lost as Hofmeister's body is turned into a record.

### Transcription of Sound, Text, Image

The transcription *into* media can seem contradictory to the idea of the self being deconstructed by the media discourse. *What* can be transferred into media, if the body is no longer considered as a whole entity? In the cinematic text, the body "itself" is represented by the photographic image. The filmic representation has often been considered as a duplicate of the actor's body — as well as that of the viewers. The figure of the *doppelgänger* is for example generally interpreted as a meta-filmic representation of this duplication. According to Kittler, the *doppelgänger*-boom in the cinema of the 20's is parallel to the early scientific use of the cinematic image to deconstruct and analyze the movement of the body. (For instance the movements a body during a crises of hysteria or of a military exercise.<sup>9</sup>)

As Lang transforms the *doppelgänger* figure to a *multimedia* context, the image as duplication of the body is put into a new perspective. The image is no longer the other side of the self; it is just a mediated variation of another mediated variation. Text is transformed into sound, sound into image.

To stress the fact that photography also takes the part of the processes of mediated representations, Lang uses a few spectacular ghostlike scenes where we can see Mabuse in a double exposure, for instance where Mabuse, shown as a fantasy of Dr. Baum, hands over his testament. This scene is the most obvious image of the *doppelgänger* relation between Mabuse and Baum: Mabuse is divided into two, and the two criminals become one. The photographic montage, where one image is posed on another, concretizes the idea of the division of the self and the integration with

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<sup>9</sup> Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, 140-182.

another person. Tantamount to writing and recording, the spirit of Mabuse also appears as a moving image, which is a trace from the *doppelgänger* aesthetics from the silent era and now deployed in cinematic duplication. This scene is especially interesting because it is the only time we hear Mabuse speak — which happens at the same time as he hands over the written document. The words are connected to a voice; the voice belongs to a body. In one image, as in the compilation of sound film, all the three media are put together.

The close up on the graphically impressive text, followed first by a voice reading the title, and then by a movement of handing over the papers creates a cinematic illusion of identity. It is significant that the voice, the body and the text stay separated (as in the filmic body). One media is shown after the other, the voice remains “acousmatic”. The body of Mabuse is perceived as a construction, as an image cut out of another context: the voice has a metallic resonance and seems far away, the movements cut short by the duplication, and by the double exposure, dislocated from the surrounding space. We get the impression that there is no consciousness, no soul, behind the words delivered by the ghostlike shadow. Mabuse’s spirit is a non-spirit, a filmic body where separated forms of media are put together.

As Mabuse is transformed into Baum — or vice versa — the two separated images put on one another stay separated in the double exposure. There is no synthesis, only a montage followed by replacement of one image after the other, Mabuse is replaced by Baum and disappears. The self has become a part of the process of transformation between forms of representations. This is the beginning of Baum’s own madness taking over, a madness appearing as his mind is controlled by a fantasy, and his body by a cinematic illusion.

*The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* is the most brilliant illustration of how the media discourse changes patient into doctor and vice versa (one of Kittler’s favorite devises). This indicates that the process of media transformation, or the mind’s control of “the other” is neither static nor stable. Through the separation of media and materialization of the sign, the connecting soul behind the creation is turned into a function of the text itself. The relations between media can be understood as processes of transformation,

rather than as processes of interpretation of meaning. In the doppelganger figure, one media is transformed into another in the same way as the symbolical is transformed into inscription, doctor into patient or controlling consciousness into madness.