"DR. MEHUSE DER SPIELE" (Decla-Bioscop, Germany, 1922)
Distributed by UPA in two parts of ten reels each: "Dr. Mehuse der Spieler" and "Inferno des Verbrechens". Directed by FRITZ LANG. Scenario by Thea von Harbou from the story by Herbert Jacques, originally published in the Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung and later issued as a novel; Camere, Carl Hoffmann; Sets and design by Otto Hunte and Stahl-Ursch; costuming by Vally Reinecke; music by Peter Schirmann.
With Rudolph Klein-Rogge (Dr. Mehuse); Bernard Goetzke (von Wenz); Aeg Egede Nissen (Cara Carozza); A Fred Able (Count Told); Gertrude Velcker (Countess Told); Paul Richter (Bull); Lydia P techine (The Russian); Karl Ruzer-Puffy (Neweash); Forster Larrings (Spoozali); Hess von Schlettow (Georg); George John (Peach); Grete Berger (Fine); Julius Falkenstein (Karsten); Julius Bergmann (Schramm).

There will be an intermission at the end of Part One; Part Two will resume at 9:30 p.m. promptly.

Many rediscovered "primitives" (and despite its 1922 date, "Dr. Mehuse is a primitive in relation to other Lang works) turn out to have amazing vitality and beauty; such has certainly proven the case with the early Peuillard serials. "Mehuse" on the other hand might disappoint a little if one takes the attitude that it is only four years prior to "Metropolis". However, this is rather like being disappointed in Griffith's "Judith of Bethulia" because it is only two years before the Birth of a Nation. The emphasis surely is wrong; rather one should be astounded at the mastery achieved in the later films over such a short period. On its own merits however, "Dr. Mehuse" is a fascinating work, not only because of its clear ties to the ultra detailed novel of mystery and detection, and for roots which obviously derive from the early serials, but also because here one can see at the source so many of the themes, characters, incidents and even individual shots that we e to permeate Lang's later films, and most specifically "Metropolis", "Spies", and his two Mehuse sequels (the first of which, "The Testament of Dr. Mehuse", was included in our first film series). Lang's criminal world was always a dark and nightmarish one, but here he hasn't quite reached that plateau; the world is grey rather than dark, and it is dream-like rather than nightmarish, with all of the characters - good and bad - seeming to glide through its cold empty rooms in a kind of somnambulitic trance.

What is most surprising of all is Lang's comparative playing-down of melodrama. His latter films had tremendous pace, and here his sequences of action and chase are interspersed methodically, dropped in where they'll do the most good, but never sustained for too long. This rather too deliberate pacing reminds one of both the first "The Indian Tomb", which Lang scripted for Joe May's direction, and Lang's own comparatively recent remake. Possibly Lang, not yet too sure of himself, was carefully following a formula which he knew was acceptable. His too-frequent use of the iris device further slows the physical pace of the film. Of course, Lang liked the long film as a matter of policy, not only because he enjoyed that kind of framework, but also because as he remarked in 1963, and in all seriousness, "...if my films were long they couldn't put anything else on the bill, and I got all the money!"

But if the influence of Joe May and the detective novel tend to dilute some of Lang's vigor, there are still ample signs of the glories that were to come. The sets in the first half particularly, with their bizarre and semi-surrealist design, are often superb. The whole sequence in the Stock Exchange gets the film off to a fine start, and Lang's talent for suddenly turning the everyday into an unreal world of terror is beautifully displayed in the card game sequence where the hideous face of Mehuse suddenly surges forward out of a cut of a totally black screen, like some evil spider on an invisible web. There are wince moments of humor, but somehow they always manage to stay outside the main plotstream, so that -- as opposed to Hitchcock's delightfully light-hearted approach to similar material -- one is never encouraged to regard any of it with anything but the utmost seriousness. And when Lang does swing into his action and chases, he builds them by surprisingly simple and unexpected devices, in which movement is usually perpetuated on two planes. Thus, as Wink pursues Mehuse's car (in part one), Mehuse's auto goes under a railroad bridge and to the right. Almost simultaneously (and this is an optical effect, confirming that Lang did it quite deliberately) the wheels of the train are seen crossing going left. This is the kind of device that Lang was to use more and more; here of course it is not done by editing, but in "Metropolis" the same pace-building effect is created by a direct cut - from Klein Rogge falling outward and down to the right of the frame (from the cathedral roof) to the crowd below surging forward from right to left of frame. Lang himself claimed that his major interest in making "Mehuse" was that it enabled him at the same time to attack the shocking conditions of crime and perversion that were rampant in post-war Germany. It is true that none of Mehuse's victims are very sympathetic.
Most of them are society parasites living empty, useless lives. Mabuse feeds on them like a wolf on a dying carcass, not from necessity but because playing with human destinies is the only exciting game left in a decadent world. For the most part, the socialites look and behave like debauched sleep-walkers and even the virile Hulul, ostensibly the hero in part one, stirs so little sympathy in Lang that he allows him to be killed off so casually, in a long shot, that his death has to be confirmed by a later subtitle. A sign of the times perhaps is that there Mabuse is contemptuous of modern art and expressionism and cooly and quietly a thriller for the rich. This latter Lang villains are often presented as decadent partially because they have become collectors of modern art! But the sociological content of Dr. Mabuse plays a distinct 2nd fiddle to the melodrama. Lang claims that he wasn't "allowed" to make the film the way he wanted, but one wonders. In all of his films where he had a message, alleged or actual - "Metropolis", "Fury", "You Only Live Once" - one has the feeling that he really doesn't give a fig for social comment, and that he's much happier playing around with his lights and cameras on macabre scenes of suspense and thrill. For all of the implied degeneracy in "Mabuse" (a very first title refers to drug addiction, and there's a delightful all-purpose club where different code-words can produce a variety of vices) the impression is not so much of a debauched Germany in the 20's as of a vintage Robert Louis Stevenson or Bram Stoker novel, somehow brought up to date with automobiles and night-clubs, much as the Sherlock Holmes stories were updated by Universal into a World War Two milieu. Sometimes indeed one forgets entirely that this is a modern story, and it is quite a shock to see an automobile emerging from the Caligari shadows. It must have seemed even less contemporary in 1928, when the real thing surrounded it on all sides. Today, the new musical score helps to re-establish period with some very authentic German jazz of the 20's, and a great deal of Weill flavoring.

More so than in "Spies" and the later Mabuse films, Mabuse is here really the "hero" in the sense that the parallel villain Fu Manchu was the hero of the Sex Holmes novels. Rudolph Klein-Rogge, Lang's favorite villain, was a kind of composite of Kerloff and Chessey. Oddly enough, he was also the first husband of scenarist Thea von Harbou, who then became Mrs. Imag! His horrible face, hemsos and sinister at the same time, is here used to excellent effect in some first-rate disguises which - rare in this kind of film - convince and work so well that the audience doesn't always realize right away that it is he beneath it all. (Mabuse spends so much time donning disguises and in being in the right place at the precisely right time that one wonders where he ever found the time to operate the rest of his huge operation, even thought its tentacles did not spread out on an international level until later adventures!)

Perhaps because of the influence of the original story - a solid-selling number in German bookstores right through the 50's, long after Mabuse had apparently faded from the filmic scene - far more emphasis is placed this time on the personal titanic struggle between Mabuse and the rather humorless but doggedly policed hero of "Spies" was a carefree "Three James Bond blueprint; Inspector Lohmann from "M" and "The Testament of Dr. Mabuse" a more human but not very active opponent. Wern her assumes the Sherlock Holmes or Heyland Smith role, and is far more involved and more dedicated personally in the proceedings. Mabuse too, like Moriarty, leaves less to his organization and takes up the fight in person. His aims are less ambitious then in later years, but his motivations are more clearly spelled out, and he emerges as a more human (and thereby slightly less menacing) opponent because of it. Sometimes he is even human enough to give way to rage and frustration, something that the later master criminals were always too self-assured to do. Mabuse has his vast organization, his band of blind counterfeiters, his autos fixed up with gas chambers and a laboratory full of snakes, but it is his own dynamic personality that is really holding his little empire together, and after his total triumph in part one, it is rather sad to see him brought to heel in part two (even though we know now that he came back with a vengeance in the 30's and again in the 50's)

Curiously, although part two has more basic action than part one - the hypnotic drive to the quarry, the gun battle and roundup, Mabuse's impressionistic descent into madness - it is slower-paced and generally a little less stylistic than part one. It is as though Lang had spent part one in establishing Mabuse, and had used all the serial-like twists to that end. In part two, he seems more concerned with telling and concluding his story in a wholly serious vein. With Lang, the seemingly extraordinary and unrelated incident has often been a highpoint via the vision of Moloch in "Metropolis" and the coming to life of the statues of the Seven Deadly Sins - end it is a pity to see his bear down on the "fun" aspect in part two. In a way, it's easy to see why both the British and American distributors were so reluctant to show the full version, but settled for a 2 real composite cut-down. But again, part two is mildly disappointing only in relation to part one; on its own it's still an exciting and absorbing work.
Bear in mind that it was never Lang's intention that the film be shown complete in one sitting. Unlike even the current "War and Peace", it was intended that audiences see one half one week, the second a week later, after the manner of serials. The intermission is necessary, and even if you only settle for brushing away the cobwebs in the fresh air in lieu of stronger stimulants, you'll enjoy part two the more for it. We'll probably lose some of our audience at the intermission, but better to separate the men from the boys then, than make the whole film an exhausting experience by running through all 20 reels without a break.

Because of the sound track (a big asset, incidentally) the film has to be run at the standard sound speed of 24 frames a second. Since the physical speed employed in German films was generally slower than in American films, most of it works well at sound speed, and there is distortion only in the occasional scenes of fast motion -- the whirling dancer, for example. We're sure you'll bear with these, and realise that they are flaws of modern mechanical limitations, and are not inherent in the original work.

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