

WHICH MABUSE? MULTIPLE BODIES, MULTIPLE VOICES

Massimiliano Gaudiosi, Università degli Studi Suor Orsola Benincasa, Napoli

Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse (Fritz Lang, 1933) is one of the most famous films in Multiple Language Versions dating back to the beginning of the sound era. Fritz Lang shot two versions simultaneously, with German and French speaking casts (*Le Testament du Dr. Mabuse*): the latter was released in Italy at the end of 1933, with a dubbed and re-edited version "suitable" for an Italian audience.

This version, on which this paper focuses, presents an interesting case of early dubbing practices in Italy and, at the same time, of the intervention of the Censorship on foreign films. In the early 1930s, dubbing and censorship were areas which usually criss-crossed each other, producing texts which were quite distant from the original ones. As for the Italian version of Lang's *Testament*, a version of a film which was "double" from its very beginning, we could easily talk about a "version of a version," a version which is rather "unfaithful," but only one of the different cuts drawn from the two films shot by Lang. Both these different *Mabuse* run along two different routes which lead to further conceptions of the original texts. Banned in Germany by the Nazi government, the German version disappeared for years. Until the end of the Second World War, the *Testament* was only available in the French version, shot by Lang in cooperation with René Sti, edited by Lothar Wolff and released by Société des Films Osso.¹ But from these two initial films many other versions evolve.

It is worth remembering, briefly, the versions released in the USA. The first version of *The Testament* that appeared in America in 1943 was the French language version prepared by Lothar Wolff, now retitled *The Last Will of Dr. Mabuse*. The subtitles had been written in part from Thea von Harbou's script, but were not translated directly. Instead, the distributor also took into account what Lang said to the press about the criticism of the Nazi government present in his picture, and thus produced subtitled dialogue that was even more pronounced in its political sentiments than had been true of the original work. In 1952 the German version was dubbed and re-edited in a new version: *The Crimes of Dr. Mabuse*. In this last case, translator Leo Katcher created a more explicitly political film than Lang had in fact originally fashioned: *Crimes* reconceived the events from 1932 to 1939, placing the events squarely within the Nazi regime.²

Thus, the Italian censored and dubbed version is only one of many other transformations of the original texts. In any case, compared to other existing editions, the Italian dubbing stands out for the high distortion imposed on the German director's film. If dubbing, as a "translation," always shapes a new version, we also have to remember that in the early 1930s, at the beginning of this process, foreign films were not only "translated": in order to obtain total ideological control, very often technical limits and strict censor cuts produced yet another different version.

The Testament and the Italian Dubbing in the Early 1930s

The Testament of Dr. Mabuse was approved by the Italian censor in October 1933, and it was released in February 1934.³ The film comes to Italy during a period of great changes, both for dubbing and for censorship. Dubbing passes from a pioneering moment into a professional one;⁴ and censorship passes from a stage of strict control, coinciding with the prohibition of all films in foreign languages, to a stage where the censor's cuts become preventive and hidden.⁵

At the end of 1933 Italian dubbing studios had been open for only one year (according to Mario Quarnolo, the first one was opened in the spring 1932 by Cines Pittaluga, and was directed by Mario Almirante). And the very recent law of October 5, 1933 imposed dubbing in Italy for all foreign films. Besides the defence of the Italian language "purity" promoted by the fascist regime, such prohibitions also aimed to make censorship of imported pictures much easier.⁶

According to Sergio Raffaelli, from the end of 1933 censor decisions disappeared from ministerial bulletins, thus going unmentioned. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the *Testament* censor bulletin did not report directories: the only one is the prohibition to show it to people under sixteen years of age. Few years earlier, on the contrary, censor bulletins imposed every kind of cut and change.

If the ministerial documents lack data, we can find some information in the Italian newspapers. In *Corriere della Sera* Filippo Sacchi argues that "the film will seem a little strange to the sane audience."⁷ Much clearer is the article by Mario Gromo in *La Stampa*: "The current edition, both because of some cuts and because of the 'added voices' (clever, but added voices anyway) does not present the film in all its ecstatic power" and "sometimes the film doesn't hold and it doesn't collapse thanks only to the strength transferred to it by Lang."⁸ Therefore, criticism was well informed about the censorship on the film. In spring 1933, the news of the ban issued in Germany arrived in Italy,⁹ and an Italian "revision" could be easily foreseen.

Very often the press protested against the cuts in foreign films because the edits were so large that the films were defined "reductions." This is a very accurate description because some films were cut until they became unrecognizable. Censorship aimed to favour the Italian production, and the interventions on foreign films were of two kinds: they were either forbidden, or they were cut, the end was changed, and the meaning of the plot altered.¹⁰ Usually foreign films passed through the censorship in their dubbed Italian version together with the script. If the studio preferred a preventive opinion, films were presented in the original version together with the translated script. In these cases, films were then subjected to a new revision in their dubbed version.¹¹

Films such as *Cimarron* (Wesley Ruggles, 1931), *Alleluja* (King Vidor, 1931), *Anna Christie* (Jacques Feyder, 1931), *Morocco* (Josef von Sternberg, 1930), are just a few titles transformed by censorship and dubbing. In 1932 Emilio Cecchi recalls these films, "where different parts were cut off, and other parts were transformed, replacing the original characters with fake ones." As for *Alleluja* by King Vidor, Cecchi claims that "the film was released in a censored Italian version and the sense was twisted. Some scenes of religion hysteria became incomprehensible, and the audience laughed their heads off."¹²

Cimarron, probably the most censored film of that period, is remembered in *L'Avvenire Fascista*: "The film presents less than thirty percent of the original film, which is an

example of coherence and clarity. Entire episodes are missing in the Italian version, as are some characters and about ten years of the main character's life, who passes from youth to death without any logical explanations."¹³ About the same film, Filippo Sacchi argues: "In the Italian version, the evident cuts make the sense almost imperceptible."¹⁴ In that period, these kind of comments were very frequent in articles.

The Cuts to the *Testament*

The comparative analysis of the French and the Italian versions suggests some keys to interpretation of the principles adopted by the Censorship. Summing them up, we could stress the following kinds interventions to the film:

- Defense of the good reputation of the Police;
- Elimination of stimulus to crime and murder;
- Elimination of references to hypnotic powers and will control;
- Elimination or concealment of impressive images.

Infringing many principles of the Censor Code, Lang's film made the censor's work very difficult. We can imagine the elimination of all instances of foreign language such as the Police Inspector Lohmann's name on a doorplate; newspaper headlines, letters, etc. In addition, many scenes which make the crime and the murder attractive are cut off from the Italian version. The Mabuse character is distorted: the life of a criminal genius who, through his hypnotic powers, commits murders with scientific precision, and follows perfectly calculated plans was necessarily changed.

Some sequences stressing the criminal adventures of Mabuse's gang are completely cut out: for example, the sequence depicting the receipt of the stolen jewels. In this sequence, two gangsters who control the stolen goods talk about the purposes of Dr. Mabuse's plans; these plans are incomprehensible because there seems to be no financial gain from their pursuit. This sequence involves a flashback which shows the dead body of a man who tried to discover Mabuse's true identity. Another brief moment, also eliminated, shows the gang counterfeiting money.

The cutting of the criminal scenes transformed the opinions of the critics. In 1939 Massimo Alberini argues that "Mabuse's gang did not have very diabolical features: sometimes the murders drifted into triviality."¹⁵

But most of the scenes couldn't be cut without spoiling the logic of the plot. In order to avoid this risk, the Censorship particularly worked on the dubbing. The interventions of the Censorship are evident in the first spoken sequence of the film, where Police Inspector Lohmann receives a phone call from Hofmeister, the ex-detective trapped by Mabuse's men. In the original French version, Lohmann defines Hofmeister as a detective dismissed from the Police because he was involved in drug-dealing and bribery cases:

<i>Le Testament du Dr. Mabuse</i>	<i>Il testamento del Dr. Mabuse</i>
Lohmann: Quoi? Le brigadier revoke? Ce cretin qui s'est mouillé pour quelque papillon? Obsédé par cet affaire de cokeïne? Ce salopard! [...]	Lohmann: Chi? Ce l'ha ancora con me? Quel cretino che vuol fare il poliziotto? Che si crede sia cosa da bambino? Che seccatore! [...]
Lohmann: Salopard. J'avais une confiance en lui... une confiance... et ce cretin se laisse embobiner par des marchands de came.	Lohmann: Babbo, va! Sempre nuove piste ha lui... E che piste! Non ne ha mai imbroccata una, manco per sbaglio.
English translation (FV)	English translation (IDV)
Lohmann: What? The sergeant who got fired? Who took small time bribes, obsessed with the cocaine case? That bastard! [...]	Lohmann: Who? What does he want? That idiot who wants to be a policeman. Does he know that this is no game we are playing? What a nuisance! [...]
Lohmann: The bastard. I put my trust in him. My trust... and the fool gets bamboozled by drug dealers.	Lohmann: Idiot! He always comes up with new leads... mainly nonsense. He has never ever got it right!

The Italian Censor Code stated that authorization of a film could be denied if it represented "scenes, events or subjects offensive to the good reputation of public institutions, policemen and the Royal Army."¹⁶

For these reasons, the Italian dubbing transforms the ambiguous past of Hofmeister into a spotless past. While in the French version Hofmeister is a detective dishonouring the Police, in the Italian one "Hoffmare" (this is the Italian name of the character) becomes a fool who doesn't take his job very seriously. Therefore, the Italian Hofmeister doesn't offend public authorities.

But we run into the real censorship when the characters talk about Dr. Mabuse. In these cases, the topics of the conversation are very often related to crime and hypnosis, as in the sequence in which Dr. Baum delivers a lecture at a University:

<i>Le Testament du Dr. Mabuse</i>	<i>Il testamento del Dr. Mabuse</i>
Dr. Baum: Le Dr. Mabuse décide de consacrer sa science très vaste et son énergie peu commune à des expériences d'hypnotisme aux quelles il soumet ses clients à leur insu. Il leur fait commettre des crimes abominables. Ils les exécutent avec une précision scientifique selon une conception mathématiquement parfaite qui leur assure l'impunité.	Dr. Baum: Nella vita ordinaria il dottor Mabuse può scegliere a consacrare la sua scienza che è vasta, la sua energia non comune, alle esperienze cliniche. Chiamato da molti clienti a consulto. Poi, parallelamente, delirio paranoico. Egli viene ideando, con una precisione scientifica, secondo una concezione matematicamente perfetta, una serie di delitti.
English translation (FV)	English translation (IDV)
Dr. Baum: The celebrated Dr. Mabuse decided to devote his vast knowledge and singular energy to experiments in hypnosis carried out on his patients without their knowledge. He made them commit horrible crimes which they executed with scientific precision, following perfectly calculated plans that assured impunity.	Dr. Baum: In everyday life Dr. Mabuse can still carry on devoting his knowledge to clinical experiences, called in by many patients. Then, simultaneously, paranoid delirium. He plans with scientific precision a series of murders.

In the French version, Baum describes Mabuse as a celebrated doctor used to hypnotizing his patients and to committing perfect crimes. In the Italian version, Mabuse becomes a celebrated doctor much sought by his patients: he plans crimes without ever truly carrying them out; his murders seem to be no more than a figment of a paranoid delirium.

Baum also recalls the gunfight between Mabuse's gang and the Police. Mabuse was arrested only after several useless attempts by the Police. In the Italian dubbed version there is no gunfight, and Mabuse is directly delivered to justice, thanks to the prompt intervention of the Police. These distortions changed the meaning of the film, as is evident in an advertisement of *The Testament* appeared in *Cinema Illustrazione* in February 1934.¹⁷ This advertisement is an interesting case of photographic novelization: many pictures are focused on the arrest of the gang, and on the triumph of justice.

Further evidence of the elimination of any reference to the hypnosis comes in the sequence of the meeting between Dr. Baum and his friend Kramm. Here, Kramm suggests that Mabuse, through his hypnotic powers, could transfer his plans to his gang. In the Italian dubbing, Kramm's suggestion is quite different: Mabuse hasn't any hypnotic powers, but could communicate his orders through an ambiguous "mysterious power."

The Italian Censor Code can account for such interventions. Another part of the law we have already mentioned denied the authorization when the film represented "repulsive and cruel scenes, events or subjects; impressive murders and suicides; hypnotic or psychic phenomena and, generally, scenes, events and subjects that can stimulate to crime and murder."

This point is confirmed by the last sentence of Baum's lecture:

<i>Le Testament du Dr. Mabuse</i>	<i>Il testamento del Dr. Mabuse</i>
Dr. Baum: On peut considérer les écrits de Mabuse comme une véritable <i>pédagogie du crime</i> . Un enseignement où tous les attentats imaginables sont exposés avec des plans de réalisation où rien n'est laissé au hasard.	Dr. Baum: A ben considerare gli scritti di Mabuse, sono un vero e proprio <i>paradigma clinico</i> . Su premesse d'una assurdità incalcolabile, egli imposta le sue più giuste deduzioni dove tutto appare chiaro.
English translation (FV)	English translation (IDV)
Dr. Baum: Mabuse's writings can be considered a <i>veritable primer in crime</i> , a guide to all imaginable <i>criminal actions</i> , each elaborately planned, with nothing left to chance.	Dr. Baum: Mabuse's writings can be considered a <i>veritable clinic paradigm</i> . With totally absurd premises, he sets up his plainest deductions where everything seems to be clear.

If the texts of the French Mabuse compose "une véritable pédagogie du crime," the Italian Mabuse's texts represent only a clinical paradigm, an "absurd thought."

All these changes are mirrored in the press. In 1948, Sergio Romano argues that the Dr. Mabuse "spends his days noting incomprehensible things [...], great undertakings, and important discoveries."¹⁸ There isn't any reference to a "primer in crime." Mabuse's notes have only ended up in criminal hands, and the doctor, as in the Italian dubbing, only represents a clinical paradigm, quite far from the character who foresees the Nazism in Lang's original work.

However, the Italian press close to the fascist regime had a hand in the distortion of the film. In *Cinema Illustrazione*, the critic Enrico Roma recognizes in *The Testament* "a satiric flavour [...]. All the criminal plans of the gang are conceived by the leader of a subversive party which aims, in the opinions of his leader, both to solve the social injustices and to establish a communist dictatorship."¹⁹ In a few words, this is a total transformation of the film.

These strategies of the censorship are related to a series of interventions which, in the 1930s, warned about the criminal dangers connected to the filmic experience. Luigi Freddi, director of the Italian Cinema Department from September 1934, reminds us how many scientists and educationists showed "the influence of the cinema on crime and the psychic degeneration." The scientists stressed three different levels of the criminal influence of the cinema: aesthetics suggestion, dialectical suggestion, technical suggestion.

As for the first case, [cinema] works on a sort of moral justification of the murder, producing a sympathy for the right murder and a compassion for the necessary murder [...]. The dialectical suggestion [...] aims at showing the easiness of the murder concealment and to demonstrate the criminal infallibility. [...]. The technical suggestion is shown through the attractive explanation of the criminal methods used to commit a crime. Cinema becomes a sort of primer in crime.¹⁷

We find a number of these characteristics in Lang's film: sympathy for the right and necessary murder (the main character Kent receives all the audience sympathies in spite of his murderous past); criminal infallibility; explanation of criminal systems; we also find the same words used by Dr. Baum, *primer in crime*, "pédagogie du crime." The opinions recalled by Freddi represented some of the most influential opinions circulating in the 1930s. Such opinions were also influential on the Catholic Church and, of course, on the Italian Board of Film Censors. In *The Testament*, Censorship reduced all the possible "criminal influences" of the cinema. A film as *The Testament*, focused on the murderous actions of a criminal genius, had to be necessarily censored.

For these reasons, the main character's murderous past is completely erased. Similarly, his role in Mabuse's gang is obscure, as shown in another sequence where a gangster talks about the Hofmeister assassination.

When the censor couldn't cut, and when the intervention on the dubbing was useless, the images themselves were censored. In the sequence set at the obituary, in which Dr. Baum and Police Inspector Lohmann talk beside the corpse of Mabuse, the censor darkened all the parts showing the criminal body. Maybe such a subject was considered too repulsive (Figs. 1-4).



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

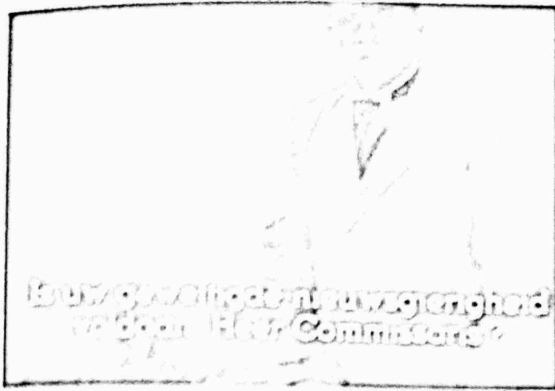


Fig. 3



Fig. 4

Besides containing “repugnant and gruesome scenes, facts or subjects” which probably led the Censor to adopt this original device of darkening images, this sequence featured an overt reference to Mabuse’s criminal plans:

<i>Le Testament du Dr. Mabuse</i>	<i>Il testamento del Dr. Mabuse</i>
Dr. Baum: Ce cerveau pouvait anéantir l'humanité. La régénérer. Oui, la purifier, par la <i>terreur</i> et par l' <i>angoisse!</i>	Dr. Baum: Questo cervello poteva purificare l'umanità. E rigenerarla. Sì! Purificarla nel <i>dolore delle prove più dure!</i>
English translation (FV)	English translation (IDV)
Dr. Baum: That mind could have laid waste to humankind. To raise it up anew! Purify it through <i>terror and anguish!</i>	Dr. Baum: That mind could have laid waste to humankind. To raise it up anew! Purify it through <i>the pain of difficult proof!</i>

Compromising expressions present in the French version such as “laid waste to humankind,” “terror and anguish” are cut to make room for words which make Dr. Baum’s monologue and Dr. Mabuse’s social project, meaningless.

Conclusions

This essay has tried to highlight some peculiarities of a version of Lang’s *Testament*, a version showing the destiny of many foreign films released in the early 1930s in Italy. A version showing, in some cases, the censor’s skill to go from the cutting of entire scenes to changing the sense of the words through the dubbing.

Very often the audience had to watch censored foreign films, especially in 1933, when the films were reduced from sound to silent. Sometimes reviewers, especially the reviewers close to the regime, praised the “miracles” worked by the censorship, when it reduced a film by more than fifty per cent without completely losing the logical sequence of the plot. Alessandro De Stefani, a very important screenwriter of the earliest Italian sound films, and also “adapter” and translator of some of the earliest films

dubbed at the Ciné Studio, for example, *A nous la liberté* (René Clair, 1931) and *L'ultimo Lord* (Augusto Genina, 1932) summarizes these tendencies:

When the censorship has some doubts it manages very often to solve all the problems by using the scissors and cutting off the "guilty scenes." So the film "reduced," more or less mutilated, is suitable for our screens [...]. It happens that some dramatic events are missed, and some moments are not very clear, but such arbitrary developments are frequent even when there are no cuts; and the reason is because the discrimination lies at the back of the director's mind, thus, there's not much to complain about.²¹

- 1 The author thanks Sergio Raffaelli and Augusto Sainati for their precious suggestions. It is likely that the French version would have arrived on the Italian screens at the same, even if the German version had not been banned: usually, in Italy, of the various versions of the same film, the French one would be privileged. This is one of the reasons why the German actor Hans Albers was little known in Italy, while his French "double" Jean Murat was much more famous with the Italian public.
- 2 Cf. David Kalat, *The Strange Case of Dr. Mabuse* (Jefferson, N. C.: McFarland & Co., 2004) pp. 74-75.
- 3 Notes from *Elenco delle pellicole cinematografiche approvate dal Ministero dell'Interno Direzione Generale di Pubblica Sicurezza. Ufficio Revisione Cinematografica* (October 31, 1933). According to the Censor's Certificate the film is 2481 metres long. The print preserved in Cineteca Nazionale, Roma, is 2.465 metres long.
- 4 Cf. Mario Quargnolo, *La parola ripudiata* (Udine: Cineteca del Friuli, 1986); Id., "Pionieri e esperienze del doppiato in Italia," *Bianco & Nero*, no. 5 (May 1967), pp. 66-70.
- 5 Cf. Sergio Raffaelli, *La lingua filmata* (Venezia: Le Lettere, 1992), p. 60.
- 6 Cf. Valentina Ruffin, Patrizia D'Agostino, *Dialoghi di regime* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1992), p. 43.
- 7 Filippo Sacchi, "Il testamento del dottor Mabuse," *Il Corriere della Sera* (March 2, 1933), p. 5.
- 8 Mario Gromo, "Sullo schermo: Il testamento del dottor Mabuse," *La Stampa* (February 24, 1933), p. 5.
- 9 Cf. Ettore Maria Margadonna, "Inchiesta nel cinema tedesco," *La Stampa* (April 11, 1933), p. 5.
- 10 Cf. Gian Piero Brunetta, *Storia del cinema italiano*, Vol. 2, *Il cinema del regime 1922-1945* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1993), p. 34.
- 11 Cf. Luigi Freddi, *Il cinema* (Roma: L'Arnica, 1949), pp. 103-104.
- 12 Emilio Cecchi, "Cinema 1931," *Scenario*, no. 1 (January 1932), pp. 6-9.
- 13 Unsigned article, *Il lavoro fascista* (May 16, 1933), p. 4.
- 14 Filippo Sacchi, "I pionieri del west," *Il Corriere della Sera* (July 1, 1933).
- 15 Massimo Alberini, "Mabuse," *Cinema*, no. 77 (September 10, 1939), p. 169.
- 16 Regulations contained in the Royal Decree April 22, 1920, no. 531, published on the *Gazzetta Ufficiale* (Official Gazette), no. 109 (May 8, 1920), on which are based all other Fascist laws relating Censorship such as the law June 18, 1931, no. 857. Cf. Ernesto Guido Laura, *La censura cinematografica* (Roma: Edizioni di Bianco & Nero, 1961).
- 17 Cf. *Cinema Illustrazione*, no. 9 (February 28, 1934), p. 13.
- 18 Sergio Romano, "Il testamento del dottor Mabuse," *Cinema*, no. 2 (November 10, 1948), p. 52.
- 19 Enrico Roma, "Il testamento del dottor Mabuse," *Cinema Illustrazione*, no. 11 (March 14, 1934), p. 12.
- 20 Luigi Freddi, *Il cinema*, cit., p. 105.
- 21 Alessandro De Stefani, "Il pelo nell'uovo (a proposito della censura cinematografica)," *Comœdia*, no. 3 (March-April 1933), p. 10.