

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Anyone writing about a 'classic' is indebted to the generations that have made it so. My debt to the film historians and critics of Lang, von Harbou and *Metropolis* is recorded in the Bibliography. But there are also other kinds of gratitude to record: to Richard Combs who asked me to review the Moroder version for the *Monthly Film Bulletin*, to Irmbert Schenk who invited me to a symposium on the 'jungle of the cities', and to Malte Hagener for doing on that occasion an excellent job of translating my text into printable German. I want to record here the work of Ann Drummond and Leon Hunt on *Metropolis*, and above all, Heide Schönemann's uniquely valuable and still under-appreciated comparative study of the sources of Lang's 1920s iconography.

With pleasure I recall one memorable conversation with Tony Kaes on the ramparts of Lucca, the patient assistance by Tarja Laine, especially with the pictures, and Alison McMahan's very useful translation of Leonardo Quaresima's article from the Spanish, after Leonardo had been kind enough to send it to me. Sally Shafto sent me material from Paris, Rainer Rother from Berlin, and Kay Hoffmann was as indefatigable as he was ingenious in ferreting out the most recondite items he could find to prove that *Metropolis* was indeed alive and well.

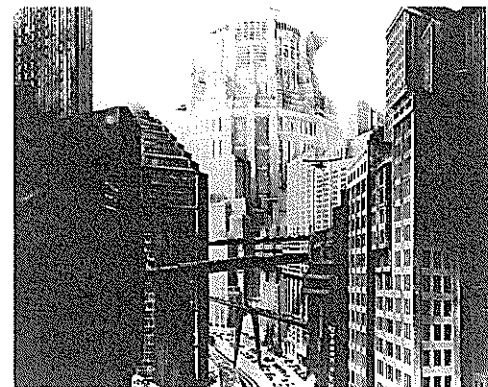
To put me right on the different versions, I benefited from long discussions with Martin Koerber, who also showed me his chapters, while Enno Patalas graciously lent me the annotated chronology of his restoration. Hans Helmut Prinzler made sure that the Library of the Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek was open to me, where the staff and Walter Theis accommodated my requests. Michael Wedel read the manuscript, and Rob White, hawk-eyed and utterly experienced, steered the book through the inevitable currents, always with a firm hand on the tiller (and the word-count).

Amsterdam, March/April 2000

INTRODUCTION:  
'METROPOLIS' FOREVER, MORE THAN EVER

Urban Modernity, Berlin's 'Golden Twenties', the Cinematic City: no film evokes these clichés of the past century more vividly than *Metropolis*, Fritz Lang's flawed masterpiece from 1926–7. Feeding on its own contradictions, this film classic has, from its own time to the present, trailed as many clouds of glory as frowns of disapproval. Lang's fatal UFA suicide mission in the studio's fierce battle with Hollywood became a monster-film the critics loved to hate. Some sixty years later, it took on the status of an *Ur-text* of cinematic postmodernity, the epitome of a sensibility its authors probably would have disapproved of: retrofitted techno-kitsch, and thus the archetype of a movie genre they could not have imagined, the *sci-fi noir* disaster movie. Generally recognised as the fetish-image of all city and cyborg futures, the once dystopian *Metropolis* now speaks of vitality and the body electric, fusing human and machine energy, its sleek figures animated more by high-voltage fluorescence than Expressionism's dark demonic urges.

Among the many creative hands and minds that have had the wit to put some heart back into *Metropolis*, a fair share of credit must go to Giorgio Moroder, the Italian composer of Hollywood hit songs and famous soundtracks from the late 70s and early 80s. In his mimetic admiration for the film he was, however, preceded by two English



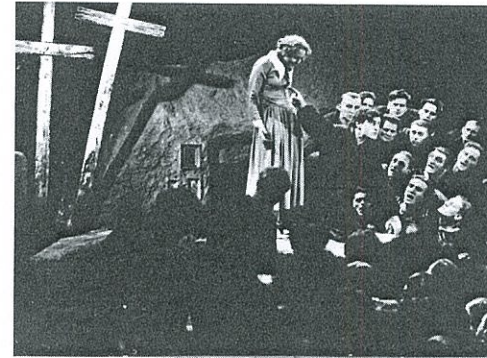
Vaulting Ambition or A Tower of Crowns: *Metropolis*'s landmark building credits

directors: Ridley Scott, who in *Blade Runner* (1982) gave both story and setting of *Metropolis* an unforgettably vivid makeover, and Alan Parker, who was the first to spot the music video that had been slumbering undetected in Lang's opening scene all along, pastiching it to good effect in the 'We don't need no education' number of *Pink Floyd The Wall* (also 1982).

Dipped in the neon-Gothic light of *fin du vingtième siècle* decadence, there is indeed much for contemporary anxieties to thrill to: the troglodyte workers remind us not only of docile-looking but inwardly rebellious adolescents in school-uniforms, they also recall the drill-routines of boot-camp basic training. The metallic figure of the robot Maria now takes on features of 'girl power' where its original audience might only have sensed misogynist projections of malevolence. The boldly outlandish sets of *Metropolis's* cityscape pulsate with consumerist life, compared to the stark modernist high-rises gone soulless and drab that once were its real-life contemporaries. In the contrast between the master of the city's high-tech office – the penthouse-dream of every yuppie trader with a view to kill for – and the alchemist's lab that is home to the wizard Rotwang, multinational corporate culture meets new-age ecology and internet hacker culture. Meanwhile, down in the catacombs of *Metropolis*, with their secret mass-sermons of the saviour to come, the sweatshops of Asia and Latin America are only a shout and a prayer away from the religious fundamentalisms, the media evangelisms and voodoo revivalisms that have been fevering towards the Millennium.



Freder among the signs of consumerist life



Maria praying for the Millennial Redeemer in the catacombs

Thomas  
Elsaesser

## 1

### THE MYTH OF ITS ORIGINS, THE ORIGIN OF ITS MYTHS

Several self-serving myths, put about by Fritz Lang and his company, the Universum Film Aktiengesellschaft (UFA), hang over *Metropolis*. The myth-making started with the story of how the film came to be conceived: in October 1924, Fritz Lang and his producer Erich Pommer travelled to New York, for the US opening of *Siegfried's Death*, the first part of *Die Nibelungen*, the four-hour disaster spectacle depicting the heroic origins of the Germanic nation out of 'hate, murder and revenge'. Because of visa difficulties, the two visitors had to stay on board the 'SS Deutschland' for an extra night before being allowed to disembark. In the evening, Lang and Pommer went on deck to see the Manhattan skyline for the first time. An idea was born:

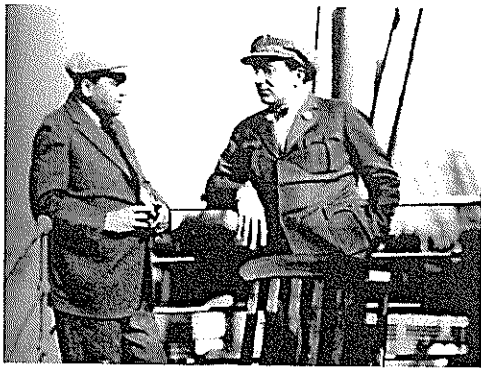
I saw a street, lit as if in full daylight by neon lights and topping them, oversized luminous, advertising moving turning flashing on and off, spiralling [...] something which was completely new and near fairy-tale like for a European in those days, and this impression gave me the first thought of an idea for a town of the future.<sup>1</sup>

But by October 1924, the concept for *Metropolis* had been in Thea von Harbou's and Fritz Lang's minds for nearly a year. Pommer had publicly

mentioned it after the Berlin premiere of *Die Nibelungen* in January 1924, Erich Kettelhut, the art director, had seen a version of the script around May 1924, and a Viennese paper had quoted Thea von Harbou working on 'the screenplay for their new film *Metropolis*' in July 1924. Of course, the script and the film (and the novel and the film) are two different things: the discrepancy between the story and its style has itself been one of the founding oppositions securing much mythic potency for the finished film. Nevertheless, several pieces of (film-) history hide inside this story of the Manhattan skyline as the origin of *Metropolis*.

#### *The Parufamet Agreement*

The trip to the US in late 1924 by Pommer and Lang was indeed crucial for the origin of *Metropolis*, though more decisive than New York was the subsequent stop in Los Angeles. It made the two most famous men of the German cinema realise why the gap had become so wide between the Europeans and Hollywood, and what obstacles lay in the way of UFA films penetrating the US market. They visited the production facilities of the major studios, they saw the latest film-making technology, they talked not only to executives like Joseph Schenk, Sam Goldwyn and Marcus Loew, but also to directors and actors like Chaplin, Thomas Ince and Mary Pickford. Lang met up again with Ernst Lubitsch, who had made Hollywood his home in 1921, and Douglas Fairbanks told Lang that German films would not sell in America until UFA put more effort into launching its players as internationally recognised stars.<sup>2</sup> Pommer in the meantime was shopping for two Mitchell cameras which were among the



Pommer and Lang, embarked for New York, 1924 (Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek Berlin)

four used for shooting *Metropolis* (the other two were a French Debrie, the standard studio-camera and a German Stachow, the latter more robust, suitable for Günther Rittau's special effects). On his way back, Lang also visited D. W. Griffith who had just finished making *Isn't Life Wonderful* (1924), set (but not shot) in a wintry and hungry post-war Germany, much to the visible irritation of Lang, who probably fancied himself sole owner of the image-bank 'Germany'.

Other reasons for the US visit had to do with UFA's parlous state. The German film industry was in crisis. Its blossoming in the early 20s proved short-lived, based as it was on exploiting the trading advantages of a rapidly depreciating currency, which allowed German firms to export their films below cost. After the stabilisation of the Reichsmark in 1924, it was the Americans' turn to do the 'dumping' on the German market with productions that had already returned their investment in the huge domestic market. Pommer knew that his films had to draw level with the Americans as far as production values were concerned, if UFA were to retain even its share of the German box-office. But with increased budgets came the need to make films for export. The success in France of *Die Nibelungen* had raised hopes that this might be the breakthrough film in the US as well. Pommer was talking in New York and Los Angeles about a distribution deal, where US Majors would import ten UFA films per annum, in exchange for UFA's first-run houses show-casing twenty American films. The Americans were seriously concerned about maintaining open access to the lucrative German market, the German film industry having successfully lobbied parliament to introduce import restrictions in 1924. After almost a year of negotiations and near-misses, the US Major-UFA deal was finally sealed in December 1925. Known as the Parufamet Agreement (after the three companies involved: Famous-Players-Lasky through their distribution arm *Paramount*, *UFA* and the *Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Corporation*), it proved for UFA a Trojan horse as well as a poisoned chalice. In exchange for a US \$4 million (16.8 million Reichsmark) loan, UFA agreed to reserve up to 75 per cent of the bookings in its 135 first-run cinemas for its US partners. They, in turn, arguing that the American public was volatile in its tastes, reserved the right to decide where, how and which UFA films to show in their theatres.

Some of the troubles that were to make *Metropolis* a notorious case (and casualty) are probably attributable to the Parufamet Agreement, under whose terms it was one of the first major productions. It explains,

for instance, the supposed profligacy of Lang and the open-ended sums he seems to have had at his disposal. To Pommer, his *carte blanche* for Lang was justified in view of the prize to be bagged, the prospect of a major hit in the US. But just how big a risk UFA's star producer was taking can be seen when the figures are put in perspective. The company's net profits in 1924–5 were 3.1 million Reichmark; at that time, the average production cost of a feature film was 175,000 Reichmark. *Metropolis* was originally budgeted for 800,000 Reichmark, but its final bill – UFA argued, but Lang disputed – was nearer 4.2 million Reichmark, half of the entire production budget of 1925–6. The rest had to be spread across the other twenty-two films made that season.<sup>3</sup> The gamble cost Pommer his neck, and already in January 1926, long before the film was finished, he had exchanged his place on the UFA board for a producer's office at Famous-Players-Lasky, no doubt a move also facilitated by the visit in 1924.

#### *Thea von Harbou*

Back in Berlin, Thea von Harbou was also working on *Metropolis*. Besides being Lang's wife, a celebrated novelist in her own right and UFA's top screenwriter, Harbou was a contract writer for the Scherl-Verlag, one of Berlin's three publishing empires, owned and controlled by press-tsar and ultra-conservative would-be politician Alfred Hugenberg. For Harbou, both *Die Nibelungen* and *Metropolis* were book tie-ins, a practice UFA had pursued with Fritz Lang films since *Dr Mabuse* (loosely based on Norbert Jacques's serialised novel, published by the rival Ullstein Verlag). Most likely, while Lang was in America, von Harbou was writing the novel rather than working on the screenplay. However, there is room for doubt which came first, or rather, how many different versions of each she was working on at any one time.<sup>4</sup>

*Metropolis* was serialised in *Das illustrierte Blatt* from August 1926 onwards, six months prior to the film's premiere.<sup>5</sup> But correspondence dated 22 February 1926 indicates that the Scherl desk editor asked von Harbou to tone down the film references in the story and rewrite the material more like a self-contained novel. What is also on record is that throughout 1924, von Harbou was busy reading herself into the literature of futuristic civilisations: two French novels and one English were consulted, Jules Verne's *The Five Hundred Millions of the Begum*, Claude Farrère's *Les Condamnés à mort* and H. G. Wells' *When the*

*Sleeper Wakens*. Nearer home, Georg Kaiser's theatre trilogy *Koralle, Gas I* and *Gas II*, Ernst Toller's play about a failed worker's revolution, *Maschinenstürmer*, Ernst Ludwig's *Zwischen Himmel und Erde* (for the showdown on the Cathedral roof-top), Max Reinhardt's and Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Das Große Welt-Theater* (for the macabre Cathedral 'Dance of Death'), and another play by the mid-nineteenth-century playwright C. D. Grabbe were also within reach. She was nothing if not thorough, employing a permanent personal secretary-typist, to whom she dictated scenes or chapters, usually while knitting to maintain concentration.<sup>6</sup>

Von Harbou's novel and the film-script differ in many respects.<sup>7</sup> But given that the shooting script has not survived, and that the film as it has come down poses enough textual and editorial conundrums of its own, attempts to pin down exactly the relation between the two were for a long time little more than guess-work or intertextual inference, often ending up by ridiculing von Harbou for her appalling prose.<sup>8</sup> Today the novel is indeed almost unreadable, yet it perfectly blended Expressionist pathos with the mass-circulation formulas of the time, in its genre of bestselling awfulness no different from other (male and female) popular novelists such as Karl May, Norbert Jacques, Charlotte Birch-Pfeiffer or Hedwig Courts-Mahler.

Preceded by the motto: 'This book is an event braiding itself around the insight that the mediator between brain and hands has to be the heart' and dedicated to 'Friedel' (Fritz Lang), the novel opens with Freder, the son of the master of Metropolis, playing the organ in his studio. Floods of tears are streaming down his face as he re-lives the scene of his first meeting with Maria, the simple woman of the people. Over long periods in the novel the perspective is that of Freder, since the story casts him as a reluctant saviour, realising eventually that his task was not only to 'mediate' between brain and hand in the social conflict of management and labour, but to redeem the soul of his hard-hearted father Joh Fredersen by reconciling him to the loss of his wife Hel during childbirth. Expressionist also by virtue of its theme of redemption, the novel blends two Western archetypes, the seeker-hero Oedipus, and the sacrificial hero Jesus and the Pietà. The matriarchal story-line runs from Maria to Hel to Joh's mother, and crosses the patriarchal story-line of two rivals in mortal combat over the possession of a woman. Quite logically, therefore, the novel does not end on the couple Maria and Freder, or the

handshake between foreman and boss, but with Joh Fredersen visiting his aged mother who hands him a letter written by his wife on her death-bed, confirming that it was Joh she loved, not his rival Rotwang.

In 1979, the Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek in Berlin acquired from the estate of Gottfried Huppertz, Lang's composer for both *Die Nibelungen* and *Metropolis*, an early version of the script of *Metropolis*, and a more thorough comparison between novel and screenplay became possible. Though not the shooting script, Huppertz' copy proved an invaluable find: it gave subsequent restoration work on the film one of the much-needed breakthroughs. But the Huppertz script also casts light on the Lang/von Harbou collaboration from script to film and back to the published novel. By comparing scenes in this script with various published extracts from Lang's shooting script, one can follow Lang at work. These divergent sources – all of which bear her signature – suggest that von Harbou was indeed a multi-talent, able to work to different specifications as well as for different media and audiences: her authorship lay in her utter lack of originality when it came to the verbal and visual clichés by which she shaped her none the less unique vision.

*Lang and von Harbou: Siamese Twins?*

*Metropolis*'s literary and stage sources were immediately identified.<sup>9</sup> Kurt Pinthus, in his opening-night review, named most of them and concluded his summary by throwing up his hands in mock-despair: 'To discuss the ridiculousness of the story-line linking all these motifs is already to overestimate it. To remain silent is in this case the highest respect one can pay the lady in question.'<sup>10</sup> Other critics followed suit.<sup>11</sup> Rubbing it in most mercilessly was the young Luis Buñuel, writing in Madrid's *La Gaceta Literaria*:

*Metropolis* is not one film, *Metropolis* is two films joined by the belly, but with divergent, indeed extremely antagonistic, spiritual needs. Those who consider the cinema as a discreet teller of tales will suffer a profound disillusion with *Metropolis*. What it tells us is trivial, pretentious, pedantic, hackneyed romanticism. But if we put before the story the plastic-photogenic basis of the film, then *Metropolis* will come up to any standards, will overwhelm us as the most marvellous picture book imaginable [...]. Even though we must admit that Fritz Lang is an accomplice, we hereby denounce as the presumed author of

these [i.e. *Der müde Tod* and *Metropolis*] eclectic essays and of this hazardous syncretism his wife, the scenarist Thea von Harbou.<sup>12</sup>

French critics divided the film's merits in roughly the same way.<sup>13</sup> *Les Annales* called Lang 'a lyricist, capable of extraordinary images and imagination', but when left to his own devices, a mere child:

[from the *metteur en scène* of *Die Nibelungen*] one expects grandeur, intelligence and poetry, but [in *Metropolis*] one only finds ponderousness, pretension and puerility. The script of *Metropolis* is of unsurpassable stupidity. One suspects a con-trick: a schoolboy's badly executed homework is somehow taken seriously, the dreams of [A.] Tolstoi, Villiers de l'Isle Adam and [H. G.] Wells are tossed together like a salad by the family idiot.<sup>14</sup>

This Manichaeian division of labour between husband and wife, however, must be considered another of the founding myths of *Metropolis*, its credibility strengthened by the two protagonists' subsequent careers, when von Harbou and Lang became estranged, went their separate ways and von Harbou joined the Nazi Party. Lang sometimes seemed to agree with Buñuel, though more often apologising on his own behalf rather than blaming his ex-wife for the sentimental naïvety of *Metropolis*'s social message.<sup>15</sup> But seeing how they continued working together and even lived in the same apartment until Lang left for France in 1933, the shared secret of their – uniquely successful – collaboration must have been a bond beyond politics or marital infidelities.<sup>16</sup>

The intervening decades, and a different appreciation of mainstream film-making, have helped to upgrade one's respect for von Harbou's synthetic imagination. Among the reasons that make *Metropolis* a classic are surely its cultural hybridity and insouciant mingling of high sentiment and low cunning in threading so many archetypal situations into one multi-strand story-line, creating characters that never pretend to an individualised psychology and who are none the less unforgettable. Hidden in von Harbou's story are references to Eastern, Egyptian, Judeo-Christian, Greek and cabbalist traditions of esoteric thought, and Lang's designs resonate with the knowing echoes of so many icons of avant-garde visual culture that the incoherences act more like cognitive jolts or musical dissonances. The musical analogy

was intended: the script consists of 406 tableaux, each with its own heading. They are in turn grouped into three 'movements' of uneven length, with part one ('Prelude') comprising 155 tableaux, part two ('Intermezzo') taking us from tableau 156 to 224, and part three ('Furioso') making up the final 181 tableaux.

*Metropolis's* incoherence is thus a matter of perspective. One of the objections in 1927 was that the film pretended to be about the future, when in fact it made no plausible predictions, either regarding technological advances or social life in the era of mass civilisation.<sup>17</sup> But since nothing ages more quickly than imagined futures, the appeal of science fiction lies rarely in its predictive power. *Metropolis* is no exception, and in its slant on the present it does have documentary value.<sup>18</sup> The story can be read as a compendium text of topical material, lifting motifs from Christian mythology and German Romantic fairy-tales, in order to graft them onto its dystopic urban parable.<sup>19</sup> Critics quickly picked up on architectural debates and housing issues, labour laws and film politics. Despite its lack of realism, the film is something of a psychogram or fever-chart of the late 20s which across its tale of technology run riot and industrial regimentation, is obsessed with rising temperatures, pressures coming to a head, bubbling liquids on the boil, imminent explosions and inundating floods: in short, it records all manner of forces welling up from the deep.<sup>20</sup> It also opposes to America's perceived optimism of unlimited progress and Fordist pragmatism the self-consciously European clamour for spiritual values, embodied in Weimar Germany's defensively hesitant, sentimentally pessimist, but also stoical or even cynical takes on modernity. Theodor Heuss (later to become the first President of the Federal Republic in 1948) noted that in its *mélange* of Christian symbols, archaic motifs and sub-literary stereotypes *Metropolis* illustrated 'the cramped spiritual atmosphere of our age, when the banal is blown up to heroic dimensions, the heroic is transformed into mysticism, and the mysticism is passed off as tragedy.'<sup>21</sup> Yet although it may take the moral(ising) high-ground, Lang/von Harbou's film is none the less rife with anxiety, which at the depth-psychological or fantasy level makes *Metropolis* all-too-coherent, a fact not always recognised at the time, but one of the key points brought out by structuralist and feminist critics in the 80s, when *Metropolis* once more returned to prominence. The director set out to create a populist idiom for his vision of modernity, rather than following the avant-garde

and deploying the film-language of Eisenstein, Pudovkin or Ruttmann, certainly well known to Lang. That the finished film failed to ignite – or even reach – most of the audience it was intended for, heightens its interest as a film-political document, but does not in itself invalidate the try. For if critics at the time thought the stylistic clashes and the commercial calculations offensive, it was not only because they expected a 'realistic' version of the future. The misunderstanding extended to the belief that a film could only be art and thus something of value if it were an original and organic work, all of one piece. *Metropolis*, however, positioned itself explicitly as a quite different experience: not a palimpsest, more like a dream-screen or a polished reflector, where the very absence of psychologically detailed characters, exacerbated by Lang's complex editing, gave a somnambulist ambiguity of motivation to the protagonists' gestures and a hovering indeterminacy to their actions, perhaps too quickly derided as the director's 'well-known' inability to handle actors.<sup>22</sup> His tableau-style may have inhibited viewer identification and irritated adherents of montage-kino and the recently imported *Russenfilme*, but it powerfully fed into a peculiar kind of poetry, attractive to some (such as Buñuel), repellent to many others. Such high-tech/low-culture eclecticism, at any rate, became a mainstream movie idiom *par excellence* and one compelling reason for cinema's general impact on the arts of the twentieth century.

*Metropolis's* combination of sophisticated design with the radical naïvety of mythic clichés in the mode of a self-referential *mise en abyme* is now a familiar feature of mainstream film-making, almost a condition for entering the international market in the first place. Like Steven Spielberg's 'politically correct' (i.e. timid) fairy-tales or George Lucas's *Star Wars* saga, Lang and von Harbou's film shows the 'imagineer' at work, rather than the artist striving for self-expression. Also comparable to Spielberg and Lucas, there was in von Harbou and Lang a didactic streak, a belief in the cinema educating the child in all of us: making the message pristine, but overwhelming the senses in order to touch core (at times, atavistic) emotions.

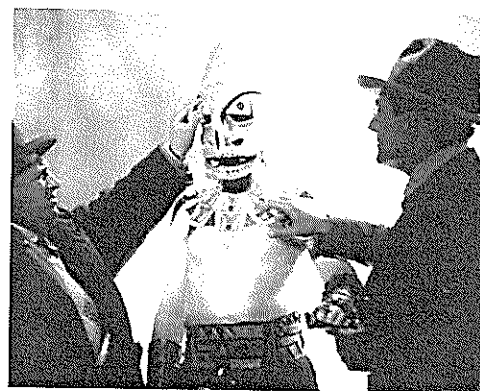
#### *Alphabet Soup of the Avant-garde*

Tracking down von Harbou's sources and Lang's borrowings would thus miss the target if it were done in a spirit to convict them of plagiarising or even trivialising the fine arts and literature, since the point of this

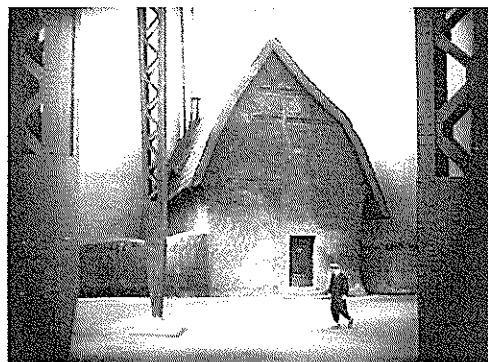
international superproduction was to create a work with a recognition factor that made contact with different kinds of cultural memory as well as stir deep-rooted fantasies, while setting out to provide an experience where the eye perceives what the mind can only marvel at. In its cultural memory, the film is a sponge, soaking up as much ideological and somatic material as the disaster of the First World War and its political aftermath – the failed revolution on the left and the resentment of an unjust peace on the right – had left behind as debris and ferment. Therefore, the fantasies had to be millennial and apocalyptic: Joh Fredersen's guilt and conversion, his son Freder's eye-witness accounts of dehumanisation and destruction and Maria's self-sacrifice are key features of the plot. These redemptive yearnings had been prominent in the Expressionist literature and had fuelled the utopian revolutionary politics of the earlier part of the decade.

In its iconography, too, *Metropolis* is a subtly knowing film, as *Zeitgeist*-conscious as *haute couture* and bestseller *belles-lettres*. Leaving aside for a moment the architectural designs and their pedigree, the wealth of direct references to the visual arts, paintings, graphics, sculpture, museum pieces, fashion accessories, book-design and commercial art is astonishing. Several Berlin reviewers commented in shocked (or mock-shocked) recognition on Freder reading in his sick-bed a copy of the *Book of Revelations*, recently published by the fashionably esoteric Avalun Verlag Hellerau (the shot has since disappeared from the prints).<sup>23</sup> They also spotted references to now near-forgotten Expressionist artists such as Karl Völker and Hans Hoerle. Lotte Eisner has tracked down some of the theatre echoes in her *Haunted Screen*, referring to Max Reinhardt for the crowd-scenes, and Erwin Piscator's *Sprech-Chöre* as precursors of all those extras raising their hands in staggered supplication. She also mentions filmic citations, such as Otto Rippert's 1916 *Homunculus* and the French avant-garde, yet Lang makes references to own films. The underground stalactites of Alberich's cave in *Die Nibelungen* turn up again in the 'Eternal Gardens'. Both were modelled on Hans Pölzig's columns in the 'Große Schauspielhaus' Berlin, too well known for reviewers to even bother to point them out. The fuming cauldron of jewels from which the false Maria rises is supported by kneeling black slaves exactly the way the chest containing the Treasure of the Nibelungen was supported by stone dwarfs come to life in *Siegfried's Death*. The water breaking through the concrete floor of the underground city is shot like the blood gushing from Siegfried's

mortal wound, and many of the crowd-and-disaster scenes are reprises from *Kriemhild's Revenge*. When Heidi Schönemann began seriously researching Lang's films for their art-historical references, she discovered models even for such apparently trivial accessories as the glass statue adorning Joh Fredersen's office coffee table (based on a design by Peter Behrens). Equally surprising, she found a constructivist drawing (by Karl Schmidt) that had clearly inspired the kitsch-Expressionist crucifixion scene at the dial controls, and the image that stood as model for Walter Schulze-Mittendorf's design of the robot-mask combines a drawing for a ballet by Oskar Schlemmer with a bronze head by Rudolf Belling (there also exists a still showing Lang and Karl Freund fitting the guards of Moloch with a West African mask, probably from the Berlin Völkerkundliche Museum, a favourite haunt of Expressionists like Schmidt-Rottluff, Kirchner and Haeckel). The 'Eternal Gardens' resemble a Jugendstil magazine cover by Fido from 1909, and another critic thought he spotted a painting by one Gert Wollheim, adding sarcastically 'held in the collection of the Prussian State'.<sup>24</sup> Some of Anne Willkomm's costumes for the ladies of the night are taken from a Bauhaus collection by Schlemmer, and finally, Rotwang's gingerbread house, rather than a pure Gothic fantasy, is modelled after a villa built by the Expressionist architect Otto Bartning for the director of a Saxony steel works between 1923 and 1925, itself probably based on an illustration first published in 1905 by Julius Dietz, who just happens to have been Lang's drawing teacher in Munich.<sup>25</sup>

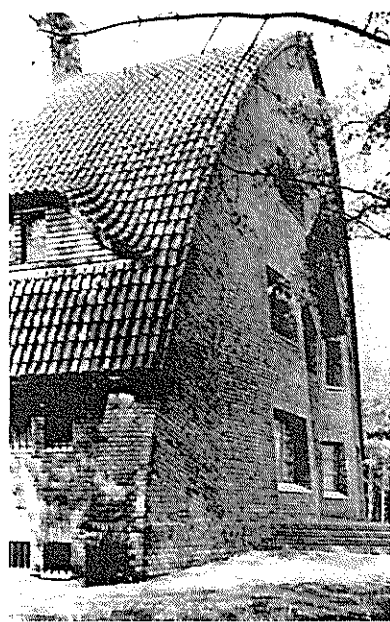


Freund and Lang with West African mask



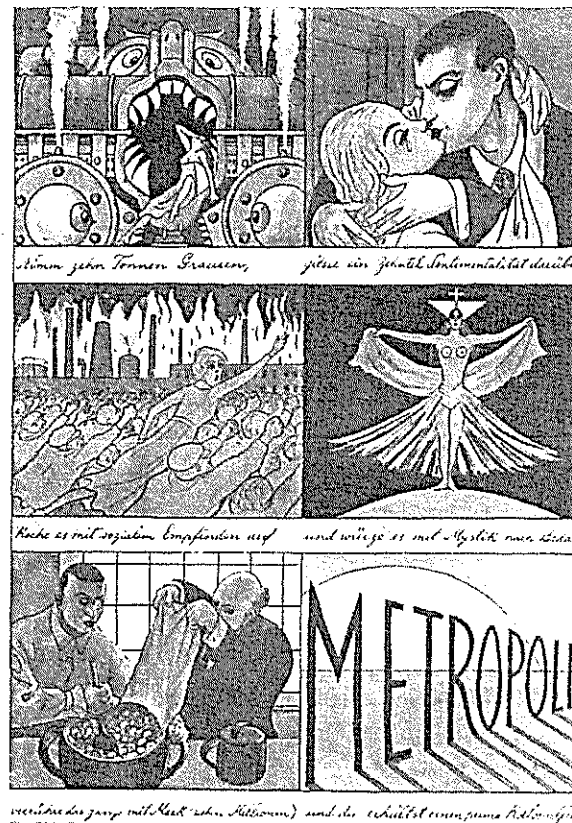
Rotwang's gothic golem house among the high-rises (Schönemann)

These avant-garde accents from the contemporary fine and applied arts confirm just how conscious the makers of *Metropolis* were of their attempt to build on previous Pommer export successes such as *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1920), and how deliberately they set about pioneering a recognisably German prototype of a 'designer-blockbusters'.



22 Otto Bartning, Director's villa, Zeipau, 1923-5 (Schönemann)

Though its disappointing box-office and Pommer's departure for the US meant that the prototype never went into serial production, it needs to be stressed that the impact of *Metropolis* in 1927 was enormous: hardly an article in the papers that year did not make reference to it, including a fair number of cartoons and parodies. In what sense can one therefore say that Lang, von Harbou and UFA did not succeed? Even if this is the case from the financial point of view, the reasons were not necessarily aesthetic, as critics averred: they were as much due to bad luck or bad timing, and they pinpoint the risks always carried by prototypes.



Nimm zehn Tonnen Grausen, gib sie ein gleich dokumentärelt dicker

Kuche es mit sozialen Empfinden auf und würze es mit Mystik über dem

verleihe das ganz mit Kost (zehn Millionen) und du behältst einen prima Kuchenspin

2

THE UFA-CREW

*The Cathedral Master Builders*

Shooting started on 22 May 1925 and went on until 30 October 1926, clocking up 310 working days (and sixty nights). In principle, it should not have been such a Herculean task. To meet the technical challenges, Lang could rely on his proven *Nibelungen* team, headed by Otto Hunte as chief architect, whose most gifted junior partner was Erich Kettelhut.<sup>26</sup>

Th. Heine, 'The Recipe for Metropolis', from *Simpl*, February 1926: 'take ten tons of horror ... pour on 10% sentimentality ... and season to taste with mysticism ... finally, stir the whole with marks (several millions) ... and ready is your mega-picture'





Freund and Lang, with the crew knee-deep in water (Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek Berlin)

Also on hand from *Die Nibelungen* was Karl Vollbrecht and for the costumes, Änne Willkomm, apparently much abused by Lang and later to marry Kettelhut. The cameraman this time was Karl Freund, a regular from F. W. Murnau's crew, with Günther Rittau, by then UFA's acknowledged expert for some of the most intricate in-camera trick

effects, who on *Die Nibelungen* had assisted Carl Hoffmann. Lang himself was no novice with special effects, either in-camera, or on a large-scale purpose-built set. The miniaturised marching armies and the self-scrolling letter in *Der müde Tod* (1921) were partly Lang's own invention, and the dragon in *Siegfried's Death* (1923) was an engineering feat admired even by Willis O'Brien, the special effects expert whom Lang had visited on the set of *The Lost World* (after Arthur Conan Doyle) at First National during his US trip. This time, the task



was not only to create mechanical monsters, like the Moloch-machine or Rotwang's lab which was to inspire a dozen Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi pictures. The real difficulties came with the architectural scale models, many of which were designed by Kettelhut, who has left a detailed account of the shoot in his (unpublished) memoirs.<sup>27</sup> Vistas and perspectives, surging crowds, collapsing buildings and wrecked machinery had to be stitched and segued into real live action, set in a throbbing city and planned in dimensions that only existed in the mind. It called for a special kind of imagination for these bodies in space, scale models, back-projection, mirror-shots and stop-frame animation to meld and blend together, as literally hundreds of automobiles, aeroplanes, human beings and other moving parts had to be fitted together. Rittau, too, has written an account of some of the effects, such as the animation of the traffic in the exterior shots, the explosion in the machine room, the flooding of the underground city and the metamorphosis of the robot into the likeness of Maria:

Electric current tends to be invisible. On the other hand, the phantastic-mysterious transformation now taking place naturally had to be rendered in images. We illuminated liquids in strange test-tubes and made them bubble, the electric apparatus surrounding Maria was made to emit sparks and we gradually enveloped it in huge arcs of lightning, at the same time as rings of fire formed around the robot, moving up and down her body. As she became human, her blood circulation lit up. We spent months in the lab preparing these effects, with photo-chemistry playing a major role, as well as the most unlikely aids [... such as] a silver ball, black velvet, liquid soap, vaseline, vignettes [...]. Some strips of celluloid had to be exposed up to thirty times.<sup>28</sup>

The process-shots of the stadium and the Tower of Babel were largely given over to Eugen Schüfftan, who was to make his reputation with *Metropolis* by developing a special matte-shot device by partially scraping the tain off a mirror through which an action could be filmed, while a painted backdrop or scenery was reflected back into the image. Several street scenes, the interiors of the Cathedral, Freder's horror vision of the Moloch machine were all done using the Schüfftan-process. Built scale models of the heart-machine allowed the simulation of an explosion: according to Rittau, forty metres of film took eight days'

work, for ten seconds of screen time. The initial explosion witnessed by Freder took four weeks to prepare and less than two minutes to shoot. Each of the many other spectacular scenes – from the underground inundation to the shaven-headed slaves building the Tower of Babel or the burning of the false Maria on the stake – also consumed weeks and months, clocking up production costs, causing frayed tempers, walk-outs and hours of merciless rehearsal time often in freezing conditions.<sup>29</sup> One of the actors in the inundation scene caught pneumonia after standing, day in day out, for hours in the water and irreparably damaged his voice: he was still telling this story to anyone willing to listen as late as 1939 in his Paris exile.

The seventeen-year-old, inexperienced Brigitte Helm, pushed by an ambitious mother, had to be groomed for a demanding double role: Maria the Virgin Mary, mother-figure and herald of the world's saviour; and Maria the robot, extra-terrestrial, femme fatale and she-devil incarnate. Some of the most taxing tasks turned out to be the endless hours spent on the robot scenes, surprisingly brief in the finished film, but dreadfully long in preparing the (wooden) casing and make-up. In other

scenes, such as the burning at the stake (with real flames), or the chase by Rotwang up the Cathedral tower, where at one point Maria swings helplessly from a bell-rope before Rotwang roughly hauls her over an iron railing, one can almost smell the seared clothes and feel the metal bruise her legs. Gustav Fröhlich, by contrast, was not Lang's first choice and was only picked from among the extras after the first lead had stormed off the set, necessitating re-shoots.<sup>30</sup> Even at the time, his acting was severely



26 Maria swinging from the bell-rope

criticised as relentlessly over-emphatic, without nuance or modulation between horror and ecstasy, as he impulsively charges forward or recoils in nameless terror.

*Metropolis* illustrates the UFA style at its best and worst. The no-expenses-spared attention to detail, the time taken for rehearsals and preparation, the armies of assistants, hopeful actors and patient extras all gave the director an unprecedented freedom, but also a huge responsibility. While the script was worked out down to the minutiae of lighting, blocking and camera-movements, it seems there was also room for trial-and-error experiments on the set. Von Harbou, for instance, was at the director's side throughout, no doubt also in her capacity as screenwriter. Telling in this respect are the precise annotations about costume, camera positions and technical sketches on the margins of the (lost) shooting script, of which several pages were reproduced in the special *Ufa Magazin* and other pre-screening publications.<sup>31</sup> The director-unit system, such as Pommer allowed for his two stars Lang and Murnau – each with an experienced and extensive crew allocated to a single project that might last a small eternity – did not give the studio the sort of control over production schedules and cost-overruns that managers or accountants like to have.<sup>32</sup> The up-side was that this team-spirit allowed for sustained creative input from a wide array of top professionals: to live with *Metropolis* for nearly two years must have generated its own kind of intensity. As Lotte Eisner pointed out in *The Haunted Screen*, the sense of a coherent (misleadingly called 'Expressionist') style for the classic 20s German cinema was due in large



Lang, Helm and von Harbou making music

part to the close co-operation between set designers, cameramen, art directors and countless other, highly skilled specialists who had made a successful transition from designer and decorator work in the theatre to the cinema. Yet unlike the US Majors with which it was competing, UFA did not run a big special effects department. In the spirit of the medieval master builders, the studio hired these different experts on a project-by-project basis.<sup>33</sup> Often, they brought with them not only their own equipment and assistants, but also their trade secrets.<sup>34</sup> This did not stop the UFA publicity department bragging about the technical brilliance of its craftsmen in fan magazines and special editions of the house journal, *Ufa Magazin*.<sup>35</sup>

What was new about the making of *Metropolis* – and another lesson possibly picked up from the Pommer/Lang US trip – was the extensive pre-screening publicity, the work-in-progress reports, the constant leaking to the press of stories, the arranged interviews and on-set visits. Throughout the nearly eighteen-month period the papers were full of production reports. Scarcely a week went by without the trade journals like the *Licht-Bild-Bühne* or the *Film-Kurier* reporting on major developments or setbacks. Journalists were falling over each other to file stories about the shooting of the film. Billy Wilder claims to have watched Lang at work, as did Curt Siodmak.<sup>36</sup> Hitchcock is known to have visited the set, though hardly as the major director he was yet to become. Eisenstein let himself be photographed with Lang and the *Metropolis* crew, as did other national and international celebrities. In Berlin in 1925, it was a sign of belonging to the smartest in-crowd to have seen Lang and von Harbou at work. They were featured at home, posing



Director, actors, cameramen and crew posing for the family album

with pets, exotic artefacts and tasteful furnishings, in the illustrated press. The horror stories about endless rehearsals, the inclemencies of the weather, the superlatives about the number of extras (36,000 adults,<sup>37</sup> 750 children, 100 blacks), about the extravagance of the props (35,000 pairs of shoes, seventy-five wigs, fifty specially-built automobiles) and other material excesses (620,000 metres negative stock exposed) originated from the UFA publicity department itself – only to be used afterwards as a stick to beat the director with, for his profligacy, his sadism with actors and his dictatorial capriciousness.<sup>38</sup>

#### *The Opening Night*

When the film eventually opened on 10 January 1927 at the UFA-Palast am Zoo in Berlin, expectations had been raised to fever pitch. No less than 1,200 spectators attended the premiere, including Reichskanzler Wilhelm Marx, several cabinet ministers and deputies, foreign ambassadors and even royalty.<sup>39</sup> The music was performed by a full orchestra and directed by the composer, Gottfried Huppertz. Subsequently published as a piano score for regional and smaller cinema venues, it keeps a judicious balance between tonal pieces, in the manner of late Romantic music, or transpositions of well-known melodies (including the *Marseillaise*, when the workers are destroying the machines), and a-tonal passages to indicate the modern rhythms of the city, without, however, venturing as far as Edmund Meisel was to do, in his scores for Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* or Ruttmann's *Berlin – Symphony of a City*. There was even a set of gramophone records of the orchestral arrangement, with a spoken introduction to the film by Lang himself.<sup>40</sup> The gala brochure, put together by UFA publicist Stefan Lorient, was an instant collector's item. The novel was presented to invited guests in a pig-skin bound edition which, as Siegfried Kracauer sarcastically remarked on a similar occasion the year after, filled the auditorium with its own kind of aroma.<sup>41</sup> The UFA publicity machine had made sure that the opening was as perfectly choreographed as 'the making of *Metropolis*' had been designed as if it were an election campaign.<sup>42</sup> At a running time of almost three hours, there was a break during which, as one critic remarked, it became already clear that the reviews would be divided. At the end of the gala evening, there were standing ovations for all the major players, the director and von Harbou. As Kettelhut noted: at the party for the cast and crew, 'a spirit of universal