

as intriguing as the search for an *Ur-text* and an *Ur-copy* has become the question: what did these cuts and re-edits think they were doing, what story did they make the film tell, and how did history and time change this story, or rather, change our idea of the meaning of this film?

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INTERPRETING 'METROPOLIS':
READING FOR THE PLOT

One definition of a classic is that it is a work which receives, or rather, provokes ever new interpretation. By this definition, *Metropolis* amply qualifies: whether because of the over-explicit moral, the inconsistencies of the plot, or the lacunary form by which the film has survived, each generation has proposed a reading, and in each case it has been as much a barometer of a period's own preferences and ideological preoccupations as a statement about the film.

The Social Question and Technology

In the 20s, uppermost in critics' minds was the so-called 'social question': did the film have anything to say about industrialisation as a factor preventing social unrest, or was it merely aggravating the class-struggle? Would modern technology enslave mankind or bring progress and prosperity to all? Overwhelmingly, the answer was that *Metropolis* had nothing to say on either, being far too cautious to show its hand other than by vapid symbolism and a pious motto.⁶⁴ The German communists were stridently scathing:

This film, born out of bourgeois-capitalist ideology and produced with the insistent obtrusive intent to propagate the idea of class-reconciliation, the better to further capitalist methods of exploitation, only succeeds in unmasking the bourgeois worker-friendly phraseology in all its mendacity: this film is financed with the same capital that has pushed through the recent exploitative labour laws.⁶⁵

The polemic clearly judges *Metropolis* in light of the industrial politics of the day, and according to some social historians, Weimar Germany's strategy regarding labour was divided, some industrialists tending

towards the American model, where wages were allowed to rise in order to give the workers spending power. Looked at by sectors, the steel and coal industry in the mid-20s tended to be right-wing, while light manufacturing and branches of industry concerned with exports were generally more liberal. If one were to attach a party-political label, *Metropolis's* 'solution' would reflect the moderate wing of the social democrats, even making room for trade union views. In fact, the offensive motto sounds remarkably like a trade union leader's address, assuring his members that 'Industry is holding its hand out to Labour.'⁶⁶

Closely allied to the social question was the film's attitude to technology. Here, the technocrats as much as the political scientists felt let down: why did the cars look like yesterday's models; why were there fixed stairs and no escalators; why was automation resulting in exhausting and dangerous work for men rather than leading to monotonous, but light and safe tasks increasingly employing women? Where in *Metropolis* was the middle management, and where were the politicians, the police or security forces? To see workers exert huge physical effort manning a machine incensed every engineer, not only because it did not correspond to the facts of modern factory conditions, but because the very purpose of machines was to reduce industry's dependency on manual labour.⁶⁷ Several reviews explained why just about every piece of machinery shown in the film was non-functional, anachronistic and nonsensical even from the point of view of the rulers. The most vituperative comments came from H. G. Wells himself, in an article for the *New York Times* taking Lang and UFA to task for having made 'quite the silliest film' he had ever seen. He, too, itemised all the improbable, impossible and unexplained features of the world depicted in *Metropolis*, noting with special contempt the fact that Lang's city was organised top-down, when the city of the future would sprawl outwards into suburbs rather than stack its workers vertically.⁶⁸

Generally, the dystopian vision of man's use of machines to aggravate exploitation and oppression rather than alleviate misery and want highly irritated social progressives, who saw the film give not only the wrong answer, but pose the wrong questions. Yet it also incensed the right-wing conservatives, because they understood the film as fuelling social tension, even advocating the class-struggle. Unresolved in this debate, and yet wholly underpinning it, was the relation of Weimar Germany to America. If *Metropolis* did not get to grips with the real

effect of mechanisation and rationalisation, it was not least because Weimar Germany did not finally come to grips with Fordism and Taylorisation, just as the film industry never resolved its schizophrenic attitude to Hollywood.

Capitalist, Bolshevik or Proto-fascist?

It is here that Nazi film history tried to cut the Gordian knot. One of the few critical discussions of *Metropolis* during the Hitler era occurs in the UFA 25th anniversary volume, Otto Kriegk's 'The German Cinema in the Mirror of Ufa' (1943). The 'mirror' held up to *Metropolis* has a distinctly 'Alice through the Looking-Glass' logic. Kriegk attempts to resolve Nazi Germany's rivalry with the US mostly by deriding the folly of UFA even trying, and he projects onto the Soviet Union the Nazis' own military and expansionist ambitions:

'What an appalling film' shouted the critics, who until then had supported every cinematic work as long as it tried to out-do the Americans. Hundreds of cinophile intellectuals were deeply shocked when they realised to what heights of folly the attempt to have a world success at all cost could lead. With *Metropolis* the alien elements in the German cinema had reached the point of catastrophe. On the one hand, [the film] tried to imitate the soulless civilisation of America by going one better. Megalomania was matched with megalomania. If skyscraper was piled on skyscraper, surely those of New York would feel defeated [...]. Furthermore, if one added, the makers must have thought, enough of 'German spirituality' which was supposed to be superior to the American [way of life], and if one tackled the social question even more radically than the Americans were said to do, then one could not but pass the finishing line way ahead of them. [...]

In Italy and Turkey the film was banned after a few showings. The reason given was the film's 'Bolshevik tendency'. In Germany at the time people of all political colours were baffled as to what could possibly be Bolshevik about the film. Today we know better. When the film opened in 1927, the Soviet Union was just preparing the phase of its technical revolution which we can now recognise as the precondition for the giant rearmament effort into which [Stalin ...] pressed the soulless masses, in order to [satisfy his] wild political ambitions.

Happily we are now immune to the dangers of such a nonsensical confusion of social problems. Nobody today would dream of throwing in one pot Marxism, dictatorship of the employers, superficial philanthropy and half-baked ideas about the decline of the West, give it the date-mark 2000, and then stir this pot so vigorously that the engagement of the son of a captain of industry to a girl of the people, playing Christ, could solve our social conflicts for the next thousand years.⁶⁹

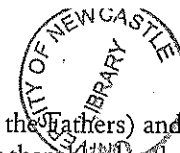
Disowning the film, Kriegk thus spares neither von Harbou's script nor the 'alien' (i.e. Jewish) input of Lang and Pommer. In fact, he makes the latter responsible for the commercial priorities the film industry set itself: '[UFA] wanted to produce whatever its export department considered good for sales, but in the end it achieved almost nothing abroad and very little in Germany.' Kriegk thus manages to turn the tables on the film's admirers as well as its detractors, calling it a Bolshevik film, made by Jewish liberals trying to ingratiate themselves with the Americans.

Only four years after Kriegk's put-down, one of the most damning (and influential) critiques that *Metropolis* was ever to receive was published in the US: Siegfried Kracauer's polemic attack on the film as proto-Nazi. In *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947) Kracauer also put *Metropolis* firmly in the dock; rather than being trivial or timid, or Bolshevik and aping Hollywood, Lang's film now put forward a right-wing utopia, giving the Weimar body-politic the shape of a social-fascist allegory. Furthermore, in its crowd-scenes, its spectacles of violence and destruction, it had like no other Weimar film inspired the Nazi aesthetic of the 'mass-ornament', implemented in Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*. For Kracauer, *Metropolis*'s 'message' could have been endorsed by Goebbels, the 'heart' now standing for propaganda, able to emotionally manipulate the working class. Especially reprehensible for Kracauer was the visual depiction of crowds. Pleasurable to the eye but politically totalitarian, Lang's geometrical forms in *Metropolis* deprive the masses of a will and reduce their public participation to a demagogic reflex. Rather than invoking the theatre work of Max Reinhardt and Erwin Piscator, as Lotte Eisner had done in *The Haunted Screen* (1969), Kracauer regarded Lang as the inventor of a new order of politicised spectacle, dangerous precisely because, fused into a crowd, individuals were encouraged to

identify with a sense of community based not on intersubjective exchange or common interest, but on an all-seeing gaze, which they both identify with and submit to. Depicting the community in terms of vision and display, Lang's mass-ornament shapes a powerfully social space, contaminated by a new kind of (media-made) subjectivity, cut loose from political action and personal relations. It enacts this fascination of 'seeing oneself seen', however much the plot might critically decry such crowd formation:

[I]n *Metropolis*, the decorative not only appears as an end in itself, but even belies certain points made by the plot. It makes sense that, on their way to and from the machines, the workers form ornamental groups; but it is nonsensical to force them into such groups while they are listening to a comforting speech from the girl Maria during their leisure time. In his exclusive concern with ornamentation Lang goes so far as to compose decorative patterns from the masses who are desperately trying to escape the inundation of the lower city. Cinematically an incomparable achievement, this inundation sequence is humanly a shocking failure.⁷⁰

Thus both Kriegk and Kracauer condemn the film, for diametrically opposite reasons. Each regards it as a 'bad object' and assigns it a place in the ideological camp of the other. Notwithstanding Kracauer's infinitely more sophisticated and less self-contradictory reading, there are problems with his reading, too, especially when one considers that in the political context of 1924–8, UFA's commercial instincts would hardly have persuaded it to make a pro(to)-fascist film: the National Socialists only polled 2.6 per cent of the vote as late as the 1928 elections. As to the paternalist parable of class-collaboration which *Metropolis* is said to promote, it is explicitly ridiculed by Kriegk, who sees it as a typical fiction of (Jewish) bourgeois liberalism, not at all part of the Nazi creed. Instead of the Führer-principle so central to Nazi ideology, does not *Metropolis* show its Führer going down on his knees, fearing for his son? And what about the foreman, torn between loyalty to his place of work and the workers he represents, conscious of his bargaining power and only reluctantly agreeing to sue for industrial peace? Kracauer argued that this is precisely what makes the film so insidious. By seeming to give in to his son, Joh Fredersen actually tightens his hold over both the son (the



Weimar rebellion of the sons defeated by the fathers) and the workers (because the appeals to their emotions make them blind to their own class-interests). But at the premiere of the restored version in Moscow, at the time of *perestroika*, a member of the audience came up to Enno Patalas and said: 'how topical the message of the film: this kind of reconciliation is exactly what we need.' Patalas wondered whether it was a communist film after all, or a sign of Russia's social-fascist ideology under Boris Yeltsin.⁷¹ In the end, however, it was Kracauer's verdict of *Metropolis* as 'humanly a shocking failure' that has echoed down the decades, retrospectively giving the US public a moral bonus for not having fallen for the film at the box-office. Its failure, supposedly sealing the fate of UFA, which came under the control of Alfred Hugenberg, also seems just punishment for German hubris politically. The film's anti-humanist vision and anti-democratic perspective was made to serve as emblem for the tragic inadequacies of the Weimar Republic in the face of imminent fascism.

From 'Metropolis' to Mauthausen

Kracauer, of course, was not reading for the plot or the export intentions of UFA. It was the hidden tendencies, the political unconscious – the *monologue interieur* as he called it – of Weimar cinema that he tried to interpret, deliberately taking advantage of his hindsight position. After 1945 and in light of the terrible devastation that a top-down, regimented social system had brought to Europe, orchestrated by military high-technology and an efficient media machine that included the cinema, *Metropolis's* planned nightmare city-state looked different from what it had before the war. Little did it matter that Nazism detested modernist architecture,⁷² and that it promoted an anti-urban, 'blood-and-soil', back-to-the-land settlement policy. The film's complacently dystopic view of industrialisation, coupled with its evident fascination for the terrible beauty of outsize machines as well as Lang's penchant for disasters and *Götterdämmerung* came back to haunt the director. *Metropolis* now seemed to prove that Lang never did make up his mind between baleful prediction and self-fulfilling prophecy, the childish plot discrediting the warning message, while the childlike pleasure in the magic of electricity endorsed a dangerous play with fire:

The superbly realised sequence in which the evil scientist creates his robot has a bizarre quality which the current science fiction films have

never equalled, but it is legitimate to ask how important in the film's context – it has, after all, a very serious theme – it is to show all the glamorous electronic devices and to let the audience marvel at the big sparks, while the main issues are being fought out between capital and labour. This child-like insistence on Lang's part in having fun with huge scientific gadgets remains the film's main source of appeal.⁷³

Whatever ambiguity had been felt in the 20s about *Metropolis*, Kracauer's interpretation from 1947 carried the day. It was as if his reading allowed one to re-live, indeed to participate in the very birth of Nazi ideology and its aesthetic in an apparently most unsuspected guise. But was the film unwittingly prophetic, anticipatory or actively collusive? This question was also raised by another feature of *Metropolis* that only hindsight had allowed to appear.

One of the most impressive visions in the film is that of Moloch, the man-devouring machine. Woven into the narrative via the *Book of Revelations* which Freder has by his bedside table,⁷⁴ its metaphoric meaning is that of a machine exacting human sacrifices. But a look at von Harbou's novel also suggests a further reading, for there, one of the main themes is that of 'food' or 'fodder'. Both in the opening scene of the shift change and in Freder's Moloch vision, von Harbou develops the image of the city's machines needing 'living fodder, the endless stream of human beings processed through the machine rooms, all those men used up, and spat out at the other end'.⁷⁵ Later on, it is the false Maria who tells the workers: 'you are just fodder for machines.' One can interpret this motif psychoanalytically, seeing it as part of the oral-anal sadistic fantasy underpinning the Oedipal scenario that the film elaborates around Freder's castration anxiety, but it could also explain why these workers do not produce anything useful, a feature that so puzzled Anglo-American critics. What if the machines of *Metropolis* did not refer to industrial production in the conventional sense at all? In the way they ingest, devour, and then excrete human beings, they take up instead the metaphor of the total war machine, which so powerfully obsessed literature and the arts after the First World War. There, Moloch was the God of War, a machine destroying machines and devouring soldiers as 'cannon-fodder'. Yet after the Second World War, such an imagery of human beings used up as brute matter would inevitably associate neither the First nor the Second World War, but another 'by-product' of Nazi-

rule, the Holocaust and the death camps. *Metropolis*'s anticipatory scenario would thus be of a society that works people to death, even when the work is socially unproductive. The film historian Georges Sadoul, writing in the mid-60s picked up this association, quoting a man arriving at the Mauthausen concentration camp in 1943. As he ascends the ramp, seeing all these men and women in uniform and shaven heads, he is heard saying to his fellow-prisoner: 'connais-tu *Metropolis*?'⁷⁶

'Metropolis' in 'Gravity's Rainbow'

This train of associations turns up, more indirectly and obliquely, in Thomas Pynchon's novel. An often overlooked but oddly telling source for charting the change in the fortunes of *Metropolis* as a classic text of dystopic modernity into a cult classic of several kinds of cynically enlightened postmodernities, Pynchon at once follows in Kracauer's footsteps, but also pre-dates Moroder's re-charging of the film's various energy levels. *Gravity's Rainbow* places its references to *Metropolis* at a very precise moment in European history, namely 1945, when the technological advances inaugurating the space age of moon rockets, jet-engines and smart bombs still show traces of the Allied Powers' political compromise with fascism. In this Second World War epic, one of the main protagonists is Franz Pökler, an ominously eloquent and yet symptomatic fan of Fritz Lang's German films, and especially *Metropolis*. A scientist who during the last years of the Nazi regime worked on Hitler's secret

weapon, the V2 rocket system at both Peenemünde and the notorious 'Dora' camp in Nordhausen, Pökler recalls the Weimar years 'through inflation and depression'. His *Zeitgeist* 'came to have a human face attached to it, natürlich that of the actor Rudolf Klein-Rogge whom Pökler idolised and wanted to be like'. Debriefed by the Americans about the brain behind the V2 rocket,



The human face of the Weimar years: Rudolf Klein-Rogge (Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek Berlin)

supposedly a former Professor at the Munich Technische Hochschule in the 20s, Pökler confuses him with Rotwang and he muses about *Metropolis*:

Great movie. Exactly the world Pökler and evidently quite a few others were dreaming about in those days, a corporate City-State where technology was the source of power, the engineer worked closely with the administrator, the masses laboured unseen far underground, and ultimate power lay with a single leader at the top, fatherly and benevolent and just, who wore magnificent-looking suits and whose name Pökler couldn't remember, being too taken with Klein-Rogge playing the mad inventor, [... a man] indispensable to those who ran the metropolis, yet at the end the untameable lion who could let it all crash, girl, State, masses, himself, asserting his reality against them all in one last roaring plunge from rooftop to street.⁷⁷

This colourful passage confirms Kracauer's intuition that Lang's film allowed viewers to nourish some very potent fantasies of absolute power and self-destruction, but Pynchon extends it to include the role Nazi scientists like Wernher von Braun were to play in winning the Space Race for the US, forcibly reminding the reader of the price such science had extracted from the human beings working in forced labour camps and Hitler's death-mills.

Pökler is a useful witness, since he is obviously sympathetic to the film ideologically, yet his emotions are invested not in the class-collaborationist parable, but rather in the disjuncture between a technocratic elite and the masses it is supposed to serve, but actually despises. A second film within the film, one responding to another kind of temperature, so to speak, seems to have carried away the first, the narrative one of the conciliatory, redemptive ending, and instead concluding with the 'untameable lion's death. Read from the point of view of Rotwang, *Metropolis* appears most truthful where it insists on the persistence of the archaic-anarchic aspects, but also the mythic dimension of the technological-rationalist fantasy that social progressives like H. G. Wells found so anachronistic and deplorable. Pökler's evident disregard for the plot's numerous twists and turns is thus interesting in light of the howls of protest that greeted the film originally,

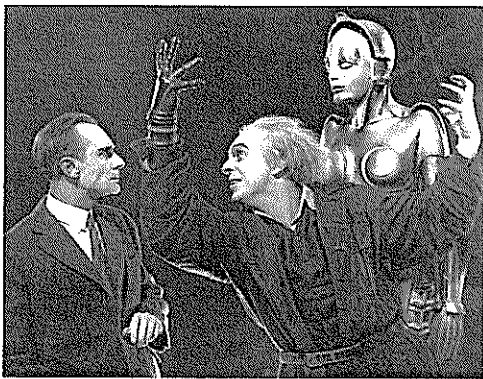
when its ideological naïveties and narrative incoherence were almost universally ridiculed.

In this sense, Pynchon's Pökler is a link between Kracauer's interpretation and another of Kracauer's apparent diametrical opposites, the postmodern, pop-rock or cyber-punk reevaluation of *Metropolis* as a cult classic of Generation X. Pynchon's *Metropolis* is, after all, also about terrific suits and style-wars as much as it is about the imaginary self-image of the 'a-political' military-industrial complex entering into a direct alliance with the political establishment, if necessary proto-fascist, so long as it upheld the knowledge-based state-within-the-state of special interest lobbies, military quangos, and above-the-law secret services. Pynchon's vision, however, is also the beginning of the urbanist fantasies that the 80s were to spin so persuasively around *Metropolis*, and he indirectly confirms that Lang was one of the first directors to envisage an ideological role for cinema's impact not on politics, but on designer-politics. *Metropolis* did in this sense pioneer one of the effects that blockbuster film-making has had on related consumer industries (clothes, fabrics, furnishings, personal accessories), as well as on modern politics, whether democratic or totalitarian, utilising an eclectic modernism of spectacle and seriality. The mass-ornament so abhorred by Kracauer as undemocratic and totalitarian would in due course become a key element of consumerist capitalism, where there is no object, gesture or expression that is not styled, 'designed', aware that it is being looked at. It is as if Lang had sensed that a debate which merely contrasted machines as either instruments of enslavement or as mankind's liberators was already obsolete by 1927. 'I want to be a machine' is a saying attributed to Andy Warhol. It could have been the alternative motto of *Metropolis*, making Lang's supposed anti-humanism look more like an anticipated post-humanism.

Fairy-tales, Machines and Oedipus

Perhaps one reason why Lang's film weathered so well the contradictory treatment it received across the decades is that it has the robustness of a fairy-tale. Such stories survive rough handling thanks to their redundancies and archetypal configurations. UFA rivalled US films not only in size and special effects, it also wanted to present a romance for the machine age, a story as previously only the Americans had known how to tell. Although not fulfilling UFA's hopes, *Metropolis* rather accurately

reproduced the double plot structure of Hollywood classical narrative, interweaving fairy-tale and romance with an adventure plot and quest. Already Roland Schacht had noticed the effect obtained: the story, he argued, deposits its schematic opposition between workers and bosses inside a *Märchen*, a fairy-tale, which it complicates by two additional intrigues. Besides the romance of Freder and Maria, there is the romantic-Gothic fairy-tale of the sorcerer's apprentice: an inventor creates an artificial human being that brings disaster to all concerned. Set against this is the intrigue centred on 'Slim' – the eyes and ears of Metropolis's master – and his ultimately foiled attempts to neutralise the hero's helpers. The second intrigue is Rotwang's revenge, trying to destroy the son of the man who took away his love. Schacht saw the long shadow of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (one of whose many filmed versions was shown in Berlin in 1925) falling on the tale, alluded to in the gargoyle-guarded Cathedral parapet which is the site for the final showdown. Rotwang as the hunchback Quasimodo as well as a demonic Dr Frankenstein brings forth further parallels: in each case, a blond but bland youthful hero contends for a fair maiden whose alter ego is an evil witch. A historical novel, heavily influenced by Walter Scott, *Notre Dame de Paris* – like *Metropolis* – mixes redemptive religion and a messiah-figure, supported by a virginal female, with an easily stirred rabble-crowd in a heady brew of post-Revolutionary anxieties. Given this stab at Hollywood-style story construction, it seems particularly ironic that in the US release version both of the adventure plots fell victim to Paramount's savage cuts, thus seriously unbalancing the narrative



Rotwang's bachelor machine: malevolent robot or empowering cyborg?

design. On the other hand, the thought that *Metropolis* might have been inspired by Walter Scott and Victor Hugo as much as it was beholden to H. G. Wells and Villiers de l'Isle-Adam is intriguing. It is picked up indirectly in the 70s, after the structuralist turn, when Vladimir Propp, Claude Levi-Strauss and Greimas provided the theoretical models for analysing popular narratives such as this.

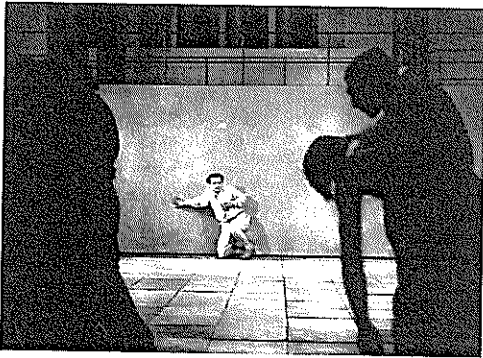
Focusing on the fairy-tale and quest elements in *Metropolis*, Alan Williams and John Tulloch's essays present structuralist versions of the Oedipal conflict, endorsing Kracauer's thesis of 'the adolescent and the whore', (i.e. the split maternal figure), but refraining from drawing Kracauer's more explicit political conclusions. For the structuralists, Lang/von Harbou's mythopoetic scheme fits into a broader ideological model of popular story-telling as the imaginary resolution to real contradictions, and they see the film respond to Weimar's political deadlocks, while addressing anxieties over masculinity and authority. Tulloch, following Lucien Goldman's genetic structuralism, discovers a dialectical movement propelling the film, where the thesis is expressed in Maria's first words: 'all men are brothers.' The antithesis would be that in practice, brain and hands are separated. The synthesis – the establishment of true brotherhood – requires the intervention not so much of Freder as mediator, but of the female element, itself purged of its own excesses (the sexualised robot) and acting through the male (Maria steering Freder): a benignly matriarchal rewriting of both the Sleeping Beauty story and the Christian myth of Mary and Jesus. Williams' Greimasian approach brings out the basic contradiction as a constitutive 'lack', located in the workers' absence of control over their existence. The task of the narrative is to move that which embodies the lack from one space to another, effectively making the worker's children the object of transfer and exchange. Parallel to this story is that of Freder, also driven by lack: not knowing how miserable the workers' lives are. For him, knowledge becomes the object, and it, too requires a transfer across different spaces: machine room, Fredersen's office, the catacombs. Williams' analysis highlights the mirroring function of certain scenes, such as the eternal gardens and the catacombs. He also underscores the central importance of Maria, since she participates in several different transactions: so many in fact, that she has to be split in two, in order to fulfil all the symbolic tasks required, including that of being the lack-embodiment object for Rotwang and Freder. Her role involves such

archetypal fairy-tale moves as kidnap, foiled rescue, the hero's fight with the sorcerer and eventual release of the 'princess' and restitution to her rightful place.

Apart from the folk-tale elements, neither the Virgin Mary symbolism nor the split between virgin and whore had escaped earlier commentators, but in the cynical Berlin atmosphere of 1927, the figure of Maria was greeted with undisguised derision. Like the taste-based division of labour between Lang and von Harbou, it was a gender discourse that all too plainly spoke a male-chauvinist language. Lang's brilliant film technique had male attributes of control and mastery, while comments on the 'kitsch' characters, and especially Maria, came with unflattering female connotations, such as 'Kurfürstendämchen' (a pun on Berlin's fashionable shopping area and the diminutive for 'lady'), 'violet-hued Biedermeier', 'ladies' home journal romanticism'. Yet why, other than to provide the plot with extra symmetries, did Rotwang fashion a robot with female features? This was a question that had apparently not struck many critics until the mid-70s. Whether it was the result of feminist film theory, or the discovery of von Harbou's script of *Metropolis*, the robot Maria and the role played by the excised Hel suddenly came into the spotlight. By the late-70s and early 80s questions of patriarchy and male paranoia, rephrased in terms of gender theory, had occupied centre-stage. Traditionally, *Metropolis* had been seen as a love story between Freder and Maria, with all the complications and delays of classical Hollywood plotting, where Freder can only win 'the girl' by defeating the Father, which he does by first taking the side of the workers in their struggle, and then, by engaging in a proxy fight with the 'bad' father, Rotwang, over the possession of the Mother. Yet the references to Hel, now that they have been put back, make the real Maria the symbolic double of Freder's mother, as well as Rotwang's lost love and Fredersen's wife. The false Maria is the 'other woman', *femme fatale*, whore and rabble-rouser. Centred on the absent mother, and thereby multiplying the father-son relationships, the intrigue transforms the woman into an object of desire without having to acknowledge her sexuality, a strategy typical of narratives constructed around male narcissism. For Rotwang, Maria is a substitute of the dead Hel, symbolised in the robot, itself a phallic representation of Rotwang's missing hand; for Freder, she is the mother he never knew; and, for his father, the woman that can be controlled and

manipulated wholly as image. In other words, *Metropolis's* darker fantasies could be psychoanalytically decoded: Freder's castration anxiety and the fetishised image of woman did indeed receive ample textual, as well as contextual attention.⁷⁸ In his influential essay 'The Vamp and the Machine', Andreas Huyssen took up two traditional Weimar motifs, the anxious male and the intellectuals' technophobic cultural pessimism. His central thesis was that the film manages an ingeniously original 'resolution' to these two complexes by constructing a fable in which the (culturally recent) fear of 'technology out of control' is mapped onto the (more archaic) fear of 'female sexuality out of control'. The move at the ideological level has its stylistic correspondence: the characters' language of Expressionist pathos is eventually contained by the *Neue Sachlichkeit* cool of the machine aesthetics.⁷⁹

Huyssen saw the robot's female gender as a conservative counter-strategy: through the false Maria, *Metropolis* demonises female sexuality, and her threat justifies the male fantasy of strong leadership, needed to keep the forces of the feminised masses as well as of a potentially destructive technology under firm control. In a society where paternal authority had been undermined by the lost war and the humiliating conditions of the subsequent peace, such a scenario was anti-socialist and anti-feminist, but served deep-seated collective psychic needs. This is Kracauer updated, backed by an impressive historical survey of the gendering of technology in German art and literature from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. It explains why Freder is weak, ineffectual, never quite at the right place at the right time, and why, despite charging impulsively with his head thrust forward, he frequently clutches at his heart or backs off in horror at what he sees. Huyssen's argument, on the other hand, downplays the Oedipal drama around Freder, who – via the robot Maria – realises that he has two father figures, as well as two maternal imagos, the saintly and the sexualised one. His personal quest unfolds in the direction of having to rid himself of both Rotwang and the robot, symbolising the disruptive doubles troubling his male identity. Only once this task is accomplished can he function as mediator, effectively having taken over from his father the role of the adult male, subject to his society's symbolic order. In the course of this, Freder has to bring his inhuman, de-sexualised father back into the community of feeling, which happens when Fredersen begins to show anxiety for his



Freder, stunned by the man-eating Moloch

son, down on the Cathedral steps, rather than continuing to shut himself up in his grief for Hel, high above the city. He, too, like Rotwang is motivated by the absent Hel, whose loss he represses by asking the wizard to create a woman, outwardly enticing like a *femme fatale*, but inwardly calculating like a man. Another reading of this plot point is offered by Anton Kaes:

Who, then, is left out of [the] harmonious ending? It is Rotwang [...], dressed like an Eastern Jew or like Rabbi Loew in Paul Wegener's 1920s *The Golem* [... and] the female robot, who is burnt at the stake. Eliminating the double threat of a 'scheming Jewish scientist' and the new woman as *femme fatale* (both marked as menacing outsiders) means, within the narrative logic of the film, eliminating the archetypes of cold rationality and uncontrollable sexuality, both seen as mortal dangers to the spirit of the community. What remains is a transformed community that again embraces technology that is now free, the film insinuates, from 'Jewish control' and infused instead with German spirituality.⁸⁰

Kaes's terms echo those of Kriegk, but once again, with a kind of figure/ground reversal as to the film's ideological meaning, proving Kaes's other point, namely that a 'dialectic of modernity' runs through almost all cultural manifestations of Weimar Germany, making attributions of political bias slippery. What remains remarkable about *Metropolis* is once again its power to compress this dialectic – made up of so many contradictory motifs and themes – into one story-line.

5

'METROPOLIS', MORODER AND SOUND

If the logic of these successive critical moves is followed through, it comes as something of a surprise to realise that a quite different reading of *Metropolis* has emerged since the mid-80s. Resolutely turning away from anxious males, man-eating machines and *femmes fatales*, from the masses, fascism and the class-struggle, the 80s and 90s have made the city itself the main protagonist: the mega-city not so much of the future, but the vanishing point of all contemporary urbanist fantasies of entertainment spaces and spectacle environments. These mega-cities in turn have spawned their own mutant bodies, so that the undisputed star of the film has become the robot, no longer called by that name, but morphed into the 'replicant' and 'cyborg': the metal-sheathed Madonna-virgin in Rotwang's lab is now a post-human, post-gender figure of ambiguous, but ultimately positive appeal, prototype of the female rock star and the pop-performer. The reversal suggests that by the turn of the century we have ceased to fear technology as invasive, so deeply has it penetrated into the spheres of subjectivity and sexuality. Instead, men and women seem happy to acquire as prosthetic extensions of their selves all manner of technical devices, domesticated in the culture of the 'personal' gadget and exoticised in the mode of performative display.

The most persuasive manifestations of this new take on technology and subjectivity are on the whole found in the cinema itself: the many references to icons, images or scenes from *Metropolis* in such 'modern classics' as *Batman Returns* (1992) and *Star Wars* (1977), *Brazil* (1985), *Terminator II* (1991), *Se7en* (1995), *Dark City* (1998) and *The Fifth Element* (1997). Above all Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) presents a remarkably faithful and yet topically transformed reprise of the basic story of *Metropolis*,⁸¹ making it the inevitable precursor of a post-60s, but also post-Fordist and post-colonial, vision of the mega-city as corporate state, driven by the globalising forces of migrant labour, mass entertainment and cult religion.

Performance Pieces and Sound Spaces: Seeing Lang with Moroder's Ears
Such a turn of events positions Moroder's version of *Metropolis* at a pivotal point, no longer merely between archival restoration and