

Anton Kaes, “Metropolis: City, Cinema, Modernity,”
in Timothy O. Benson (ed.), *Expressionist Utopias: Paradise, Metropolis, Architectural Fantasy* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1993): 146-165.

One of the crucial antinomies of art today is that it was to be and must be squarely utopian, as social reality increasingly impedes utopia, while at the same time it should not be utopian so as not to be found guilty of administering comfort and illusion. If the utopia of art were actualized, art would come to an end.

Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*¹

OPENING NIGHT

On January 10, 1927, all of Berlin's forty newspapers were abuzz with anticipation and excitement. *Metropolis*, the monumental new film by Fritz Lang, one and a half years in the making, was finally to open following an unprecedented advertising campaign that had run for several months. Everyone must have known by then that *Metropolis* was the most expensive and ambitious European film production to date, with an unheard-of cost of 53 million Reichsmark (more than three times its budgets); that its shooting ratio was 1:300 (with more than one million meters of film exposed); and that it employed thirty-six thousand extras, including seventy-five hundred children and one thousand unemployed whose heads had been shared by one hundred hairdressers for a scene that in the final cut lasted less than a minute. “A film of titanic dimensions,” “the greatest film ever made, one of the most eternal artworks of all times,” an “Uber-film,” and other slogans promised a film that could compete with such American high-culture spectacles as D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Intolerance* (1916) or Raoul Walsh's three-hour extravaganza, *The Thief of Baghdad* (1924), which had been shown in Berlin just a few years earlier.

Metropolis was also eagerly awaited as a sequel to Lang's successful megaproduction of 1924, the two-part *Die Nibelungen* (The Nibelungs), which established him as the most daring filmmaker of the 1920s both in visual style and ideological ambition. Dedicated to the German people, *Die Nibelungen* translated the archetypal German myth into stunning images of architectural excess, flaunting gigantic medieval castles and complete prehistoric forests made of concrete.² The son of an architect, Lang, who had studied painting before he turned to filmmaking, infused all of his films with a rich spatial imagination; he molded his characters and their fictional world to fit his architectural design. Not surprisingly it was the big-city architecture of New York that struck him when he toured the United States in 1924. His first glimpse of the New York skyline at night from a ship near Ellis Island in fact inspired him to make *Metropolis*:

I saw a street lit as if in full daylight by neon lights and, topping them, oversized luminous advertisements moving, turning, flashing, on and off, spiraling... something that was completely new and nearly fairy-tale-like for a European in those days.... The buildings seemed to be a vertical veil, shimmering, almost weightless, a luxurious cloth hung from the dark sky to dazzle, distract, and hypnotize. At night the city did not give the impression of being alive; it lived as illusions lived. I knew then that I had to make a film about all of these sensations.³

Upon his return Lang's wife, the novelist and screenwriter Thea von Harbou, furnished him with a script that envisioned a futuristic city of the year 2000 as the setting for a story that dramatized the latent social, sexual, and aesthetic conflicts of the 1920s. Serialized in the magazine *Das illustrierte Blatt* (The illustrated paper) and published as a novel at the time of the film's premiere, von Harbou's narrative, like Lang's film, extended over a broad intellectual terrain, touching on almost every issue that was discussed during the Weimar period. Placed in the artistic and social context of the modern era, *Metropolis* is janus-faced, looking back to the rebellious Expressionist avant-garde and looking ahead to quiet submission under a fascist leader. The film displays the modernist dimension in fascism and the fascist dimension in modernism; it creates a site where modernism clashes with modernity.

After its premiere at the Ufa Palast am Zoo, which was attended by twenty-five hundred guests, among them the Reichskanzler and the leaders of finance and industry, *Metropolis* played at the refurbished Ufa Pavilion at the Nollendorfplatz for several months. The theater's exterior walls were covered with a gleaming silver coating. Brilliantly shimmering at night and faintly glistening during the day, the building radiated an eerie otherworldliness. Advertising gimmick as well as technological feat, the silvery theater projected a modernity associated with metal machinery. Futuristic technology was displayed not only in the film's fictional world but also outside, in the public space, which thus became an extension of the movie set. Upon approaching the theater, Berliners were also confronted with a gigantic steel sculpture that had been taken from the film set and mounted above the entrance. The gonglike sculpture represented a beating heart, offering a humanistic counterpoint to the cold, mechanical appearance of the exterior walls. The film's central conflict between machinelike modernity and the sentimentality of the heart, was alluded to well before one entered the theater.

METROPOLIS THE FILM

Metropolis, the event, clearly overshadowed *Metropolis*, the film. After a yearlong barrage of advertising and publicity, expectations were so great that probably no film could fulfill them. The papers on the morning following the premiere were almost unanimous in their criticism, pointing out the glaring contradiction between the film's strikingly innovative visual style and its atavistic, if not reactionary ideology. The utopian solution to the plight of the working class (namely, to be oppressed by a kinder, gentler management) seemed either too facile or too cynical, and the Expressionist love story (oedipal son rebels against rich father to win the hand of a working-class girl) seemed incongruous with the technical fetishism characteristic of this film as of all science fiction films,

"There is altogether too much of *Metropolis*," the exasperated film critic of *Life* commented when the film opened in New York in March 1927, only two months after its premiere in Berlin, "too much scenery, too many people, too much plot and too many platitudinous ideas."⁴ It is true that intertextual references and resonances abound. The set design, for instance, runs the gamut from abstract cityscapes in the tradition of the Futurist architect Antonio Sant'Elia to cavernous Christian catacombs, from Art Deco interiors to the mythical Tower of Babel, from the abstract moving machine parts at the beginning of the film to the Gothic cathedral at the end. It was as if Erich Kettelhut, the set designer, were presenting his own entry in the famous architectural competition of 1921-22, in which more than a hundred architects (among them Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Hans Poelzig, and Hans Scharoun) presented plans for a *Turmhaus* (skyscraper), the ultimate emblem of modernity, at the Friedrichstrasse station.⁵ And Kettelhut's plan, unlike those of the architects, was actually realized. The film

reaches back into the mythical past and forward into the year 2000; its buildings stretch to the sky, and its lower reaches go deep into the bowels of the earth. This overdrawn vertical structure in the tradition of Expressionist architecture is meant to underscore the contrast between the wealthy, in their tuneless pleasure gardens high above, and the working class, languishing in subterranean darkness, where time is measured in ten-hour shifts.

The bodies of the workers, depersonalized to the point of blending into the film's architectural design, are choreographed in the tradition of the agitprop and *Sprechchor* theater of Erwin Piscator, forming what Siegfried Kracauer has called a "mass ornament," in which the individual is radically submerged in highly structured formations. Kracauer saw the same process at work in the marching columns of the military as well as in the synchronized dancing style of the popular American girl revues, which mesmerized Berlin in the mid-1920s.⁶ These lavish revues often featured more than one hundred dancers, all performing identical movements; they were, in his words, veritable "girl machines."⁷ Less than a decade later Leni Riefenstahl would organize the masses similarly in her documentary of the Nazi Party Congress, *Triumph des Willen* (Triumph of the Will, 1935).

"*Metropolis*, the city of the future," proclaimed the advertising material sent to movie theaters in 1927, "is the city of eternal social peace—the city of cities in which there is no animosity, no hatred, but only love and understanding."⁸ Having gone into production only six years after the failed workers' revolution of 1918-19, *Metropolis* is clearly utopian in its keen desire for social peace. While it was true that relations between the classes had become relatively stable following the hyperinflation of 1923-24, the reconciliation between labor and management at the conclusion of the film still seemed like a happy ending made in Hollywood. In an interview published in the 1960s, Lang recalled: "The main thesis was Mrs. Lang's but I am least fifty percent responsible because I made the film, You cannot make a social-conscious picture in which you say that the intermediary between the hand and the brain is the heart—I mean that's a fairy tale—definitely. But I was very interested in machines."⁹

MACHINE AESTHETICS

"But I was very interested in machines." Lang's statement reveals precisely his contribution to the novel's predictable love story. In fact, the machine represents the underlying metaphor that places the film within the 1920s discourse on modernity and technology. The city, the workers' bodies, and the film itself are all associated with the machine. The city draws its energy from machines below ground; lights flicker, and flashes of lightning shoot across the sky after the workers destroy the gigantic generator that powers the city. And the city itself is organized like a machine that self-destructs as soon as any part malfunctions. When the workers rebel against their dehumanized status, they are presented as malfunctioning cogs in the city's machinery. Thus management's plan to replace them with robots is only logical: "Machines will be the workers of the future," proclaims Rotwang, the cabalistic scientist, voicing a utopian sentiment already uttered in Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's first Futurist manifesto.

Metropolis begins with an abstract montage of machinery in motion, set against tall skyscrapers that fill the entire frame. Close-ups of moving pistons and a turbine engine turning in opposite directions build to a crescendo as more gears and movements are incorporated. The sequence is punctuated by the intercut image of a ten-hour clock, yet another machine, indicating the imminent start of a new shift. The steam whistle sounds, releasing the pressure that has built up, and—as a title card announces—a new shift begins. These machines move by themselves; we do not know what they produce or generate, nor do we know who set them in motion.

This fascination with mechanization, which Lang shared with the Russian Constructivists and Fernand Léger (whose film *Ballet mécanique* (Mechanical ballet) appeared in 1924), also found expression in the work of Ernst Jünger, who hailed the cold elegance and metallic energy of the impersonal machine. In 1925 Jünger wrote: "Standing in great glass-roofed halls, amid pistons and gleaming flywheels, where the mercury columns of manometers rose and fell, the red dials of dynamometers quivered against the white marble of wall panels, we sensed that some surplus lived and breathed there, a luxury, an excess of energy, a will to transform all of life into energy."¹⁰ This fusion of technology and vitalistic Nietzschean *Lebensphilosophie* (life philosophy) corresponds to what Joseph Goebbels would later call "*stählerne Romantik*" (steely romanticism). It was an intoxicating mixture. Jünger and Goebbels—and, one might add, Lang—reinvested modernity with the mythical dimension that had been repressed since the eighteenth century,

"Ours is the first generation to begin to reconcile itself to the machine and to see in it not only the useful but the beautiful as well," Jünger wrote in 1925, referring to the front generation of World War I, which experienced and survived the new symbiosis of human being and machine in the trenches. This generation was one that "builds machines and for whom machines are not dead iron but rather an organ of power, which it dominates with cold reason and blood."¹¹ In his view the war transformed a group of individuals into a cohesive mass that left behind the "gray, frightful world of utilitarianism" for the sake of higher values, community, and primordial passion.

Wartime mobilization, in which the soldier sacrificed his individual freedom to the demands of autocratic planning, also seemed the ideal model for industrial production: it was Jünger's contention, as expressed in his 1932 book-length treatise *Der Arbeiter* ("The worker"), that one day the worker would in fact become a worker-soldier of the type depicted in *Metropolis*. Jünger's futuristic project blended feudal imagery of service and sacrifice with a modern celebration of efficiency and vitality.

It was precisely the war, however, that also showed the destructive potential of modern technology, and it was the experience of bombing raids, machine-gun fire, and poison gas (invented and first used by Germans in 1917) that informed the deep split in the 1920s between technology and humanity. As Jünger put it:

The war battle is a frightful competition of industries, and victory is the success of the competitor that managed to work faster and more ruthlessly. Here the era from which we come shows its cards. The domination of the machine over man, peacetime had already begun to shake the economic and social order, emerges in a deadly fashion. Here the style of a materialistic generation is uncovered, and technology celebrates a bloody triumph. Here a bill is paid, one that seemed old and forgotten.¹²

In 1927, more than eight years after the war was over, the bill was still being paid. The images of large numbers of men in dark uniforms shuffling along in formation in *Metropolis* must have evoked memories of soldiers marching off to the front. It was the first modern war in which machines (from machine guns to bomber planes) decided the outcome. The consequences of World War I—thirteen million dead, eleven million crippled—were not forgotten by the mid-1920s. Millions of veterans with prostheses and mechanical body parts—half machine, half

human—walked the streets, as we know from photographs and from George Grosz's paintings and drawings.¹³ The war and its aftermath provided the ultimate context for modernism, *Metropolis* offers a hallucinatory vision of the relationship between humanity and machine. The gigantic turbine that dominates the machine room transforms itself before the horrified eyes of Freder into the gaping jaws of a monster, identified in a title card as the biblical god Moloch. Taking the visual motif of the man-eating machine from the famous 1914 Italian film *Cabiria*, the film uses superimposition to make the machine take on the features of a fuming god.¹⁴ This sudden metamorphosis reveals *Metropolis*'s underlying ideology, which associates machines with man-eating monsters and the inventor Rotwang with black magic. Reminiscent in both dress and demeanor of Rabbi Loew in Paul Wegener's film *Der Golem* (The golem, 1920), Rotwang displays on his door and in his laboratory a five-pointed star, a pentagram associated with the occult and only vaguely with the star of David, even though von Harbou's novel wrongly identifies it as "the seal of Solomon" (i.e., star of David). The film dramatizes Rotwang's outsider status by linking him to a tiny, bizarre-looking medieval house surrounded by huge skyscrapers. Inventor of the artificial machine-human as well as sorcerer and magician, he represents the repressed archaic and nonsynchronous dimension of modernity.

"The more plain and advanced the technology," Frost Bloch wrote in his perceptive essay "*Die Angst des Ingenieurs*" (The engineer's fear, 1929), "the more mysteriously it intersected with the old taboo region of vapors, supernatural velocity, Golem-robots, blue thunderbolts. Thus it touched what was once thought of as the realm of magic. An Edison is much closer to Doctor Faustus than to Herbert Spencer. Much of what the old fairy tales of magic promised has been realized by the most modern technology."¹⁵ Situated between fairy tale and high-tech machinery, the film medium was predestined to represent technical progress and modernization as the intrusion of the horrific and uncanny.

Like most science fiction films, *Metropolis* is highly self-conscious about the representation of technology, because it is technology that produces the special effects and tricks that have characterized the genre ever since Georges Méliès made his first science fiction film, *Le voyage dans la lune* (Trip to the moon), in 1902. It was paradoxically the status of the camera as a machine that kept film for a long time, particularly in Germany, from being admitted to the temple of art: how can a machine produce more than a mechanical reproduction of reality? The invention of moving pictures itself was seen at the time as a fiction of science, and it is no coincidence that H. G. Wells's classic science fiction novel *The Time Machine* appeared in 1895, the same year moving pictures were inaugurated.¹⁶

In what is probably the most stunning scene in *Metropolis*, Rotwang's transformation of the robot into the likeness of Maria, mentioned only briefly in von Harbou's novel, a replica is created with the help of enormous electrical machines and chemical apparatuses, a dazzling display of both scientific and cinematic magic. The process involves machines, electricity, and chemistry—elements that are also needed to create a lifelike image on photographic film. Technology has the ability to conjure up simulacra, machine-made images indistinguishable from reality.¹⁷ When the robot performs a lascivious dance before a male audience, attracting the spectators' desiring gaze and at the same time deceiving them, she becomes an emblem for the cinema as such: a product of technical ingenuity, an incarnation of visual pleasure, and a temptress out to delude anyone who falls for the illusion of a replica.¹⁸

The split of Maria into an asexual "good" Maria and an oversexed "bad" Maria, which Andreas Huyssen has perceptively analyzed,¹⁹ can also be read as a reworking of historical

developments that von Harbou and Lang may have regarded as a threat: the emergence of emancipated and sexually liberated women as well as organized feminist activity in the mid-1920s. The robot Maria, as the "new woman," rips the social fabric asunder, inciting the workers to rebel and seducing them into self-destructive acts. Her punishment, once she is uncovered as an agent provocateur, is to be burned at the stake. The machine woman as witch: the film collapses the fear of women and machines into one. This nexus of technology, visual pleasure, simulation, and fantasy was also at the core of modern American mass culture, which, according to some cultural critics, had seduced Germany into renouncing its classical canon of high culture. While American modernity conquered the economy, culture, and life-style of the entire Western world in the 1920s, German intellectuals appeared powerless, vacillating between fascination and repulsion. Raoul Hausmann's famous sculpture, which bears a striking resemblance to the robot's head in *Metropolis*, is tellingly entitled *Mechanischer Kopf: Der Geist unserer Zeit* (Mechanical head: The spirit of our time, c. 1921).

"The number of people who see films and never read books is in the millions;" theater critic Herbert Jhering wrote in despair in 1926. "Then are all subordinated to American taste, they are made identical... The American film is the new world militarism, which inexorably marches forward. It is more dangerous than Prussian militarism because it devours not only single individuals but whole countries."²⁰ The fear that mass culture might be a secret American weapon, one that would enslave the world by distracting it, found a particular resonance in Germany, where for too long cultural identity compensated for a lack of national identity. Linked to technology, mass consumption, and mass media, American modernity became a powerful agent in the economic and cultural modernization of Germany after the war,

AMERICAN MODERNITY

"How boring Germany is," wrote Bertolt Brecht in a short diary entry dated June 18, 1920. After finding fault with all classes of German society—peasants, middle class, and intellectuals—he concluded, "Only America remains."²¹ For Brecht, as for other avant-garde writers of the early 1920s, America was the only progressive alternative to the still semifeudal life-style of Germany. America, more than Russia, was consistently represented as the New World, the alternative, the other. The relationship between Germany and America was understood as a historically momentous encounter between two radically different cultures, two ways of perceiving and interpreting the world, two divergent cultural languages and systems of signs. The Berlin avant-garde circles of Brecht and Grosz saw American mass culture as a vehicle for the radical modernization and democratization of German life and culture. American mass culture stood for Charlie Chaplin and the movies, for jazz and Charleston, for boxing and other spectator sports; above all, it represented modernity and the ideal of living in the present.

No other country embraced American modernity more feverishly than did Germany after the war. "America was a good idea," a German intellectual remarked, looking back in 1930:

It was the land of the future. It was at home in its century, We were too young to know it firsthand; nevertheless we loved it, Long enough had the glorious discipline of technology appeared only in the form of tanks, mines, poison gas, for the purpose of annihilating humankind. In America it was at the service of human life. The sympathy expressed for elevators, radio towers, and jazz demonstrated this. It was like a creed. It was the way to beat the sword into a plowshare. It was against cavalry; it was for horsepower.²²

By the mid- 1920s, however, at the beginning of a five-year period of relative political and economic stability, a noticeable shift in the image of America began to take place in Germany. It continued to represent the mass culture of jazz, sports, and cinema, but it increasingly became associated with inhuman technological progress and industrial rationalization as well. Americanism in the economic sphere meant efficiency, discipline, and control, and both the right and the left began criticizing what they considered the encroachment of instrumental rationality and cost effectiveness into all areas, including culture, which in Germany had always been defined as antithetical to the world of commerce. Adolf Halfeld, a conservative cultural critic, states this unmistakably on the cover of his polemical book *Amerika and der Amerikanismus* (America and Americanism), published in 1927, the year of *Metropolis's* release: "Indebted to tradition, the culture of Europe, in particular of Germany, is threatened by America, with its focus on materialism and the mechanization of life. Rationalization in the American example triumphs, even if it kills the human side of humankind."²³ And in 1928, when asked by the avant-garde journal *Transition* about the influence of the United States on Europe, the German poet Gottfried Benn answered: "[The American] influence is enormous. There is a group of lyric poets, who think they have composed a poem by writing 'Manhattan.' There is a group of playwrights, who think they reveal the modern drama by having the action take place in an Arizona blockhouse and by having a bottle of whiskey on the table. The entire young German literature since 1918 is working under the slogan of tempo, jazz, cinema, overseas, technical activity by emphasizing the negation of an ensemble of psychic problems."²⁴ He particularly objected to "the purely utilitarian, the mass article, the collective plan," concluding, not surprisingly, by stating, "Personally I am against Americanism." In Benn's view Americanism had conspired with communism in promoting collectivism and crass materialism at the expense of the German ideals of individualism and idealism, a polemical juxtaposition that structured the cultural debates of the Weimar era and also inscribed itself in *Metropolis*.

By the mid-1920s the term Americanism had come to signify two intricately related phenomena: scientific management of labor and industrial mass production (known as Taylorism and Fordism, respectively), on the one hand, and commercial mass culture, on the other. To speak of America was to evoke an image of a country in which economic productivity, technology, and democracy went hand in hand with a new urban culture. But to speak of America was also to conjure a nightmarish picture of a materialistic, mechanized society ruled by exploitation, commercialism, and a lowbrow mass culture cynically catering to the largest possible audience. These contradictory attitudes prevailed throughout the Weimar era, with the critical view becoming dominant after the stock market crash of 1929.

Henry Ford, car manufacturer and popular philosopher, was generally regarded as the official spokesman for American big business. His 1922 autobiography *My Life and Work* was an instant bestseller in Germany and became a bible for all those who wanted to emulate America's economic success and thus lift Germany out of its backwardness. Ford preached the gospel of scientific instrumental rationality couched in humanitarian terms. In a chapter entitled "The Terror of the Machine," he writes: "I have not been able to discover that repetitive labor injures a man in any way, I have been told by parlor experts that repetitive labor is soul- as well as body-destroying but that has not been the result of our investigations." He goes on to explain:

There were 7,882 different jobs in the factory. Of these, 949 were classified as heavy work requiring strong, able-bodied, and practically physically perfect men; 3,338 required men of ordinary physical development and strength. The

remaining 3,595 jobs were disclosed as requiring no physical exertion and could be performed by the slightest, weakest sort of men. In fact, most of them could be satisfactorily filled by women or older children. The lightest jobs were again classified to discover how many of them required the use of full faculties, and we found that 670 could be filled by legless men, 2,637 by one-legged men, 2 by armless men; 715 by one-armed men, and 10 by blind men.²⁵

Ford prides himself on the employment of the deaf and mute as well as the tubercular, who, he suggests, should be used mainly outdoors. He concludes, "Yet it is not true that men are mere machines."²⁶ Between 1912 and 1914 however, following the introduction of the assembly line, the time required to assemble a car was cut from fourteen hours to ninety-three minutes. By 1925, after further refinement and the addition of more conveyor belts, a new car rolled off the assembly line every ten seconds.

Metropolis's highly stylized, almost dancelike image of rationalized and fully alienated labor visualizes and critiques basic principles of Taylorism and Fordism: repetitive work under the dictates of the clock is bound to create pressure that can be released only in an explosive revolution, which the film represents as a natural catastrophe on the order of an earthquake or flood. Technology's repressed other returns with a vengeance.

THE DIALECTICS OF MODERNITY

The much-maligned ending of *Metropolis*—the reconciliation between capital and labor, which has been called simplistic, foolish, reactionary, and worse²⁷—is in fact an accurate expression of contradictory tendencies in the mid-1920s that have to do with German reactions to modernity, technological progress, and instrumental rationality. Modernity, in Max Weber's often-quoted definition, means above all the progressive disenchantment (*Entzauberung*) of the world, a result of myth and religion being superseded by rational and secular thought. Intertwined with the rise of capitalism, free-market economy, democracy, and mass culture, modernity had a more destabilizing effect in Germany than in France, England, and the United States because Germany lacked an established democratic tradition. Everything capitalist modernity stood for—its challenge to authority, its drive for unbridled economic competition, its disavowal of spiritual and religious values, and its commercialization of culture—collided head-on with still intact patriarchal, feudal, and authoritarian structures.

Although the German battle against modernity goes back to the mid-nineteenth century (culminating in World War I), it was the Weimar Republic, Germany's first democratically elected government, that revealed the contradictions within modernity itself. In their magisterial *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Dialectic of enlightenment, 1947), Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer voiced the suspicion that the rationality characteristic of the joint projects of enlightenment and modernity might rest on a logic of domination and oppression. Writing in the aftermath of two world wars, of Hiroshima and the holocaust, they argued that the desire to dominate nature entailed the domination of human nature; the quest for human emancipation was thus transmuted and hardened into a system of universal oppression. The legacy of the Enlightenment spirit that informed modernity meant, in short, the triumph of instrumental rationality.²⁸

Metropolis lays out a host of reactions to the nexus of modernity, capitalism, and rationality—including religion, superstition, irrationalism, sexual abandon, Expressionist

idealism, and revolutionary zeal—only to reaffirm in the end a somewhat modified instrumental rationality. Both the failed socialist revolution of 1918-19 and the successful fascist takeover in 1933 responded to forces unleashed by modernity in Germany, *Metropolis* incorporates both reactions to modernity, the failed workers' revolt (in the film cynically masterminded by capital) as well as the insidious right-wing takeover that stands for what might be called "oppression with a heart." At the end the workers again march in formation to watch their foreman shake hands with management, as Freder and Maria, the idealistic young couple, look on.

Who then is excluded from this harmonious ending? Rotwang falls to his death from the rooftop of the Gothic cathedral while fighting with Freder, and the female robot is burned at the stake. What remains is a transformed community that again embraces technology, a technology that is now free, the film insinuates, from "Jewish control" and infused instead with German spirituality. It is the kind of community (*Gemeinschaft*, not *Gesellschaft*) that reactionary modernists such as Jünger, Werner Sombart, and Oswald Spengler had emphatically valorized in their writings throughout the 1920s. *Metropolis's* linkage of modern technology, cultural pessimism, and totalitarian ideology prefigures the National Socialists' resolve to emancipate technology from capitalist exchange and "Jewish materialism."²⁹ Hitler, who once defined Aryan culture as a synthesis of "the Greek spirit and Germanic technology,"³⁰ did not oppose modernity (unlike *volkisch* ideologues). Goebbels summed up the official Nazi position on technology in a speech at the opening of the Berlin Auto Show on February 17, 1939:

National Socialism never rejected or struggled against technology. Rather, one of its main tasks was to consciously affirm it, to will it inwardly with soul, to discipline it and to place it in the service of our people and their cultural level. We live in an age that is both romantic and steel-like, that has not lost its depth of feeling. On the contrary, it has discovered a new romanticism in the results of modern inventions and technology. While bourgeois reaction was alien to and filled with incomprehension, if not outright hostility to technology, and while modern skeptics believed the deepest roots of the collapse of European culture lay in it, National Socialism understood how to take the soulless framework of technology and fill it with the rhythm and hot impulses of our time.³¹

This romanticized vision of modernity was meant to obscure the contradictions of a regime that built high-tech weapons systems while insisting on the values of blood and soil.

Metropolis's ideological trajectory is part of a larger debate among German sociologists and philosophers about the "intellectual and spiritual revolution," which, Ernst Troeltsch stated in 1921, was a "revulsion against drill and discipline, against the ideology of success and power...against intellectualism...against the big *Metropolis* and the unnatural...against the rule of money and prestige."³² This reaction against capitalist modernity was itself perceived as revolutionary and utopian in the 1920s. Troeltsch put his hopes in the youth movement, and it is no coincidence that *Metropolis* also places the task of spiritual renewal in the hands of the young.

Lang's *Metropolis* offers one of the most fascinating and complex contributions to the vigorous 1920s discourse on modernity. Its message is ambivalent, suggesting that the undoing of modernization and technological progress would bring only self-destruction. This ambivalence is evident in the images that fetishize technology even as they display its cataclysmic power. The machine is the object of fascination and terror, of savagery and myth; its

faceless power contrasts with the individualism of the German Expressionist narrative, in which a son rebels against his father and an entire industrial system. Clearly the Expressionist utopia of Georg Kaiser's Gas plays and Ernst Toiler's *Die Maschinenstürmer* (The machine wreckers), which advocate revolution and a radically anti-technological humanism, had itself become dystopian in the context of the modern industrial society that Germany unquestionably was in 1927. Still it was impossible to dismiss utopian Expressionism, with its idealistic, impractical, and old-fashioned emphasis on the heart (and, in a wider sense, on community) and its rebellion against unrestrained instrumental rationality. The idealism of *Metropolis* should be seen, however, not as a "fault" of the film but as a historically explainable and valid attempt to fight those tendencies of modernity that have undeniably shown themselves to be cruel and dehumanizing. Viewed in its historical context, the film thus dramatizes the reaction of German modernism against an overpowering modernity, one that had undermined and negated its emancipatory and utopian potential.

NOTES

¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 4.

² See Sabine Hake, "Architectural Hi/stories: Fritz Lang and The Nibelungs," *Wide Angle* 12 (July 1990): 38-57.

³ Fritz Lang, "Was ich in Amerika sah," *Film-Kurier*, 11 December 1924.

⁴ R. E. Sherwood, "The Silent Drama: *Metropolis*," *Life*, 24 March 1927, p. 24.

⁵ See Florian Zimmermann, ed., *Der Schrei nach dem Turmhaus: Der Ideenwettbewerb Hochhaus am Bahnhof Friedrichstrasse Berlin, 1921/22* (Berlin: Argon, 1988).

⁶ "The structure of the mass ornament reflects that of the general contemporary situation. Since the principle of the capitalist production process does not stem purely from nature, it must destroy the natural organisms which it regards either as a means or as a force of resistance. Personality and national community perish when calculability is demanded" (Siegfried Kracauer, "The Mass Ornament," *New German Critique* 5 [Spring 1975]: 69).

⁷ See Siegfried Kracauer, "Girls and Krise," *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 2-April 1931. The workers' automatized movements also recall the "mechanical ballets" performed at the Bauhaus theater (Oskar Schlemmer's *Triadisches Ballett* [Triadic ballet], for instance) in the early and mid-1920s.

⁸ Publicity brochure for *Metropolis* (1927).

⁹ Cited in Peter Bogdanovich, *Fritz Lang in America* (New York: Praeger, 1967), p. 124. For the production history of *Metropolis* and interviews with Lang, see also Fred Gehler and Ulrich Kasten, *Fritz Lang: Die Stimme von Metropolis* Berlin: Henschel, 1990; Enno Patalas, "Metropolis, Scene 103," *Camera Obscura* 15 (Fall 1986): 165-73.

¹⁰ Ernst Jünger, "Feuer and Blut: Ein kleiner Ausschnitt aus einer grossen Schlacht" (1925), in *Tagebücher* (Berlin, 1926; Stuttgart: Klett, 1960), p. 465; see also Klaus Theweleit, "The Soldierly Body the Technological y \lachine. and the Fascist Aesthetic," in *Male Fantasies, vol. 2, Male Bodies: Psychoanalyzing the White Terror*, trans. Erica Carter and Chris Turner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), pp. 197-210.

¹¹ Quoted in Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 79-81.

¹² Jünger, "Feuer and Blut," p. 466.

¹³ See Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). PP. 443-59.

¹⁴ Chaplin alludes to this motif in a more playful, fairytale-like way in a scene from *Modern Times* (1936) in which the machine he operates first devours him and then spits him out.

¹⁵ Ernst Bloch, "Die Angst des Ingenieurs," in *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 9 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1965), p. 353; see also idem, "Nonsynchronism and the Obligation to Its Dialectics," *New German Critique* 11 (Spring 1977): 23-38.

¹⁶ On *Metropolis* within the context of science fiction and utopia in Germany, see Peter S. Fisher, *Fantasy and Politics: Visions of the Future in the Weimar Republic* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991); Gotz Muller, *Gegenwelten: Die Utopie in der deutschen Literatur* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1980), pp. 212-17.

¹⁷ On the importance of the motif of the machine-woman in Auguste de Villiers de L'Isle-Adam's 1886 novel *L'ève future* for cinema, see Annette Michelson, "On the Eve of the Future: The Reasonable Facsimile and the Philosophical Toy," in *October: The First Decade, 1976-1986*, ed. Annette Michelson et al. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), pp. 417-34; Raymond Bellour,

"Ideal Hadaly," *Camera Obscura* 15 (Fall 1986): 111-34.

¹⁸ For a discussion of the sexual politics of *Metropolis* in general and the nexus between machine and female sexuality in particular, see Andreas Huyssen, "The Vamp and the Machine," in *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 65-81; Patricia Mellencamp, "Oedipus and the Robot in *Metropolis*," *Enclitic* 5 (Spring 1981): 20; Stephen Jenkins, "Lang: Fear and Desire," in *Fritz Lang* London: British Film Institute, 1981); Roger Dadoun, "*Metropolis*: Mother-City'--Hitler," *Camera Obscura* 15 (Fall 1986): 137-64; Peter Wollen, "Cinema / Americanism / the Robot," *New Formations*, no. 8 (Summer 1989): 7-34.

¹⁹ See Huyssen, "The Vamp and the Machine."

²⁰ Herbert Jhering, "UFA and Buster Keaton." in *Von Reinhardt bis Brecht*, vol. z (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1961), p. 509.

²¹ Bertolt Brecht, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 20 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1967), p. 10.

²² Hans A. Joachim, "Romane aus Amerika," *Die neue Rundschau* 41 (September 1930): 397-98. On the extensive debate over cultural Americanism, see *Weimarer Republik: Manifeste and Dokumente zur deutschen Literatur, 1918-1933*, ed. Anton Kaes (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1983), pp. 265-86. see also Anton Kaes, "Mass Culture and Modernity: Notes toward a Social History of Early American and German Cinema," in *America and the Germans: An Assessment of a ThreeHundred-Year History*, eds. Frank Trommler and Joseph McVeigh, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), pp. 317. On Americanism in the economic sphere, see Charles S. Maier, "Between Taylorism and Technocracy: European Ideologies and the Vision of Industrial Productivity in the 1920s," *Journal of Contemporary History* 5 (April 1970): 27-61.

²³ Adolf Halfeld, *Amerika and der Amerikanismus* (Jena: Eugen Diederichs, 1927).

²⁴ Gottfried Benn, "Inquiry," *Transition* 13 (1025): 251ff; reprinted in *Gesammelte Werke* (Wiesbaden: Limes, 1968), p. 2218.

²⁵ Henry Ford, *My Life and Work* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Page, 1922), pp. 105, 108.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

²⁷ H. G. Wells, for instance, begins his 1927 review as follows: "I have recently seen the silliest film. I do not believe it would be possible to make one sillier.... It gives in one eddying concentration almost every possible foolishness, cliché, platitude, and muddlement about mechanical progress and progress in general served up with a sauce of sentimentality that is all its own" (quoted in *Authors on Film*, ed. Harry M. Geduld (Bloomington. Indiana University Press, 1972), p. 591.

²⁸ See Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Seabury Press, 1972); see also Jurgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 198-); Michael E. Zimmerman, *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity: Technology, Politics, and Art* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

²⁹ The relationship between Fritz Lang and National Socialism is still under debate. Hitler and Goebbels liked *Die Nibelungen* as well as *Metropolis* and wanted to make Lang the head of the entire Nazi film production in 1933. He declined and went to Hollywood instead. His passport shoves, however, that he actually returned to Germany on several brief sojourns after 1933 (see Costa Werner, "Fritz Lang and Goebbels: Myth and Facts," *Film Quarterly* 43 (Spring 1990): 219-27; Willi Winkler, "Ein Schlafwandler bei Goebbels," *Spiegel* 48 (26 November 1990]: 236-42).

³⁰ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* quoted in Eberhard Jackel, *Hitler's World View: A Blueprint for Power*, trans. Herbert Arnold (Middletown Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1992), p. 28.

³¹ Quoted in Herf, *Reactionary .Modernism*, p. 196.

³² Ernst Troeltsch, "Die geistige Revolution," *Kunstwart and Kulturwart* 34 (January 1921): 231; translated in Fritz Ringer, *The Decline of the German Mandarins: The German Academic Community, 1890-1933* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969).