

some truth, what is hard to explain is why this rancour against *Metropolis* continues to be renewed, continuing to generate new reviews and essays. The enigma to be explained is not the controversy the film inspires, but its continued popularity, its constant citation in pop culture (Madonna's video, *Express Yourself*, a London musical, the film *The Bodyguard*) as well as in highly regarded cultural sources (Rotwang's mechanical hand on *Dr. Strangelove*, the machine room explosion in Philip Glass and Robert Wilson's *Eisenstein on the Beach*, the references in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*).

But if *Metropolis* has remained a topic of heated discussion since its release, its reception has hardly been stable. Its current popularity cannot be attributed simply to a disco makeover for its re-release by Giorgio Moroder in 1984. Anyone, like myself, teaching the film over the decades noticed a sudden rise in student enthusiasm for it — with or without Pat Benatar and Loverboy on the soundtrack. The very element that caused most critics to abjure it, the naive resolution of the heart mediating between head and hand, was offered as the final words of wisdom in Madonna's *Express Yourself* video. Although I will not argue this point fully here, I would claim that *Metropolis* was received as a postmodernist work in the 1980s. A new sensibility embraced its blend of kitsch and monumentality, mechanical sexuality and over-the-top melodrama, powerful political critique matched by cartoon solutions, all conveyed through its exquisite sets and masterful visual style. In a postmodernist context *Metropolis*'s contradictions could be seen, not as an inherent flaw, but as the sign of a work divided against itself (a fissure attributable, claimed many, to the Harbou/Lang collaboration — with the good due to Lang and the bad to 'that Nazi bitch'). Its schizoid nature found a home in the 1980s, on a level of appropriation, if not of critical evaluation, and its overt employment of allegory was intuitively, if rarely articulately, embraced by audiences and artists.

We are also faced with the irony that the best-known and most popular of Lang's silent films survives in the most incomplete form of any of his major films. *Metropolis* was Lang and Ufa's super-film, the most elaborate and expensive film made in Germany to that date and one which was to crown Germany's challenge to Hollywood as an international maker of films. Lang and Harbou had already made the claim with *Die Nibelungen* that by drawing on its past Germany could produce a cinema that would rival and surpass Hollywood. With *Metropolis*, Lang claimed, the technology of motion pictures which the Americans understood pragmatically would be given a 'spirit', a meaning and significance Hollywood films lacked.³ This was a common claim by German technicians and engineers from the Weimar into the Third Reich, that German technology was superior to other nations because it was based on spiritual values.⁴ However, *Metropolis* so overspent its budget that it drove Ufa into the red (and ultimately into financial dependence on Hollywood corporations), and the mixed reviews *Metropolis* received at its opening led to the cutting of the film for its international release and for its secondary release in Germany.⁵ Unfortunately no print of the original release was preserved, and the print most commonly circulated is based, ironically, on cuts made for the American distribution of the film.

The cuts were drastic. The second version reviewed by German censors for general release was nearly a quarter shorter.⁶ The American version made some additional cuts. Whole subplots (such as Georgi the worker's trip to Yoshiwara, the pleasure quarter) were cut, characters eliminated (Desertus the monk, head of the sect of gothics, Joh Fredersen's mother) as well as the back story of Joh and Rotwang's rivalry over Hel, Freder's mother. Attempts to restore the film have recovered a number of previously missing scenes and stray shots, but still more than twenty

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Metropolis.

The Dance of Death

The Allegory of the Machine

Allegorists, like alchemists, hold dominion over an infinite transformation of meaning, in contrast to the one, true, word of God.

Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*¹

Metropolis remains the albatross around Lang's neck, condemned, or at least partially condemned, by critics and film-makers (including, at points, Lang himself).² Since its first release, every generation seems to have found a new reason to be suspicious of this film, whether for its naive romanticism about solving the problems of technology; its harbouring of — if not Nazi sympathies — at least a susceptibility to Nazi ideologies; or its blatant gender stereotyping. While all these attacks hold



per cent of the film originally released has disappeared. Therefore, I will discuss Thea von Harbou's novel in some depth in this chapter, since it reflects much of the original design of the film.

I detour here into the contemporary reception of this film because, of all the films I deal with in this section, *Metropolis* flaunts its allegorical emblems and devices most flagrantly. Just as Benjamin, writing his book on the baroque *Trauerspiel* in Weimar Germany felt that this seemingly archaic form held the key to the contemporary use of allegory in Expressionist art, I think the embrace of the allegorical in the postmodern has facilitated the contemporary revival of Weimar art and cinema.

Both *Der müde Tod* and *Die Nibelungen* rise to moments of emblematic allegorical clarity out of other narrative forms, the *Märchen* and the epic. The narrative structure of each film seems initially to be determined by the fairytale or the legendary epic, but the importance of figural emblems, especially cued through the visionary scenes, reveals a more dominant allegorical intent. In both these films the allegorical revelation is closely tied to the discovery of the Destiny-machine and the figure of death. It is the exposing of the mechanical pattern and force beneath the apparent tale or legend that lifts these films into the allegorical mode. In *Metropolis* allegory, as well as the theme of the mechanical, lies on the surface, with the science fiction genre serving simply as the modern genre most attuned to the allegorical mode. Harbou makes clear in the epigram to her novel version of *Metropolis* that her tale is not intended as a simple prognostication of the future, but as a figural commentary on the present (a fact underscored by the date given for the action, 2026 AD, one century from the time of the film's completion). 'This book is not of today or of the future. It tells of no place. ... It has a moral grown on the pillar of understanding.' The no-time, no-place of *Metropolis* open into the realm of significance and instruction: the mode of allegory.

How does allegory as a mode function to bend representation or narrative towards the task of significance and instruction, and particularly how does silent cinema take on this task? To answer this we need to catch allegory at work. The classical definition of allegory saw it as a development of the trope, the turn of phrase that deviates from literal meaning (allegory in Greek means 'inversion' or 'speaking other than one seems to speak'). But as developed in classical rhetoric, allegory does not serve as a simple synonym for a trope, but as its extension. Thus rhetorician Richard Lanham defines allegory as 'extending a metaphor through an entire speech or passage'.⁸ Angus Fletcher offers the classical distinction between trope and figure, trope being a play on single words, an isolated instance, while figure deals with larger groups of words.⁹ An allegory, then, could be defined as a text which uses tropes by grouping them into larger figures which regulate the whole text.

If Benjamin's *Origin of German Tragic Drama* supplies the treatment of allegory both most contemporary and most revelatory for Lang's silent films, the most thorough contemporary study of the forms of the mode is Angus Fletcher's *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*. While Benjamin's work reaches a greater depth in contemplating the melancholia of allegory, and I will return to it at the end of this chapter, Fletcher's work replicates a wider range of allegorical structures that allow us to analyse *Metropolis* in detail. A masterful work of critical syntheses and originality, Fletcher's approach to allegory supplies us with several essential tools for making sense out of Lang and Harbou's film. A great deal of the disfavoured which *Metropolis* inspires comes simply from an unfamiliarity with the allegorical mode,

an unfamiliarity which often masquerades as a judgment about taste and therefore obscures the nature of Harbou and Lang's film. Fletcher's analysis of the form of allegory allows us to decode the enigmas of characterisation, acting and plot resolution in this film, and its strange melange of attraction and repulsion, its blending of sexuality and the mechanical.

It is important to remember that modern critical commentary on allegory began as condemnation, first in the work of Goethe who denounced the allegory in favour of a new understanding, originating in Kant, of the innate power of the symbol.¹⁰ For Goethe the symbol puts us in contact with an idea in an indirect and mysterious way, while allegory remains conventional and rational. Bringing these concepts into an English tradition, Coleridge perhaps said it most clearly when he translated the opposition between allegory and symbol into the conflict between the organic and the mechanical.¹¹ Whether realist or romantic, nearly all of nineteenth-century aesthetics aligns itself with the organic form as opposed to the mechanical. In contrast, silent cinema – the 'art of the machine' – understood its affinity to allegory, and Lang perhaps more strongly than any other director.

Metropolis is the allegory of the future as the triumph of the machine. And the machine in a variety of manifestations becomes the central allegorical figure of the film. I have already discussed the key visionary scene in *Metropolis*, Freder's vision in which he sees the central machine of the city transform itself into a demon, the cannibalistic, pedophagic god, Moloch. I will return to this scene later. But in many ways even more central to the film's allegorical structure is the figure of the robot. Fletcher in his attempt to explain allegory's determinedly non-psychological, non-realist and non-organic approach to characterisation first describes allegorical characters as demonic, as if each were possessed by a monomaniacal force. However, he finally declares:

The perfect allegorical agent is not a man possessed by a daemon, but a robot, a Talus, and finally after certain prototypical creations, as in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, this type of agent is fully exploited by a twentieth-century author, Karel Capek whose play *R.U.R.* makes robots out of creatures who look exactly like human beings.¹²

Although *R.U.R.* (the play which introduced the term 'robots' and chronicled their revolt against their human masters and inventors) undoubtedly influenced Harbou and Lang's image of the robot in *Metropolis*, Fletcher could have easily replaced Capek with Lang. The image of the robot dominates *Metropolis*, not only in the false Maria created by inventor Rotwang, but also in the performance styles of the workers (in their dehumanised mechanical actions as soulless slaves – as well as their chaotic 'machine-gone-wild' riot of destruction instigated by the robot Maria). In many ways the robot (and the demonic aspect of the mechanical it represents) takes over *Metropolis*'s imagery and action, diverting energy from its rival parables of order and rationality or spiritual awakening which attempt to contain this demonic energy.

Metropolis stands, therefore, as the Lang film that is most blatantly allegorical. Here he wrestles most directly with the demon of allegory and in a sense overcomes it, never returning to the form as explicitly again (although never abandoning it entirely). But the victory may be pyrrhic. Likewise *Metropolis* stages man's encounter with the machine front and centre, there is no need for anyone to have a visionary revelation of the machine pulsing beneath the surface; it stands as manifest content.

It is the over-explicit nature of this film that makes many viewers, trained to hunt out subterranean meanings and organic symbols, so uncomfortable. But if Lang and Harbou's allegory at points appears too obvious, the process of reading it reveals, as in Freder's vision, demonic energies that pulse beneath the tropes and subvert any final comfortable interpretation.

The Universal Language of Silent Film

The internationalism of filmic language will become the strongest instrument available for the mutual understanding of peoples, who otherwise have such difficulty understanding each other in all too many languages.

Fritz Lang, 'The Future of the Feature Film in Germany'¹³

Every allegory, and certainly every modern allegory, foregrounds the act of reading and even offers a lesson in how it should be read. *Metropolis* offers its lesson as instruction not only in the act of reading allegorical figures but in the specifically cinematic creation of tropes or hieroglyphics. Lang demonstrates the work the film-maker undertakes to wrench the image away from simple reference. The tutor text for this mode is revealed appropriately as a story within a story, a visual parable that translates a sermon delivered by the film's moral centre, the female prophetess Maria: the story of the Tower of Babel.

The selection of this particular Biblical text for visual translation and ideological re-interpretation marks *Metropolis*'s culmination of the millennial ambitions of the silent film. Vachel Lindsay's invocation of the hieroglyphic as the foundation of a new film language was made within a broad millennial claim for cinema as a new language for mankind: 'The invention of the photoplay is as great a step as was the invention of picture writing in the stone age.'¹⁴ In a particularly American reinterpretation of the hieroglyphic, which had been traditionally understood as an enigmatic, priestly language sheltered by its obscurity from the understanding of the profane, Lindsay saw the motion picture as a mode of iconic communication whose images where accessible to the great international masses, legible and visible at once: to see a moving picture was to understand it. However, beyond this immediate accessibility, the visual hieroglyphic for Lindsay contained layers of meaning, and pondering its 'spirit meaning' would open its viewers to a new vision of the world.¹⁵ Miriam Hansen, in her brilliant discussion of Griffith's *Intolerance*, has cannily inserted Lindsay's discussion of the hieroglyphic and the potential of film as a new language into the tradition of the universal language, a millennial concept like Lindsay's, which centred on the Biblical image of the Tower of Babel. As Hansen points out, the view of silent film as a universal language, based partly on gesture and physiognomy, found European advocates as well (such as Béla Balázs, to give an example more likely to be influential on Lang and Harbou than the American Lindsay).¹⁶

Choosing the Tower of Babel as an allegory for this new universal language of silent cinema reveals the tensions at the heart of Lang's allegory, for, as Hansen says, 'the Tower of Babel stands not only for the project of a universal language but also for its opposite, the impossibility of such a project.'¹⁷ In the Bible, it is man's hubris in building the tower whose top reaches to heaven that causes the diversity of human languages. Jehovah, witnessing a project ambitious beyond anything

humans have yet attempted, declares: 'Here they are one people with a single language and now they have started to do this; henceforward nothing they have a mind to do will be beyond their reach' (*Genesis*, chapter 11, verse 6). His confusion of the single language into multiple tongues subverts the building of the tower by divine intervention. Therefore the rebuilding of the tower, the creation of a new universal language will always carry a suggestion of titanic revolt. Harbou and Lang's retelling of the Tower of Babel parable involves, as do all of the film's numerous Biblical references, not a pietistic reference but an allegorical refashioning of the original meaning.

Maria tells the tale of the Tower of Babel to the workers of Metropolis deep within the catacombs in the depths of the city. It functions primarily as a political parable about class and power divisions, introducing Maria's central trope, one of the oldest in the history of allegory, the city-state as a human body, with workers conceived as 'hands' and planners as 'brains'. Harbou moderates the hubris of the project behind the construction of the tower by inscribing it with a motto which gives divine and human glory equal billing: 'Great is the World and its Creator. And Great is Man'. Rather than descending as divine punishment, the confusion in languages derives from a primal division in labour, as those who conceived of the tower gather labourers – hands – to realise it. The labourers do not understand the architects' noble motives, but only experience the pain of their own enslavement; while the architects have no awareness of the workers' suffering. Harbou's novel glosses this confusion in communication as a breakdown of the primal word 'Babel' into opposed meanings for each class:

'Babel!' shouted one, meaning: Divinity, Cotonation, Eternal Triumph!
'Babel!' shouted the other meaning: Hell, Slavery, Eternal Damnation!¹⁸

Harbou's re-reading of the Tower of Babel has a certain power, locating the origin of the dispersal of mankind not in divine jealousy, but in the breakdown of the unity of labour, and hence language. However, the limits of Harbou's political insight are also naturalised by her allegory: the division of labour is not questioned, nor are the power relations inherent in it revealed. Instead, it is 'natural' that the 'hands' and the 'brains' have different tasks. The only problem is one of communication.

Many of these allegorical figures were commonplace of Weimar culture which was deeply embroiled in a debate on the nature of technology and political power. Harbou most probably adopted this image, as well as many others in the film, from Oswald Spengler whose *The Decline of the West* had declared, 'the center of this artificial and complicated realm of the Machine is the organiser and manager. The mind, not the hand holds it together.'¹⁹ The portrayal of the natural masters of society as architects, planners or engineers occurs both in Weimar science fiction and in the 'reactionary modernism' of Weimar's right-wing engineers themselves.²⁰ The idea that the working classes simply needed to be informed of the planners' ideals became contented predicts the role of propaganda as a major agent of social change and consensus. As Kracauer commented, discussing the final scene of *Metropolis*, where the heart is proposed as mediator between brain and hand, '[Goebbels], too, appealed to the heart – in the interest of totalitarian propaganda.'²¹

Although parsing the reactionary and progressive elements in *Metropolis* between Lang and Harbou seems to me suspicious (and possibly sexist), the articulated moral of the film seems to lag behind the play of figural language. If generally

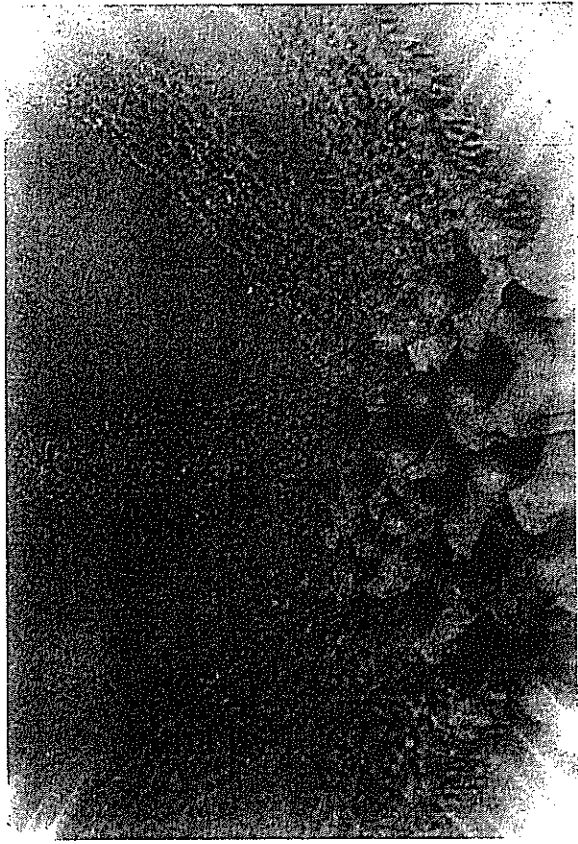
Lang can be held responsible for the visualisation of the film text, nonetheless Harbou's mastery of allegorical figures within her novel shows a figural imagination which certainly inspired the film's visual style. At the same time, the visualisation of the Babel sequence in the film, although its basic figures derive from the parable as told in Harbou's novel, serves as a demonstration of the visual tropes at the command of a film-maker as articulate as Lang.

The sequence is embedded within Maria's meeting in the catacombs. It is framed by two shots of Maria looking directly at the camera at the beginning and ending of the sequence, in one of the clearest examples of Lang's use of the look at the camera as a sign of authorship, since these images convey Maria's words. The opening shot frames Maria in medium long shot against the altar covered with tall candles. She begins the shot with her face raised, as if getting inspiration from above. She then lowers her face until her gaze meets the camera. Wide-eyed, actress Brigitte Helm speaks, as she raises her left hand in a broad gesture. In a title she announces she will tell the story of the Tower of Babel. The following shots are to be understood as visualisations of the sermon. Each shot is marked by streaks of halo-like light in their corners, which function like quotation marks, marking the images as being at a different level of reference from the images which surround them.

The composition's first image of the parable reflects the last image of Maria. Again a figure stands on a raised platform speaking to a group below him. Like Maria, he also gestures broadly as he speaks. Intertitles convey the content of his speech: the desire to build a tower which will reach the heavens and to inscribe it with the motto: 'Great is the World and its Creator and Great is Man'. The image of this desire appears magically in the next shot, a huge multi-tiered tower against a starry sky, recalling the painting of the Tower of Babel by Pieter Breughel. However, a dissolve places this image in context, as the tower appears as a model surrounded by several men. The tower, so immediately imaged, is only a plan, and the long-haired, elegantly-gowned men surrounding it merely contemplate it, emblematically taking the pose of Rodin's 'The Thinker', chairs resting on closed fists.

The next intertitles indicate the men's impotence, their inability to build the tower they imagine so vividly. The imagistic response to their need for workers comes in a brilliantly executed composite shot. This is probably the shot that cameraman Karl Freund described as a multiple re-printing of a shot of a thousand men to make them look like six thousand – a trick necessary, he claimed, because Ufa could not find enough extras willing to shave their heads!²² That motivation is unlikely, since the effect of this elegant composite shot is far from illusionistic. Instead, we see five columns of bald slaves converging toward the centre. At the centre we have another element in this composite, a circularly framed and closer shot of the slaves, emphasising their lowered bald craniums. The image addresses the viewer through its shape and artificial quality (as the previous images of the parable have also taken place in the more minimal and shallower space of stylised sets). The space of this shot has no real previous life equivalent; its composite nature makes it a purely cinematic image whose reference is metaphorical. The shape itself acts as a trope, based on the synecdoche introduced in Harbou's text, the workers as 'hands'. We see the converging columns as the outspread fingers and the circular insert as a palm. This composition of rolling bodies also functions as a symbolic close-up of a hand, one of Lang's most powerful visual tropes.

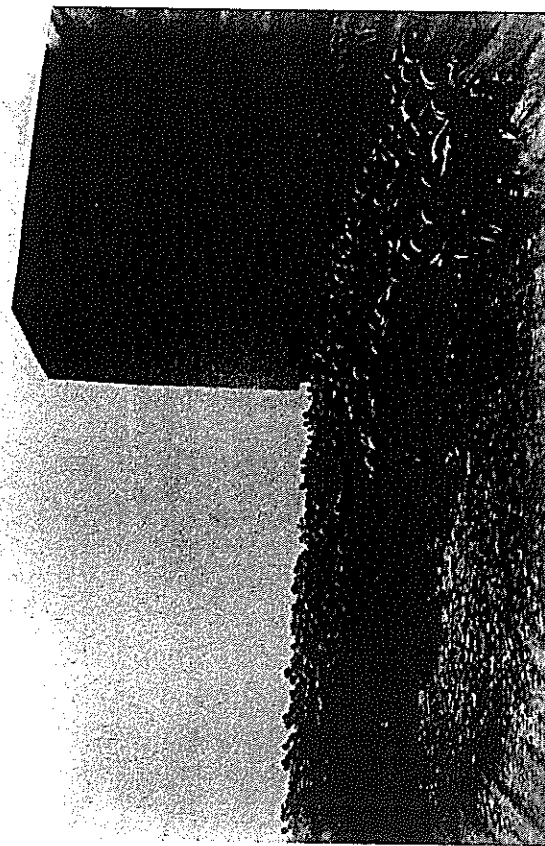
The next two shots develop Harbou's contrast between hand and brain, ideal plan and physical labour. We see the speaker from the opening shot kneeling in rapture before a vision of the tower. The flat space of this vision, surrounded by con-



centric circular nimbeuses, marks it as immaterial, floating in air. But the following shot visually conveys the material resistance of the tower's building material. The first shot to be set in a real exterior shows slaves pulling a huge block of stone (like the wall in *Der müde Tod*, its monumental size is expressed by looming beyond the edges of the frame of this extreme long shot). Lang stresses the physical strain and effort of the workers by cutting into a medium shot of the slaves grimacing and cursing as they pull at their wooden yoke.

Ideals and physical force collide violently in the following shots, perhaps Lang's most ingenious combination of dramatic set design and cinematic framing to create dynamic action within a visual trope. A huge staircase dominates most of the frame. As in the Worms' cathedral steps in *The Death of Siegfried* (and undoubtedly influenced by the use of stairs in the experimental theatre of Reinhardt and Jessner), the stairs in this set not only create a powerful graphic image, but also stress shifting power relations and hierarchies. At the top of the massive staircase and occupying the very top edge of the frame, stands the visionary speaker from the first shot. Once again he speaks, his arms outstretched as he gestures. If the stairs lift him to the top of the frame and express his position of power, his distance from the camera carries a different message, reducing him to a tiny figure. His puny physical presence contrasts sharply with the massive and very physical figures of three slaves standing in the foreground. Their subordinate position below the speaker stands in tension with their dominant presence. This tension ignites in action, as the slaves raise their hands in defiant reaction to the speaker's gestural rhetoric.

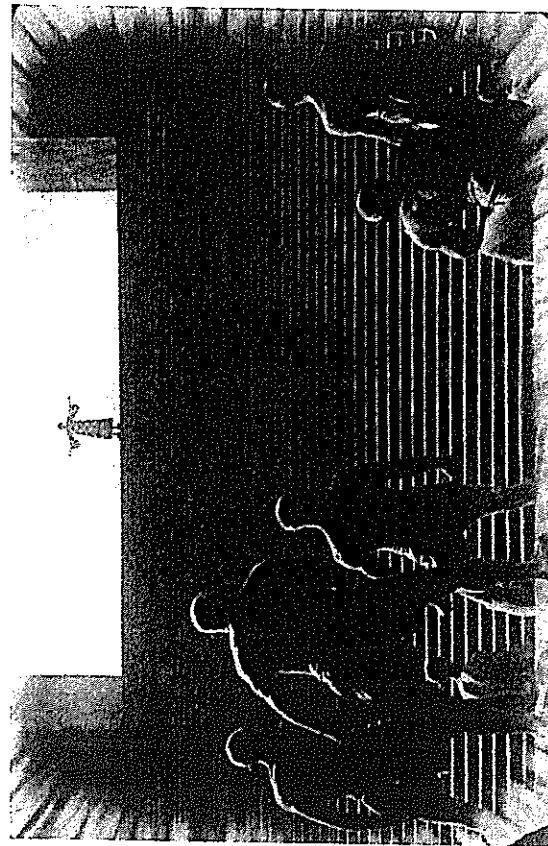
A title follows with the single word: 'Babel', Harbou's primal word with polar signification for the masters and the slaves. The title itself is animated, as if bringing significance to life: the word drips (with blood? sweat?). The workers rush forward and, almost magically they turn into a huge mass of workers, which, filling the frame and, almost magically they turn into a huge mass of workers, which, filling the frame rushes up the stairs to converge violently on the speaker. The stairs now stage a



revolt against hierarchy, as if Lang were quoting Eisenstein's *Potemkin*, reversing the direction from Eisenstein's down-thrust of the Tsarist repression in this dynamic uprush of rebellion. The visual transformation from a handful of figures to a charging mass is not, however, achieved by an optical trick, but from the careful framing of the shot. The masses emerge from below the frame, presumably at the bottom of the stairs, while those first visible stood on another platform closer to the camera. The visual tropes beautifully expresses the reversal of hierarchy and power, the few rebels becoming a sea of humanity. The next shot expresses the same idea more abstractly. In the background we see the vision of the tower ringed by the shining nimbus. In the foreground a series of hands rise, backlit and forming dark silhouettes, progressively blocking out the tower with angry gestures. The final shot completely reverses the first view of the tower, against the same stary background, but now it lies a shattered ruin. The speaker's motto 'Gross is die Welt und sein Schöpfer. Und Gross ist der Mensch' shimmers in arcs above it, now an ironic epitaph.

Harbou's moral, which sprouts from this parable of ruin, is rendered legible as we return to Maria, now framed in medium close-up, her eyes fixed directly on the camera and spectator. She gestures emphatically with her hands as the intertitle gives her words: 'Between the brain that plans and the hands that build there must be a mediator.' As Lang cuts back to her after the intertitle, her eyes still fixed upon us, Brigitte Helm grasps her left breast and intones (through the intertitle): 'It is the heart that must bring about an understanding between them.' No doubt this is Harbou's message, inscribed as the epigraph to her novel as well. But does the tower sequence teach us anything more than this schoolboy dictum? Certainly on the visual level, it also serves as a lesson in the construction and framing of visual emblems, cueing us to scrutinise the visual form and framing for meanings, contrast, similarities, synecdoches and symbolic arrangements in space. What should we make of the pronounced visual similarity between the speaker/visionary in the parable and the speaker/visionary Maria who delivers it? Within the parable the visionary is blind to the forces around him and is destroyed by them. Does the parable predict the same fate for Maria? Of course, one can also see a contrast here. The visionary scene of the tower has no mediator; the only thing that bridges that deep gulf between the speaker and the masses huddled at the bottom of the stairs is violence. In the cathedral set, also dominated by a massive stairway, Maria will resolve the violence of the masses, but not until the end of the film. But at the very least, this sequence tells us not simply to believe in the moral as stated in words but in the acts portrayed in images. The final image showing the results of the revolt, the ruined tower, serves to overturn the optimistic but naive slogan above it.

Visual emblems in *Metropolis*, then, operate less as inert translations of a verbal moral than as site for the play of opposed energies, or as Fletcher puts it, daemons – active agents who embody a single purpose and identity endlessly repeated and replayed, like a perpetual motion machine.²³ Like the seesaw of master and slaves (one goes up, while the other goes down), this rhythmic energy pulses beneath the allegory. In this way the allegorical image possesses a magical function, the possibility of concentrating the energy of its demon to a specific purpose. As Fletcher makes clear, the demonic portrayal employed by allegory is given to polarisation and dichotomies rather than mediation, to explosive struggles and internecine battles.²⁴ The Tower of Babel teaches this in the mutually destructive war of master and servants. It would seem the mediator Maria prays for is designed to deliver them from allegory as much as from enslavement or ignorance.



Demons of Energy: Who Rules the City of Metropolis?

In their structure and mechanics, all larger cities of the white world are identical. Situated at a midpoint of a web of rails, they shoot off their petrified street-threads over the country side. Visible and invisible networks of rolling traffic crisscross and undermine the vehicular ravines and twice daily pump human beings from the limbs to the heart. A second, third, fourth network distributes water, heat and power, an electrical bundle of nerves carries the resonance of the spirit.

Walter Rathenau, *On the Critique of the Times*²⁵

If allegory employs demonic energies in explosive situations, what holds it together? For Fletcher containment comes from a specific type of allegorical figure which subordinates other figures into the central trope. He calls this central figure the *kosmos*. Fletcher uses this term for its two meanings, one familiar, the other forgotten: first a universe, and second, an adornment which reveals the wearer's rank within a hierarchy. Fletcher makes the *kosmos* perform all the tasks he considers essential to an allegorical image, especially creating a hierarchy in which the various demons of energy can contend.²⁶

Is there such a complex image in *Metropolis* which corrals its various demons into a structured whole? It obviously consists of the city of Metropolis itself, whose highly hierarchical spatial levels not only determine symbolic meanings, but stage the tensions of dramatic actions and encounters. The city Metropolis takes its spatial order from the Tower of Babel itself (in fact, in Harbou's novel the main building in which Joh Fredersen has his offices is called 'The New Tower of Babel'): a vertical structure which aspires to reach the heavens and proclaim the technical triumph of humankind. As in the parable, the main narrative of *Metropolis* explicates the structure of the city and narrates its (near) destruction.

This city is nothing if not hierarchical, with the first third of the film basically tracing and exploring (and re-exploring) its various layers and levels. The opening prologue introduces the machines that power the city: the repetitive motions of pistons and drive shafts ordered into a ten hour shift (the Langian clock face here rationalised into a round number and setting the only pattern for a worker's life), and the whistle of released steam, energy turned audible, that marks the end of one work round and the beginning of the next. But the structure of the city is best described by the elevator ride which the mechanised labourers take from their place of work to their home in the depths of the city. The elevator sets a vertical trajectory of the city and the narrative to come, although somewhat disingenuously. At the end of the ride we have not yet reached the depths of the city.

The class-based nature of this vertical hierarchy is next established as the purgatorial imagery of the depths is contrasted with the paradisaical images of the pleasure gardens and playing arenas of the rulers of Metropolis and specifically Freder, son of Joh Fredersen, the Master of Metropolis. The opening scenes set up an image of order and hierarchy which, while it may be unjust, appears at least to be unquestioned. It is disturbed by a displacement from the depth, when the pleasure gardens are invaded by Maria (with a gaggle of urchins from the lower slums of Metropolis) who demands that Freder recognise the kids as his 'brothers'. The power of this visitation

to wrest Freder out of the order of Metropolis comes less from the moral appeal for common humanity or the psychological motivation of erotic attraction to Maria (although the film allows space for both) than the central allegorical question of power and agency. What is behind all this? What really lies in the depths? Here lies the constant question in Lang's films. A system is revealed, but the question lingers — who controls it, whom does it serve?

Freder's two voyages into the depths of his city discover layers he had not known of before and raise new questions about who wields power in Metropolis, undermining his unquestioned faith in the vertical order of the city in which power radiates from his father's intellect and control down to his minions, the workers and machines. In the first voyage he discovers the realm of the machines and has the visionary experience which reveals the demonic power of the city, embodied in the Moloch machine screaming to be fed (the steam whistle now revealed as a demonic cry rather than marking the orderly progression of time). After being rebuffed by his father when he returns to the surface, Freder makes his second voyage below and takes on the identity of a worker (embodied in the worker's uniform and cap emblazoned with a number). The allegorical high point of Freder's incarnation as a worker comes in his symbolic crucifixion on the dial wheel which dissolves into an image of the inhuman ten hour clock. But on this second voyage he discovers an even deeper level to the city, one previously unknown even to his father, the catacombs in which he hears Maria deliver the sermon on the Tower of Babel. Each voyage calls into question his father's power. The first reveals the demonic machine god Joh Fredersen may serve as an acolyte rather than use as a tool, while the second introduces a feminine prophecy that foreshadows the results of hubris and ignorance in ultimate destruction. How does power move through the vertical city of Metropolis, then? From top to bottom? Or radiating from the demonic centre, the voracious maw of the machine issuing its demands? Or ascending from the female voice calling for repentance in the city's lowest depths?

The city operates as a demonic machine using and releasing energy, either in an orderly manner (the steam whistle, the clock) or in an explosive one (the 'accident' Freder witnesses in the machine room which immolates the workers). But in fact, in this demonic system of production, order and explosion are not opposed to each other, but simply different parts of the one cycle ('Such accidents are inevitable', Joh Fredersen says, dismissing his son's alarmed report). This cycle will be writ large in the action of the film, the workers' revolt incited by Joh Fredersen and his tool, the false Maria, the demonic robot, giving way finally to a new order as father and son are reunited. The revolt and restoration then are less a new beginning, perhaps, than the large form of the cycle of order and catastrophe on which the city is founded. We will return to this possibility when we consider the allegorical language of the end of the film.

There are three centres of figuration in *Metropolis*. The first circles around the figures of the machine and images of modernity and rationality: the machine room itself, the robot Maria, and the city of Metropolis. All of these figures involve a combination of potentially explosive energy contained by repetitive and orderly motions; chaos and uniformity form the polar extremes of this centre. These images supply the major science fiction elements of the film, and are clearly associated with a dystopic future. The second centre clusters around images associated with the past and particularly the gothic, as if props and sets left over from *Siegfried* somehow formed the ur-level of the city of Metropolis. The madonna Maria, the sorcerer Rotwang, the locales of the catacombs and the cathedral form this cluster; its polar elements are the

religion of love preached by Maria and the black magic of demonic technology mastered by Rotwang. Mediating between these two centres are the images associated with Freder as hero. As Roger Dadoun points out,²⁷ Freder performs archetypal heroic functions, very much like Siegfried's exploits in the early *Gesänge*, the journey into the underground, the quest for the pure maiden, the encounter with the monster. However, although Freder is posed as a simpler hero than Siegfried (he is not defeated by the secular world of civilisation and betrayal), he is also more vulnerable and even feminine, repeatedly given not only to the visions which were the privilege of the women characters in Lang's earlier films, but subject to fits of fainting. Freder propels the narrative action initially, but his visions seem to baffle and defeat him. These three centres constantly intersect with each other and key moments of *Metropolis* can be understood as emblematic tableaux in which the different centres superimpose themselves. For instance, Freder's first encounter with the Moloch machine brings the three centres into alignment and produces the first vision: the machine as medieval demon, the undermining of the order of Metropolis' modernity and order.

Gothic Modernism: Technology as Modern Magic

It forces the entrepreneur not less than the workman to obedience. Both become slaves, and not masters of the machine, which now for the first time develops its devilish and occult powers.

Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*²⁸

Insufficient attention has been paid to the role of the clash between the gothic and modernity in this film, which often displaces the more manifest conflict between classes. The revolt in *Metropolis* is staged as a conflict between master and workers, a struggle resolved so legibly – and yet so unsatisfyingly and naively – in the film's articulated moral. But in many ways this workers' revolt, the result of the false robot Maria operating as an *agent provocateur*, takes the form of a sham battle. The true conflict in *Metropolis*, the one which actually produces and energises the film's system, comes from the collision between the gothic and the modern.

Lang in later interviews made rather cryptic remarks about the central role magic played in his original concept of the film. Speaking to Peter Bogdanovich, he said:

Mrs. Von Harbou and I put in the script for *Metropolis* a battle between modern science and occultism, the science of the medieval ages. The magician was the evil behind all the things that happened: in one scene all the bridges were falling down, there were flames, and out of a Gothic church came all these ghosts and ghouls and beasts. And I said 'No I cannot do this.' Today I would do it, but in those days I did not have the courage. Slowly we cut out all the magic and perhaps for that reason I had the feeling that *Metropolis* was patched together.²⁹

Much of this statement remains obscure, especially why Lang didn't dare to include the creatures coming from the gothic church (perhaps concern about a sacrilegious uniting of the Church and the demonic?). But he certainly signals the key opposition between the imagery of the gothic and the modern in the film.

While Lang indicates he eliminated much of the gothic imagery from the film, plenty remains, radiating from, as I said before, two centres: Maria and the medieval Christian imagery associated with her, and Rotwang who drags along with him a whole baggage of medieval magic and demonic images. One can undoubtedly see the influence of Spengler's sweeping theory of history here, pervasive in its influence on Weimar culture, with its description of Western man as 'Faustian' and the impulses toward mastery of nature through the machine as having its roots in the 'gothic'. Yet if Spengler's ideas seem sprinkled throughout Harbou's novel and screenplay, the gothic never entirely loses its opposition to the modern, and its associations with the ancient. The gothic exists in the core of the modern, providing another function of the 'layers' of the city of Metropolis. Metropolis is not simply a new modern city but a palimpsest whose layers (like the layers of ancient Rome that Freud invokes as an image of the way the past persists in the unconscious)³⁰ contain the traces of previous belief systems. Lang makes it clear that these repressed layers are only slumbering and can be called back into life.

'In the centre of the city stood an old house', says the intertitle introducing the home of Rotwang the wizard inventor. The image shows a squat windowless medieval building with a sharply peaked roof like a gothic arch huddled among the steel girders and skyscrapers of Metropolis, as if the city had grown up around and over it. As R. L. Rutsky points out, the house (like Maria's catacombs) seems 'to hide a power that has been repressed by Harbou's functional, technologically rationalized world, a power that is figured in the connection of these structures to the spiritual, to the religious or to the magical'.³¹ Harbou's novel describes the house as 'older than the town'³² and relates that it was built by the supernatural power of an evil magician. When modernisers tried to pull down the house, it responded with a malevolent power, killing those who attacked it. It remained as an ancient relic until the inventor Rotwang chose it as his home. Rotwang, whom Lang describes as the source of evil in the film, combines the images of the modern and the gothic in the Spenglerian figure of the Faustian scientist. He is a master of technology, whose own hand is mechanical, the inventor of the race of robots ordered by Joh Freider-wizard, a trafficker in spirits and demons.

Lang and his designers created every aspect of Rotwang and his surroundings to blend modern associations with medieval ones. The desk in his study is illuminated by a coil of electrical light tubes, but the walls are filled with ancient tomes. His costume recalls a monk's robe, but a robotic hand emerges from its sleeves. His laboratory is honeycombed with electrical wires, and contraptions, but recalls traditional representations of an alchemist's lair. The effect of all this is not contradictory. Rather, new technology, especially those aspects which are part of the future predicted by *Metropolis*, such as robots and automatically opening and shutting doors, are presented by Lang and Harbou as a form of magic. Inscribed on the wall behind Rotwang's ultimate creation, the robot which the novel names Futura, is the inverted pentagram of the sorcerer. Harbou mimes here an already well established series of similes even without the contributions of Spengler's theory of the scientist as the Faustian man. American journalists had christened Thomas Edison 'The Wizard of Menlo Park' after the invention of the phonograph, and Villiers de l'Isle Adam literalised this in his portrayal of Edison in *L'Ève Futur*, his symbolist novel of the creation of a female robot that greatly influenced Harbou. The future as a return to the repressed and forbidden energies of the past – this constitutes one of *Metropolis*'s allegories of modernity.

The house of Rotwang forms a node of images of the gothic past in Harbou's system. Her novel speculates the house may be older than the cathedral which faces it across the street. In the surviving prints of the film the cathedral's presence has been reduced, but it still plays a key role. In the novel the cathedral stands as another reminder of past ages, crowned with an image of the Virgin on its highest tower (an image of faith in contrast to Rotwang's house of magic) and ornamented with gothic figures and gargoyles (presumably the ones that Lang refers to as coming to life during the city's catastrophe). Joh Fredersen, the Master of Metropolis, has long desired to pull it down as well, but a strange pressure sect known as the 'gothics' headed by a monk named Desertus demand its preservation. Desertus and his following are not included in the version of the film we now have, but the cathedral still plays a central role in the images that remain.

After Freder's encounter with Maria in the catacombs where she gives her sermon on the Tower of Babel, she agrees to meet him the next day in the cathedral. Maria has been imprisoned by Rotwang, while Freder, wandering through the cathedral searching for her, becomes attracted to the gothic statues that adorn it. He contemplates an arrangement of figures: the Seven Deadly Sins flanking a figure of Death, portrayed as a scythe-bearing skeleton about to play a deadly tune on his leg bone flute. This arrangement returns us to a major source of allegorical emblems for Harbou and Lang, the Dance of Death. The figures representing the sins, as well as the skeleton itself, seem frozen in arrested motion, expressing that 'restless activity' that Worringer saw as characteristic of the gothic style, and evident in Holbein's etchings of the Dance of Death.³⁵ The moment when these figures seem to come to life in Freder's vision will occupy the central moment in the intertwining of *Metropolis'* allegorical strands and their fusion into a vision of the apocalypse.

The gothic cathedral shelters this image of Death as master of the dance. The imprint of death rests as well on the third realm of the past, this one buried in the depths of the city of Metropolis – and again Rotwang's house serves as a place marker. As the house without windows faces the ancient cathedral, it also rests over the most primordial part of Metropolis, so neglected that even Joh Fredersen, whose mastery of the city becomes increasingly tenuous, remains ignorant of it: the catacombs, described in Harbou's novel as 'the city of graves over which the city of Metropolis stands ... the thousand year old Metropolis of the thousand year old dead.'³⁴ The interconnected topology of gothic spaces is completed by the fact that Rotwang's house contains a secret passageway down to this space.

Instead of meeting Maria in the cathedral of the Virgin, Freder encounters the Dance of Death. His previous inspirational meeting with his beloved prophetess also took place in the realm of the dead, the necropolis that forms the root of Metropolis. This moment of transfiguration for Freder in which he accepts the mediator role Maria prophesies for him, corresponds to the hero's descent into the underworld described by so many twentieth-century theorists of myth and romance, the encounter in the depths with the realm of the dead from which the hero emerges with the promise of salvation. Harbou knowingly employs this archetype, but it is her complication of it that makes it interesting. Every image of the gothic as religious renewal in this film meets its demonic and deathly counterpart. Maria's sermon is followed by her capture by Rotwang inside the tombs, a capture seemingly accomplished by his wielding the beam of an electric flashlight which terrifies Maria by illuminating the skeletal remains around her and then creeps up her body like a crawling male gaze with a slow slimy tactile violation. (Lang himself described it this way: 'This beam of light pierced the hunted creature like the sharp claws of an animal,

refused to release her from its grasp, drove her unremittingly forward to the point of utter panic.'³⁵)

As I stated earlier, for an archetypal hero, Freder is amazingly ineffective. His voyage to the underworld yields revelations, but his return to the surface is beset by missed appointments, temporary imprisonment, fainting fits and sick-bed fever-dreams. His role as saviour becomes shunted aside as the film's demonic energy kicks into high gear. This may reflect Harbou's inability to construct action under any form other than chaos or, in the last reel, 'sensation film' heroic rescues and cliffhangers. But this lack of action by the mediator hero reflects the film's profound ambivalence about its own messianic vision. No-one, other than the demons, wants to take action in this film; action leads only to chaos. The religious figures, the blessed side of the gothic equation, are capable only of visions. Maria herself refuses to take any role other than that of John the Baptist, the forerunner and announcer of the Messiah to come. As the anointed one, Freder becomes lost in the labyrinth of Metropolis's gothic neighbourhoods and his own visionary psychosis.

Only the demonic side is capable of creation and destruction. The ultimate sequence of gothic modernism takes place when Rotwang creates the film's synthesis of the energies of magic and technology, false Maria, the robot. This justly famous sequence employs all the spectacular resources of modern technology to produce the image of scientist as wizard, as currents of electricity arc through the set and liquids bubble in strange containers. Rotwang methodically rushes from one switch to the next, checking readings, turning dials, merging himself with his equipment so that neither man nor apparatus appear as master or tool, but rather are fused into one technological project. The rhythmical pattern of the cuttings, the use of superimpositions fuses cinematic devices with the creation process, both spectacularly visual, and hard-edged in their precision (interestingly, Harbou's novel does not describe the robot's creation). This mechanical rhythm, first introduced in the opening images of the film and reprised in the scenes in the machine room, finds its ultimate embodiment in the robotic Maria who will gather it into herself and bring it to the point of explosion and chaos.

But, for all its heavy equipment, the means by which the robot is created remains mysterious: imagistic and metaphoric rather than technological. The end result is the transfer of Maria's physical likeness (and presumably some quality of her organs and flesh) to the metallic Futura. This is a process of mechanical reproduction in at least two senses. First the obvious parody of birth, the attempt at reproduction by the male wizard/scientist without a female partner. But while the foaming liquids, shooting sparks, the pulsing machines and the rods Rotwang handles burlesque some processes of procreation, what we see primarily takes the form of photographic superimposition. Over the metal endoskeleton first a pulsing heart, then systems of circulation are superimposed. Although Rotwang directs the process, Lang continually cuts to the true Maria, encased in a glass tube, her body banded by metal rings, electrodes plugged into her helmet. She seems unconscious, yet dimly aware of the process. The process aims at producing a simulacrum, a copy. Raymond Bellour, in fact, describes the sequence as a whole as a reflection of the cinematic medium, 'the actual process of substituting a simulacrum for a living being directly replicates the camera's power to reproduce automatically the reality it confronts.'³⁶ Villiers' description of the creation of his female android Hadaly portrays Edison employing his motion picture device, the 'cylinder of movements', to transfer the gestures of the model to her simulacrum. The final stage of Lang's process is marked by a close-up of Futura, the metallic robot whose inhuman eyes stare at the

camera. Then, through Lang's recurring metaphorical device, the overlap-dissolve, we see the face of Maria appear, her eyes closed. Her eyes stretch open into a stare at the camera. Lang cuts to the source of the simulacrum, a close-up of the true Maria in her electrode helmet, as her head collapses into a deeper unconsciousness. We cut back to robotic Maria as she stares piercingly at the camera.

The final moments of the process link it to Lang's visual vocabulary and use of allegory in silent cinema. Like a photographic process, Maria's face and figure have been imprinted onto the machine. We have watched the transfer of identity: that process which film theorist André Bazin saw as the truth of photography and which Lang shows here as the technological triumph of the lie and the demonic — the illusory power of false appearance. The final overlap-dissolve recalls the visionary scene earlier in the film, Fredet's encounter with the demon face of the machine Moloch, but here the process is reversed. Instead of a gaze which penetrates past the surface to a revelation of the true nature of things, the overlap-dissolve cloaks the metallic armature with the appearance of flesh. Magic acts at antipodes to vision, it camouflages the actual mechanics of existence. Robot Maria's stare at the camera asks again the question that echoes throughout the film, resting on a variety of characters: who holds power in *Metropolis*, who can control its energies?

Robotic Maria's forthright but cold stare serves as a direct challenge, a parody of the visionary gleam of the real Maria as she preached the coming salvation in the cat-acombs. The creation scene is bracketed by shots of Fredet trapped by the trick doors of Rotwang's cellars, screaming Maria's name helplessly. The saviour has no role in the cloning of his prophetess. Through its proliferation of looks at the camera, its multiplication of saviour and anti-Christ figures, *Metropolis* overloads the allegorical mission of its film and threatens to reduce it to a hall of mirrors reflecting competing authorities, counterfeit identities and spurious images. In *Metropolis* Lang and Harbou bring the allegorical language of silent film to an end, bringing it to a climax and staking its high-water mark from which, in the years remaining to it, it can only recede. The mechanically driven figures of religion in *Metropolis* confront and parody any attempt to revitalise the symbols of religion and magic and thereby tip the film into a sustained vision of the apocalypse. If *Die Nibelungen* dramatised the decline of the world of myth and magic into the decadent world of civilisation and double dealing, *Metropolis* stages the failure of an attempt to revive the energies of the gothic through a fusion of religious salvation and technological magic.

Oedipal Nightmares, Allegorical Riddles

Berlin, your dancing partner is Death!¹⁷

Metropolis continues to produce visionary scenes of a more and more ambiguous nature and Fredet becomes increasingly undone by them. Released almost disdainedly by the magical devices of Rotwang's house after the creation of the false Maria, Fredet rushes home to his father. There he sees the deceptive scene of (what he takes to be) Maria in his father's arms. Quite simply, he freaks. The next ten minutes or so of the film are so bizarre, so fully loaded in their visual rhetoric, so complex and even contradictory that no analysis could ever exhaust them. Roger Dadoun who offers a psychoanalytic interpretation of this sequence admits this overcharge of material, saying, 'so complex are the displacements and overdeterminations that there is

scarcely an image in the film that cannot occupy the most surprising positions at any of the forty-nine levels of Talmudic interpretation.¹⁸ But if we follow the thread of an allegory-machine gone wild, spewing out a torrent of filmic rhetoric, we can follow its progression to the film's final apocalypse and its perverse destruction and reconstruction of its saviour hero. This series of visionary scenes contrasts sharply with the moments of insight granted to the maiden in *Der müde Tod* or Kriemhild in *The Death of Siegfried*, or even Fredet's vision of Moloch. In contrast to the terrifying but piercing brevity of those visions, these are baroque and hysterical sequences, imaged as hallucinations and nightmares. They also play a psychological role for the character of Fredet that was avoided in the earlier films.

The first hallucination sequence demonstrates Lang's alliance with the avant-garde of the late 20s, the 'pure film' montage experiments and the animation of Walther Ruttmann and others. Lang does not simply rip off this tradition here; he uses it not only expressionistically to portray a mind stretched to its limits (through the use of rapid montage and a loss of spatial co-ordinates), but also as a visualisation of his own will-to-abstraction, his visionary claim that abstractly organised schema and allegories operate beneath the surface of reality.

Lang first presents Fredet's view as an obscuring of sight. As he rushes in the door and sees Maria and his father entwined, he stares at the camera in disbelief and backs away. Lang cuts to the first of a series of nearly subliminal shots, white circles of light either enlarging or approaching the camera, like bright flashes obscuring vision. The next few shots develop this dissolving grasp on vision. Fredet raises his hand and passes it before him, as if simultaneously trying to wipe out what he sees, and touch it to see if it is real. A point of view shot follows of Joh and Maria holding each other; their faces turned toward Fredet. This image wavers and goes out of focus. Fredet holds out his hands as if beseeching them.

The following images move from vision obscured to pure hallucination. The image of Joh and Maria becomes surrounded by a border of Joh's office spinning at a dizzying rate. Fredet seems to lose his balance, as if the floor rocked beneath him. The spheres of light are supplemented by star-like bursts, scratched directly on the surface of the film. Lang pushes the crisis of vision past abstraction into the very materiality of the film strip, losing its emulsion before our eyes. The scratches explode around Fredet as well. Then comes a series of subliminal shots (each under a second): we see a close-up of Maria, her hairstyle and makeup marking her as the sensual robot clone (rather than the pure prophetess) as shapes spin around her. Cut to the spheres of light bursting. Cut to a close-up of Joh, then a fade to black.

The following extremely brief shots are no longer based on elements present in Joh's office, but move into the visionary. We see a close-up of Maria almost identical to the last shot of the creation of the robot, staring at the camera. Lang cuts in a close-up of Rotwang grinning demonically against a black background. Then a close-up of the image of Death the flute player, surrounded by cubist swatches of light. Then a return to the first close-up of Maria, only now prismatically reflected into multiple images, as the outer images spin. The final barrage of images place Fredet in an abstract but violent space as the room disappears and scratches, arcs of light and spheres burst around him and he continues to lose his footing. Fredet lifts his arms and seems to plunge through this abstract nightmare, plummeting through horizontal bands of light which pass over his body.

Fredet's attempt to bring his message of salvation up from the underworld here encounters its strongest check, a descent into madness, an almost classically Freudian nightmare of Oedipal terror. But before we follow through the Freudian

link Harbou has tied in the hero's quest, we need to explore this moment as an archetypal Langian visionary moment. It performs the same role all such scenes take on, the revealing of the system of forces beneath the surface. The quick succession of close-ups at the centre of the sequence not only provides a riddling answer to Freder's own disbelief at seeing his beloved in his father's arms, but also addresses the central question of the film: who truly rules Metropolis? The succession of shots beginning with the false Maria followed by close-ups of Joh, Maria at the moment of creation, then Rotwang, spell out in telegraphic montage the order of her creation: 'This woman was ordered by Joh Fredersen, she is a robot created by Rotwang.' Likewise the prismatic multiplied image of Maria not only conveys Freder's vertigo, but hints at the process of mechanical duplication that stands behind the robot Maria. Freder, however, cannot read or decode the message. The middle of creation also proposes a succession of 'masters' (and a mistress) of Metropolis: Joh, the robot, Rotwang, Death. Death as the master of Metropolis not only links this central enigma back to previous Langian visions, but prepares the way for the apocalyptic finale of the film.

But Freder does not understand his vision and this leads to his complete regression. Not only does he break down emotionally during this sequence, he loses the ability to stand upright, regressing to an infantile state. The next shot after the fade to black that ends his tumble through space shows him tucked in bed, ministered to by father and nurse. Unlike the maiden's disavowal of her vision of death in *Der müde Tod* which does not develop her as a psychological character, Freder's disavowal draws explicitly on Freudian scenarios that Harbou weaves into her script and novel. Cuts in the current version of the film have obscured the back story, but the primal forces are still very clear. Harbou works as creatively with her Freudian themes as she does with the Biblical material. The development of Freder as an archetypal hero intertwines with both Christological and Freudian patterns to create an extraordinary maze of reference from which no analyst may ever emerge unscathed.³⁹

What a hoot this film is! Although it is easy to see the prophetess Maria as a sexist stereotype of feminine purity (and she is that), tracing her roles leads us into a mare's nest of gender contradictions. In relation to the Christ myth she primarily plays the role of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ. But her name and her association with virgin purity also align her with the mother of God. But if the hero's romance demands (as it literally will in the film's climax) the love for, and rescue of, a pure maiden, Maria cannot be Freder's mother, without creating a scandal. But if the plot avoids literally acting out this regressive Oedipal fantasy, Harbou constantly throws it back in our face, and most obviously in this (primal) scene. What is this trauma-producing moment, as Roger Dadoun was perhaps the first to point out,⁴⁰ but Freder rushing into his parents' bedroom to witness the primal act of darkness? The splitting of Maria into pure virgin and mechanical whore so often noted in this film loses none of its ideological charge in this reading. But it becomes that much more psychologised, if not pushed to the point of psychosis: these polarities are the rival fantasies a boy has about his mother, a sign of his inability to accept adult sexuality. Thus the imagery of regression given Freder, stumbling like a toddler who has forgotten to walk, arms outstretched for support.

The novel makes explicit Freder's longing for a mother, more precisely for Hel, his biological mother who died bringing him into the world. Maria appears as the explicit reflection of this lost mother throughout the book. When Freder first sees Maria in the pleasure gardens Harbou's prose describes what he sees: 'the austere

countenance of the virgin. The sweet countenance of the mother."⁴¹ Freder wanders the streets of Metropolis looking up at the image of the virgin atop the cathedral and calls out: 'Mother, look at me.'⁴² Harbou casts her saviour as a lonely mama's boy lost in the big city. This dead mother also broods over the creation of the robot. Hel was the wife of Rotwang, a love he has never abandoned and memorialises in a monument he has created to her in his house. She was taken from him by Joh Fredersen, and the two men hate each other for this reason. At the film's climax Rotwang has gone mad and believes Maria actually to be Hel, his lost wife (and Freder's lost mother) and climbs the cathedral with her in tow. The processes of mechanical reproduction in this film constantly recycle the image of the lost mother/lost wife through a play of substitutes and doubles.

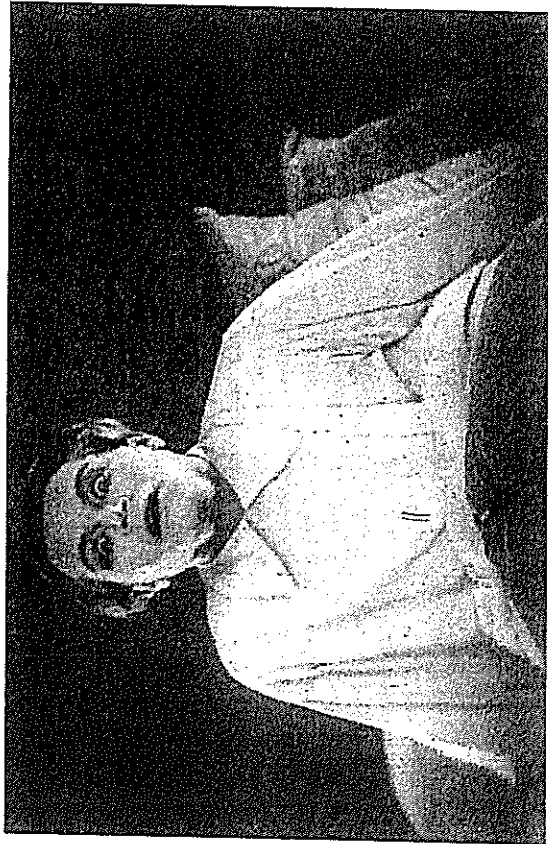
In a nearly Gnostic manner Harbou recasts the Christ aspect of Freder's hero tale as an Oedipal drama, longing for union with his virgin mother, attempting to wrest her from the control of his father, Joh (the invented first name intended to recall the God of the Old Testament) Fredersen corresponds to one Gnostic view of the Old Testament God as learning the lesson of compassion through his son's sacrifice. The film makes Freder's crucifixion explicit in his martyrdom on the dial wheel of the machine room (crying out to his father), and Harbou in the novel lays on Christ references with a howl. But Freder's mission of salvation must also be an Oedipal revolt against his father, as his hallucination sequence makes clear. The need to reconcile Freder with his father, as well as the masters with the workers, strains Harbou's mythopoiesis to the breaking point. The scenes of resolution and reconciliation remain unsatisfying partly because Harbou does not truly seem capable of thinking through (or accepting) any of the scenarios offered by her material: the resolution of the Oedipal complex, the Christian sacrifice, or the workers' revolution. Instead, imagery of breakdown and chaos dominate. The allegorical vision of Lang and Harbou remains an apocalyptic one, dominated by the figure of castration rather than identification with the father, Death rather than resurrection, capitulation rather than revolution.

To understand the power of this apocalyptic imagery we need to go back to Freder's continued fever-dream hallucination. The scene which follows his plunge through the floorboards opens with Freder tucked cozily in his bed at home. In the sequence to follow Lang systematically plays with the devices of parallel editing and shot/reverse shot in order to create a visionary scene of remarkable spatial ambiguity. Parallel editing, the earliest major editing figure mastered by silent film-makers, in order to indicate simultaneity. On the literal level this editing rules the sequence. Lang cuts between Freder on his sick-bed and the soirée Rotwang and Joh Fredersen arrange to introduce the robotic Maria to male high society, supposedly to test the believability of her fleshly incarnation; two separate events happening at the same time at some distance from each other. On the other hand, shot/reverse shot, especially when combined with an eyeline match, presents a single dramatic space by cutting between two opposed angles within it, usually to indicate a back and forth exchange, such as a conversation or an exchange of glances. Most often such shots are angled to the side of the characters talking and/or looking, but, as discussed earlier, Lang occasionally films them with direct 180 degree reversals, having characters look directly into the camera. The added intensity of this manner of shooting usually indicates for Lang some heightened emotion or threat.

In this sequence Lang complicates things by blending these two editing figures, thereby contradicting their spatial codes. He intercuts Freder with the soirée in such

a way that it seems he is witnessing (or imagining?) the events. At first only parallel editing seems involved. Robotic Maria appears on stage and does an orgiastic dance as men in evening wear ogle her. (Brigitte Helm swivels her hips in a manner here that leads me to believe either that she truly has ball bearings in her joints, some sort of special effect was used, or, alternatively, that there are more mysteries in creation than I have yet experienced.) Meanwhile Freder rests at home, his brow smoothed by an attentive nurse. The editing contrast stresses his infantile regression. Awakened by a clumsy servant, Freder sits bolt upright in bed, his eyes widened and staring at the camera. The force of his movement up and towards the camera is multiplied by a cut to a closer shot of him leaning forward, staring. Such a forceful stare leads one to expect a point of view shot and Lang cuts directly to a shot that is clearly designed to catch a male gaze, Maria twirling in her scanty costume.

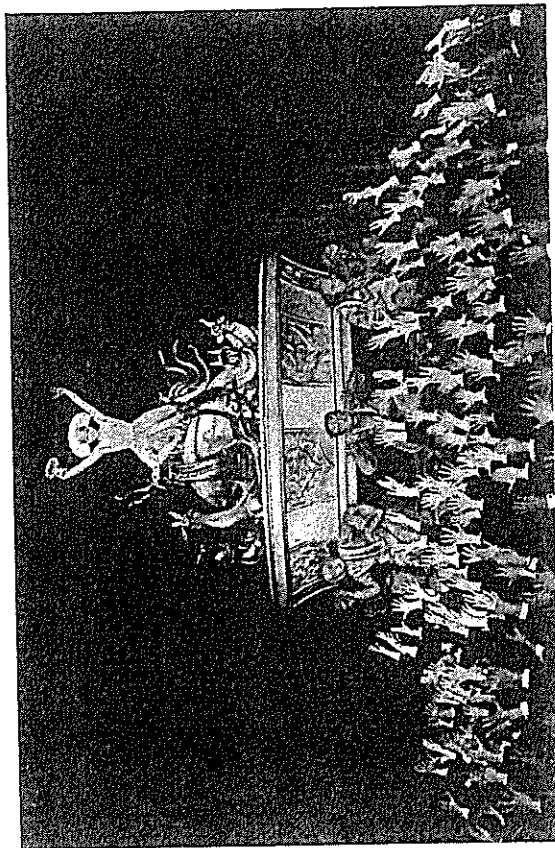
As if reassuring us about the conventional nature of the shot/reverse shot, Lang then cuts to a medium shot of the onlookers at the soirée, staring at the spectacle and chewing their lips in lust. He then introduces a more avant-garde editing figure, the jump cut: the editing together of actions within a single space with a marked temporal ellipsis so that they seem to jump from one position to another. The remainder of Maria's dance is cut in this manner, jumping, for instance, from Maria kneeling and twisting her torso, to Maria standing lifting her legs, to Maria turning her head from side to side. Lang continues to intercut this with the ogling men, but these images, too, become more abstract, giving way to a composite shot of several unblinking eyes in close-up, until one single staring eye fills the screen. This fantasia on the male gaze returns to Freder, likewise staring enraptured in close-up. Lang clearly encourages us to read Freder as also witnessing the dance, whether through clairvoyance, hallucination or pure sexual fantasy. These sexual visions contend with his regression. After Maria kneels down, her legs spread provocatively, Lang



cuts to Freder smiling as the nurse's hand enters the frame from left, strokes his brow and offers a glass of water with her other hand. Freder closes his eyes and drinks sensuously, leaning his head back in her supporting hand. But, after giving into this moment of infantile oral satisfaction, he opens his eyes again and leans forward toward the camera, his eyes fixed on visual pleasure.

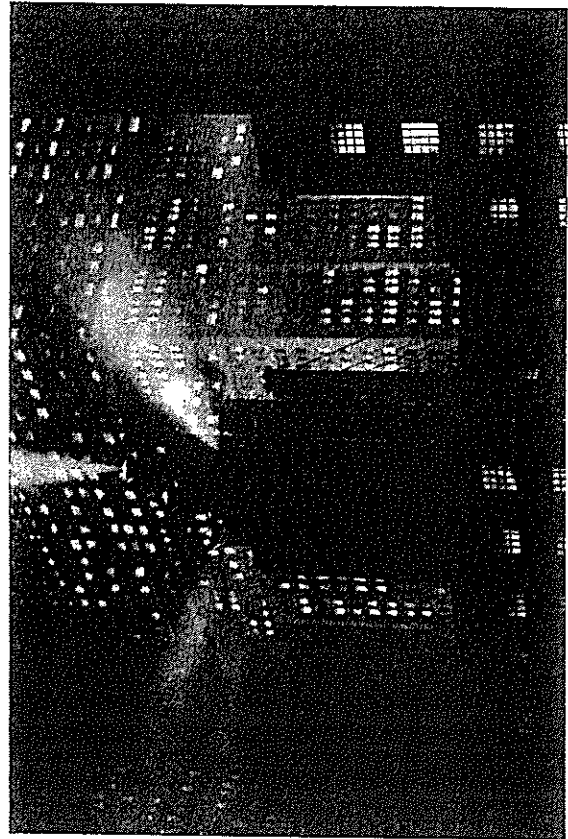
At this point Lang signals that we are abandoning the parallel editing between separate, but real, events, however strangely linked by a preternatural gaze, and entering the realm of pure hallucination and vision. Maria rises from the cabaret stage mounted on a huge monstrous statue, holding a chalice in one hand. Lang intercuts Freder staring and the woman on the beast. We cut back to Freder's astonished gaze. A long shot shows the beast and Maria on a platform, the platform itself supported by the statues of the seven deadly sins from the cathedral. Lang cuts again to Freder. We see Maria and her beast as the men rush forward, arms outstretched. Cut back to Freder. The more insistent intercutting of Freder marks this as his vision. But more importantly, the imagery tips not simply toward the subjective but the allegorical and referential. As the finale for her act, robotic Maria does a *tableau vivant* from *The Book of Revelations*, the whore of Babylon with her golden goblet and the beast whereon she sits with seven heads and ten horns.

Here Lang develops the film's most complete apocalyptic vision, as Freder's gaze no longer links us to the events of the soirée but to entirely allegorical scenes. We return to the sculpture of Death and the seven deadly sins in the cathedral. But their immobility gives way as Death jerkily sways his thigh bone flute, like a parade master raising his baton. In a close-up, recalling the brief shot in Freder's earlier hallucination, Death raises the flute to his lipless mouth and plays. Cutting back to long shot, the statues step from their niches stiffly, as if still contending with, not overcoming, their inert stillness. In close-up Death continues his music. This image of gothic statues come to life fulfils Worringer's description of the gothic as a frozen



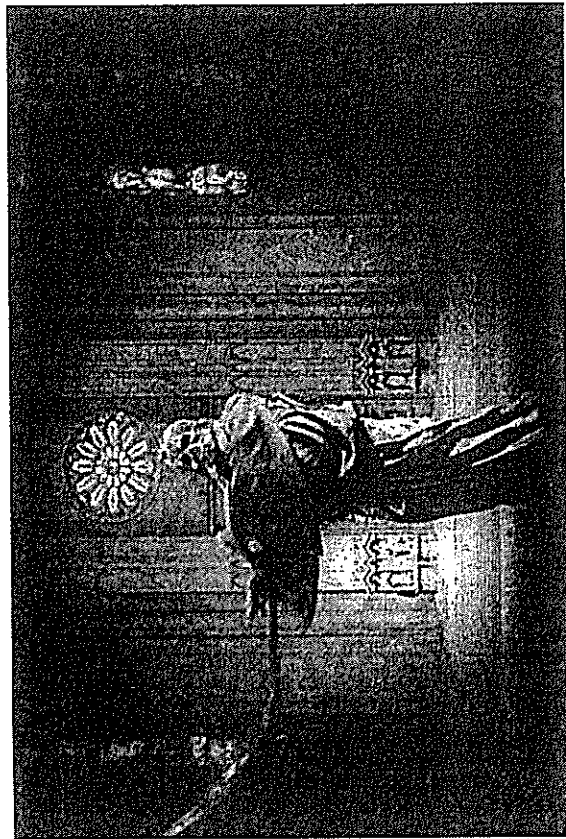
moment of energetic gesture and Fletcher's image of allegorical agents as images brought to life in a halting mechanical manner. They recall Futura, the metal robot that moves beneath the synthetically reproduced flesh of the false Maria. This grotesque Dance of Death blends the mechanical and the allegorical in one image. Then the sins dissolve away and Death has the dancing floor to himself.

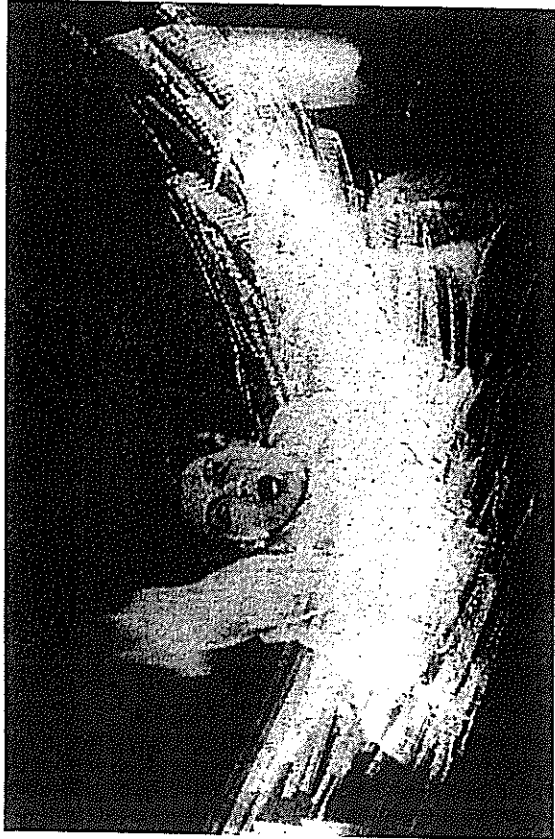
The next images take us deeper into Freder's delirium and propose an allegorical riddle that ties his Oedipal conflicts back to the question of who wields power in Metropolis. Intercut with Freder's visionary trance-like stare, Death comes forward. Lang cuts to one of the *leit motifs* of the film, the steam whistle that marks the cycle of ten hour working shifts in the city of Metropolis. Like the nightwatchman's cry in *Der müde Tod*, it is an aural marking of the passing of time, the mechanical progression of the Destiny-machine, here embodied in the whole city organised as one vast mechanism. When the whistle blows, as Harbou phrases it in her novel, all the machines of the city demand to be fed on living men.⁴³ In its time-marking, rationalised aspect, the steam whistle appears as the tool of Freder's father, Joh, linking up with a series of images that unite Joh with the clock and its almost sadistic measurement of time. A huge clock face looms over Joh's office at the top of the New Tower of Babylon. During Freder's ordeal at the dial machine, Lang cuts to Joh Fredersen glancing at his watch, shown in close-up, then back to Freder moving the dial hands. In the next few shots the dial becomes a clock face with numerals and minute hands as Freder appears crucified upon the hands of time. He appeals then to his father in a parody of Christ's words on the cross. The answer and his deliverance come with the steam whistle. The steam whistle embodies, then, both aspects of power in Metropolis, the rationalised order represented by Joh's methodical calm, and the demonic hunger, fed on human flesh, of the Moloch machine. Now in Freder's vision both demand and order are tied to Death. Freder claps his hands over his ears at the piercing noise.



In the penultimate image of the delirium, Death is shown in front of the cathedral, his scythe in his hands, swinging the blade as he moves forward, swiping at the camera. The image of the Grim Reaper, the gothic image of death, derives partly from the reaping angels described in *Revelations* harvesting the souls of the world. But his accoutrements, the hour glass and the scythe, also derive from a classical reference, the god Kronos, the Greek god of time, and father of Zeus. Kronos in Hesiod's *Theogony* castrates his father Uranos with a sickle given him by his mother. He in turn devours his own children until killed by Zeus. I have no doubt Harbou, with her love of mythology, was aware of these associations with the Grim Reaper, and used them to articulate her blending of Oedipus and Christ in Freder. Freder reacts to this figure with his greatest panic. In the last image of the sequence, Lang shows him flailing his arms in alarm as if trying to ward off the blow from the scythe. Beautifully, Lang images Death's attack as an attack on the film image itself: a huge arcing scratch appears over the image of Freder, marking in a supernatural way the curving stroke of the scythe in this visionary reverse angle. To affirm its castrating power, the scratch passes over Freder, as if cancelling him out. Once again he loses consciousness.

On one level the allegorical figure here encourages a psychoanalytic decoding: Freder as terrified by the castrating power of his father, a reading very much in line with the scene previous to this delirium, his horror at the primal scene of Joh and Maria. The Freudian primal scene, as Laplanche and Pontalis put it, gives rise to sexual excitation in the child while at the same time providing a basis for castration anxiety.⁴⁴ Freder's fantasy acts out both of these, combined with an image of the mother figure as literally a whore. Freder seems unable to deal with the threat his father poses. But if the allegory is not simply read as a case of character psychosis, but as a serious answer to the riddle of power in Metropolis, we recognise what the flash-images in Freder's earlier hallucination hinted at. Behind the two extreme





faces power assumes in this city of modernity – the rationalised image of the clock face and the devouring maw of the monster (both images associated with the castrating god of time, Kronos) – stands a figure of primal terror – lack and castration itself, and a desire for the absolute wiping clear of all representation, the scratching away of the film's emulsion, the desire not only for death but for the end of everything – apocalypse.

Are we to read this central sequence of *Metropolis*, then, psychoanalytically, or allegorically? One of the triumphs of Lang's visual language and Harbou's mythopoiesis in this sequence is to render psychoanalysis as a modern allegorical language as rich in figures and exemplary narratives as any sacred text. *Metropolis* converts psychoanalytical imagery into visual tropes as creatively as the medieval cathedrals did the Holy Scriptures (and their host of other sources). At the same time, the chaos of this film, its interbreeding of references, its syncretism of sources – from mythology, from the Bible, from Freud, from sensation films – makes it impossible to disentangle a psychoanalytical reading from the others (mythic and allegorical) offered. One can no more read Freder's dream simply as an Oedipal fantasy and leave it at that, than decode its mythic references and ignore the psychoanalytical references. We are mired deep within the allegorical imagination and its processes. This blasted allegory gives the film much of its postmodernist feel; the processes for making significance still function, but there remains no single master-text for making sense of the damn thing.

Apocalypse without End, Endings without Conviction

This Babylonian confusion of words
Results from their being the language
Of men who are going down.
That we no longer understand them
Results from the fact that it is no longer
Of any use to understand them.

Bertolt Brecht, 'The Babylonian Confusion'⁴⁵

The final third of this film chronicles the destruction of the city of Metropolis primarily by forces unleashed by the robotic Maria, and therefore with the collusion of Joh Fredersen, the figure of instrumental rationality, and Rotwang, the figure of demonic technology. As almost all viewers have noticed, Joh Fredersen's action seems to be lacking a motive (in fact the supplier of the English language intertitles felt compelled to manufacture one not present in the English language version, describing Fredersen's desire to eliminate the workers and replace them with robots, aware of the gap in Harbou's character logic). In her novel Harbou responds theologically rather than psychologically to this lack with an allegorical scene in which Freder encounters his father standing before a cross sparking with electricity in the machine room as the whole city is shaking with explosions. He begs his father to save the city, but Joh Fredersen declares it is his will the city must be destroyed so that Freder can build it up again and redeem its inhabitants. Whether or not this scene was ever part of the original film, it still remains inconclusive. Freder does not accept his father's mission but remains incapable of stopping the city's destruction.

The motiveless destruction of Metropolis may reflect Lang's own vision, an attitude found in accounts of Lang's own titanic efforts during the film's production, as well as in the Tower of Babel parable: an unparalleled energy of creation matched by an equally powerful nihilism, a desire to smash creation into shards. Witnesses of Lang's filming have described his delight in personally precipitating the conflagrations that tend to mark the climaxes of his silent films. Designer Eric Kettelhut described Lang shooting the magnesium flares-tipped arrow which initiates the holocaust of Etzel's palace in *Kriemhild's Revenge*. Cameraman Fritz Arno Wagner reported Lang's glee in pushing the red button that caused the explosion of the chemical factory in *The Testament of Dr. Mabius*. And Harbou reported that Lang himself threw the torch onto robotic Maria's funeral pyre.⁴⁶ The director's hand intervenes here personally to immolate the world he has conceived. The authorial fantasy becomes a fantasy of destruction.

The ending of *Metropolis* simply extends the conflagrations which end *Der müde Tod* and *Die Nibelungen* with longer duration and more elaborate sets. Although on one level the film can be seen as a reactionary, cautionary tale about the destructive power of workers' revolt, the film actually displaces its political discussion of power into a nihilistic denunciation of the world, expressing the melancholic world-denying nihilism that Benjamin associates with the allegorical mode. Here lies the film's power. However, the film backs away from its nihilistic vision and attempts to rein-stall Freder as an action hero, rescuing the children Maria first proclaimed his brothers, from the flood (but failing to rescue what he believes is his beloved from

the flames, as the robotic Maria is burned by the crowd), then, least originally of all, rescuing Maria from Rotwang and flinging the magician from the top of the cathedral (like a recycling of Universal's 1923 *The Huntback of Notre Dame*, precisely the mechanical sort of American costume film Lang had claimed he was determined *not* to take as a model).⁴⁷ These unconvincing heroics are followed by the film's most tepid allegory, one which intentionally or unintentionally seems to self-destruct before our eyes.

Resolution comes quickly to this film, as if the business of tying up loose ends should be accomplished as soon as possible. Within a single reel we see: the rescue of Maria; the destruction of Rotwang (having become the scapegoat of the film, at least for its resolution); the burning away of the illusory flesh of the false Maria; the accession to manhood of Freder (marked mainly by his climbing ability); the transformation of Joh Fredersen (embodied in his hair turning white as he watches his son's peril among the cathedral towers); and the pacification of the workers (presumably by the combined terror and pity of watching the robot's immolation and Freder's hairbreadth rescue). We now get the staging of Harbou's motto: 'The mediator between brain and muscle must be the heart'. The workers form a flying wedge and toddle up the stairs of the cathedral where the motto will be staged. The hierarchical stairs with Freder, Joh and Maria at the top and the orderly geometrical pyramid of workers seems designed to reverse the powerful image of revolt in the Tower of Babel sequence. The workers are led by Grot the foreman who approaches Joh Fredersen, hands in his pockets like a bashful adolescent too shy to ask for the next dance. Joh stands like a prom queen unable to overcome his stiff reluctance. Maria urges Freder to emerge from the corner: he has withdrawn into and act like a good host and help the guests mingle, intoning, 'there can be no understanding between the Hand and the Brain unless the Heart acts as mediator'. Freder takes the hands of the reluctant couple and pulls them together into the handshake that now ends all existent versions of the film.

Everyone hates this ending. I will not try to redeem it, but there are things worth pointing out about it. First, it is an extremely literal allegory, a tableau of personification in which the characters line up to form a sentence, spelled out in front of us, reading left to right, HANDS (Grot) BRAIN (Joh) and between them HEART (Freder). Further, its artificiality is stressed: we see it staged before us within the theatrical porch of the cathedral with Maria acting like a kindergarten teacher patiently directing her bored charges. But these aspects of super-legibility and artificiality also reflect the allegorical mode, so it would be inconsistent to fault this sequence for them. More complex issues are raised, however, if we scrutinise the personifications performed for us. Joh Fredersen remains the brain of Metropolis, no change there. Freder apparently has won his right to represent the heart by his compassion for the workers' children. And the hand, the workers — are represented by Grot. Who is Grot? We have seen him earlier as the spy who brings Joh the plans found on the dead workers, and communicating to Fredersen over a television telephone about the workers trying to wreck the machines. He defied the workers as they approached his machine, then led them to capture and burn the robotic Maria. In other words, the workers here are represented by a management spy and informer, who cares only for the machines of Metropolis. And the heart is the boss's son, who at one point donned the workers' overalls for part of one shift that almost killed him and has been wearing his former silk duds ever since. The tableau staged for us shows the boss congratulating his spy and *agent provocateur* with his son cementing the deal. Kracauer, determined to discover the contraband concealed



within this tableau, gave it this interpretation decades ago: 'The whole composition denotes that the industrialist acknowledges the heart for the purpose of manipulating it; that he does not give up his power, but will expand it over a realm not yet annexed — the realm of the collective soul.'⁴⁸ Georges Sadoul also noted that the workers approach the cathedral like the subdued automata they appeared to be when they went to work in the beginning of the films and asks, 'Shouldn't we see here an internal critique of an imposed ending?'⁴⁹

Are we supposed to read this sequence this way, can we argue for an authorial intention? Nothing in Harbou's novel indicates cynicism about her motto (but this scene of reconciliation is also absent from it). The Tower of Babel sequence (which I presented as a guide to reading allegorical figures in the film) ends, as I noted, with an inscribed motto (Great is Man) which is belied by the imagery of ruin beneath it. But Lang, for all his discomfort with the ending of this film, never claimed he visually undercut it. Perhaps the discomfort the ending causes most viewers comes partly from the film itself, an underlying nihilism which it cannot articulate explicitly. Or this may simply be a case where the melancholic nihilism of allegory has so outrun any attempt at an optimistic narrative resolution that even if taken at face value this final tableau proves inadequate, not only as political thinking, but as an aesthetic strategy. Or if this tableau of reconciliation is not to be read against the grain, then it perhaps should be read cynically, as the fulfilment of Joh Fredersen's master plan, with the revolt operating within the total system of Metropolis much like the explosion in the machine room, an unavoidable spate of violence easily absorbed into the cycle of inhuman production, a release of demonic energy — like Metropolis's steam whistle, containable within the re-established cycles of work. Anton Kaes has also proposed to me another approach: that *Metropolis* is conceived basically as a series of sensations, a film of disparate attractions rather than narrative integration, and that

Lang simply didn't care that much about pulling it all together in a final satisfying coherence. The final tableaux would then be a cinematic equivalent of the Looney Toon proclamation of closure — 'That's all Folks!'

Burn Witch Burn

CHIEF ENGINEER: For the first time a gap opens in a system that has been flawless all the years. The pendulum swings wild! The machine has stalled. ... It's the machine that's running wild and it's running wild because its works are moving to a different rhythm. ... The tumult becomes a face grinning its hideousness into their horror-frozen minds!

Georg Kaiser, *Gas II*⁵⁰

The last truly powerful image in the climax of *Metropolis* comes with the burning of Maria. The burning reverses the process of creation already discussed, with the fleshly sheath melting from the metallic armature. As such it literalises a typical Langian visionary revelation. The crowd draws back in horror as they see the metal robot tied to the stake. If the allegorical centre of *Metropolis* lies in the revelation of a demonic energy at the core of the rational system of modern technology, it appears for the last time in this bizarre immolation. The apocalypse in *Revelations* purges the world with a great holocaust and prepares the way for a new heaven and new earth. Here the flames uncover an interior that cannot be burned, the robot as image of death standing amid the flames. This unconsumed residue, this leftover of death, returns us to one of the allegories of *Metropolis* which never seems to be thoroughly digested, the figure of the false Maria.

The gender stereotypes and polarity of the film, as already noted, portray the flesh and blood Maria as virginal and pure: Brigitte Helm's body language remains asexual, motherly when she kisses Freder and entirely lacking in sensuality. The robotic Maria, however, possesses every cliché of carnality, and Helm does an amazing job of keeping these signs of sexuality coming. Not only are hair and makeup transformed, but facial expression and bodily posture telegraph an errant sensuality. Robotic Maria doesn't simply dance semi-naked in nightclubs, entice men in evening dress to fight duels and commit suicide over her, and invert Maria's message of peace and patience into one of violence and revolt — her total body language stands at antipodes to Maria's. Whereas Maria's hands are usually folded in front of her as she stands rather rigidly and moves with stately symmetry, robotic Maria stands with legs apart, runs, holds her hands above her, forming grasping claws, or pulls provocatively at her bodice, and thrusts her head and pelvis out. Her movements remain jerky, her head, particularly, darting from side to side like a lizard's, her body bent forward as she speaks to the workers. But this liveliness and sensuality are attributed to the *machine*, while rigidity and repose are the attributes of the (supposedly) living woman.

Andreas Huyssen first directed critical attention to *Metropolis*'s relation to a long tradition that tied technology to the cultural image of the feminine, embodied in his quote from art collector Eduard Fuchs: '... the machine which coldly, cruelly, relentlessly sacrifices hecatombs of men as if they were nothing is the symbol of the man-strangling Minotaur-like nature of woman.'⁵¹ Huyssens points out that the

duality of the virginal Maria and her destructive mechanical twin not only reflects patriarchal fears of woman, but also contrasting views of technology: the machine as obedient passive servant to man, or as an untamable destructive force. Huyssen also relates this diametrically opposed attitude towards technology to *Metropolis*'s dual inheritances: from Expressionism which distrusted technology and from *Neue Sachlichkeit* which embraced the machine's rational order. The climactic witch-burning becomes for Huyssen a purging of both fear of woman's sexuality and of the unpredictable energy of technology, making way for a new rational order.

In perhaps the most thorough and complex essay on *Metropolis*, R. L. Rutsky has complicated Huyssen's schema, emphasising the film's desire to avoid choosing between these two alternatives, and attempts to find mediation through figures which seem to combine opposed traits. According to Rutsky both the realm of the purely rational (Joh) or the instinctively sexual (robotic Maria — notice how the workers again drop out of the schema) are portrayed as incomplete and deadly.⁵² I think Rutsky's reading of the film's logic holds, but we run into the same problem, the inability of the film to portray this mediated wholeness convincingly, an inability which may be a backhand virtue rather than a vice. Just as the film cannot imagine Freder as a convincing saviour, and cannot truly come up with a new melding of religion and technology to 'heal' the rift within the city of *Metropolis*, it does not succeed in raising a new cathedral of humanity. Rutsky convincingly relates the film to the architectural fantasies circulating through Weimar culture, from Paul Scheerbart's *Glasarchitektur* and Lionel Feiniger's Cathedral of Socialism to Albert Speer's 'Cathedral of Light' designed for the Nuremberg Party Rallies.⁵³ But this is not what the ending of the film portrays. As Rutsky admits, the enthused vitalised crowds attending the Nuremberg rallies in *Triumph of the Will* have little in common with the pacified and re-mechanised workers Sadoul noted at the end of *Metropolis*.⁵⁴ Perhaps the ultimate image of *Metropolis*'s fortunate failure in achieving the aesthetic and religious renewal of the technological state would be Lang's image of the supernatural creatures fleeing from the collapsing church. Walter Benjamin, speaking of the baroque allegorists, complained that 'these allegories fill out and deny the void in which they are represented just as ultimately, the intention does not faithfully rest in the contemplation of bones, but, faithlessly leaps forward to the idea of Resurrection.'⁵⁵ The resolution of *Metropolis* also makes this faithless leap, but seems to lose its footing, while the aesthetic energy of the film remains true to 'the contemplation of bones.'

But the issue of sexuality's relation to gender, the riddle of the false Maria remains. It is not simply that the false Maria figures the feminine as technological, she also embodies sexuality itself. Clearly part of the horror of the crowd at the final image of Maria at the stake lies in the fact that instead of bones revealed beneath the fire-consumed flesh, one sees the machine, an image neither of life nor death. Beneath the whore of Babylon runs the mechanism of modernity. In this respect Huyssen's technological reference should not be to Vaucason's flautists, but to Henry Adams' revelation at the Gallery of Machines at the 1900 Paris Exposition of the common element shared by the dynamo as the force of modernity and the Virgin as the force behind the gothic cathedrals: energy. Sexual energy and mechanical energy for Adams had the common denominator of future, or attraction.⁵⁶ If the motives of Joh Fredersen and Rotwang in the creation of Futura as a sensual version of the virgin Maria remain obscure in terms of narrative logic, the sequence of robotic Maria's performances makes clear that the fascination of their experiment lies in the energy and attraction generated by the exploitation of mechanical sex as

a visual spectacle. A charismatic performer who excites upper-class young men to acts of violence against themselves and each other and working class audiences to orgies of destruction against machines, the robotic Maria demonstrates an untapped explosive energy equal to the mysterious Gas which powered Georg Kaiser's Expressionist play so influential on Harbou's script.

Sex as energy and as a means of stimulation, if not control, takes the visual form of a woman as the focus of the male gaze. But once that form is taken away, only the metallic works are revealed. Freder's panic at this vision marks it as another figure of the terrifying lack at the centre of this film, while the horror shared by the crowd as well reveals it as not limited to his unsuccessful Oedipal trajectory. This image reveals the void Benjamin found at the centre of allegory as much as a Lacanian lack, and the strongest moments of the film confront (and equate?) both. Feminist readings of this film have not proposed Harbou's script as a feminist work, and more than her ultimate Nazi affiliation seems to argue against such appropriation. Harbou (or Lang) do not seem capable of a truly feminist critique any more than of a Marxist, Freudian or Christian resolution. Instead, we have a text whose allegorical energies seem unable to coalesce into a single grand narrative, but rather ceaselessly generates reference to nearly all the narratives – political, religious, occult, aesthetic, sexual – that circulated through Weimar culture. The energy in *Metropolis* becomes increasingly centrifugal, images escaping from the grand narratives to which they belong. Rutsky, for instance, points out that *Metropolis* utilises some of the key images Klaus Theweleit isolates from the writings of members of the Freikorps to express their unconscious terror of women, such as the overwhelming flood.⁵⁷ But if the flood can be associated with the robotic Maria through her role in destroying the machines, it is also opposed by the angelic Maria, who strives to rescue the children from the rising tides. More important, however, might be the image of the masculine body armour, particularly as embodied in Ernst Junger's steel-clad bodies of warriors and industrial workers.⁵⁸ One must observe Harbou's brilliant, and perhaps feminist, inversion of this image. The woman as an object manufactured for the male gaze wears her flesh on the outside, her metallic sheath within.

Harbou's understanding of the gender roles in this film may not be limited to the skin deep contrast between the Madonna and the whore of Babylon. Not only, as Huyssen points out, do the sequences of robotic Maria's performances reveal the working of the male gaze in an unparalleled critical fashion, the image of the robotic Maria stands less as liberated female cyborg, than the deconstruction of the attractions of commercial sexuality.⁵⁹ The crowd, after being aroused by robotic Maria's erotic gyrations, punish her and burn her flesh away. Their moment of triumph turns to horror, however, when her body armour is revealed, standing like a final allegorical emblem, invulnerable to their flames. The robot at the stake (invoking Joan of Arc – whose heart, according to legend, would not burn as much as the witch) and the crowd's horror provides an endlessly generative allegorical enigma, in contrast to the inert illustration of final reconciliation offered on the cathedral steps. It is perhaps this understanding of the feminine masquerade as a different form of body armour, skin deep with a metallic core to shield the centre from the male gaze, that attracted Maria's modern counterpart Madonna, who knows a thing or two about the apotropaic power of donning the costume of a slut.

As I mentioned, the ending everyone hates and which is ritually attributed to Harbou, does not appear in her novel. Instead, the novel ends by invoking again the absent women that hover over the story, Hel, Freder's mother, Joh's dead wife and

Rotwang's lost mistress. This finale is arranged by another withdrawn mother, Joh Frederesen's estranged mother (who lives in a farm house with a thatched roof and a walnut tree which Joh has transplanted to a rooftop in the city) and has always opposed her son's work. Joh returns to her, chastened and humbled, and she gives him a letter she has been keeping, written by Hel shortly before her death. The letter closes by quoting the Bible: 'I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.' Harbou's novel opens with the motto about the heart as mediator, but closes with a message from a dead woman, and a protest against separation. In the last lines Joh Frederesen repeats the message of ultimate reunion in a manner which stresses its apocalyptic horizon: 'Until the end of the world ... until the end of the world.'