

## Notes on *Metropolis*



### The Restored Version

The story of the discovery of an almost complete 16mm print of *Metropolis* in Buenos Aires is recounted in *Sight and Sound* September 2008 (Naundorf, 2008: 26-29). The extra footage in that print has now been incorporated into the incomplete version of the film which has been in circulation for many years, and the original intertitles have been re-instated. The restored film was premiered in Berlin on 12 February 2010 with the original 1927 score by Gottfried Huppertz. It is now available on DVD in the UK in the 'Masters of Cinema' series from Eureka. Two sequences – summarised in on-screen titles – remain lost, and there are a few jumps in the editing resulting from missing frames. Otherwise the film is complete, although all the additional footage is unsurprisingly of very poor quality.

Overall, the film now flows more smoothly: most hiatuses have gone, links between narrative threads are more coherent, and sequences which are now longer, such as the rescue of the children, are more dramatic. One can also see embryonic examples of the sort of 'associative editing' that Lang was to develop in his subsequent German films. (See my article on *Das Testament des Dr Mabuse*, 1933, in this issue.) The histrionics of Rotwang (Rudolf Klein-Rogge) in his first encounter with Fredersen (Alfred Abel) now make sense, because they relate to the tensions between the two men over Hel, who left Rotwang for Fredersen and subsequently died giving birth to Fredersen's son Freder (Gustav Fröhlich). Other significant elements to emerge as a result of the extra scenes are summarised below. The implications of these additional features will be discussed later.

1) Freder, like Maria (Brigitte Helm), has a double. The young man, Georgy (Erwin Biswanger), whom Freder

replaces on the machine in effect (temporarily) swaps identities with him. The men exchange clothes, and Freder sends Georgy to Josaphat (Theodor Loos), the secretary whom Fredersen dismissed. Finding money in Freder's pocket, Georgy is side-tracked into Yoshiwara, the notorious nightclub which features prominently in later scenes. There are no scenes in Yoshiwara at this point, but Georgy does not emerge until the next day, whereupon he is seized by Slim (Fritz Rasp), who has been delegated by Fredersen to find and keep an eye on Freder. Discovering Josaphat's address on Georgy, Slim sends him back to his machine. Georgy is next seen in the catacombs when Freder (with Josaphat) confronts Robot Maria (Helm) with the accusation: 'Du bist nicht Maria!'. The workers recognise Freder as Fredersen's son, turn on him, and it is Georgy who steps in front of a



knife thrust and thereby saves Freder's life. Robot Maria and the workers set off to the Machine Room; Freder and Josaphat stay with Georgy as he dies.

2) There is a huge bust of Hel on a plinth in Rotwang's house, and he intended his robot to replace Hel. (There is no explanation as to how he thought he could do this. In the film's terms, it 'makes sense' that he is able to create a double of Maria – he has the real Maria there to draw from. Hel has been dead for twenty years.) After witnessing Maria preach to the workers in the catacombs, Fredersen orders Rotwang to give the robot Maria's face – so that he can 'sow discord' between the workers and Maria. But Rotwang here has observed more than Fredersen: the budding romance between Freder and Maria. This means that he can now see a way to use the robot to make Freder hate his father.

3) Waiting for Maria in the Cathedral, Freder hears a monk preach the imminence of the Apocalypse. This scene is still missing, but we are shown the page (from an illustrated Bible) to which the monk is pointing: a drawing of 'The whore of Babylon', sitting astride a multi-headed beast, accompanied by a text which vilifies her. (The text is taken from *Revelation* Chapter 17, and rather coyly censored.) When Robot Maria emerges out of the urn in Yoshiwara astride some sort of monster, this is a precise echo of the drawing.



4) The roles of Josaphat, as Freder's friend, and Slim, as Fredersen's agent, are both more developed. Nuances emerge in their characterisations, especially in the case of Slim, whose public demeanour is sneering, but who is by no means entirely deferential to Fredersen. When Fredersen orders: 'Whatever happens tonight, it is my express order to allow the workers to do as they please', Slim's reaction is to close his eyes. He is registering the craziness of such thinking. Slim also appears in Freder's hallucinations. After Freder's breakdown – at seeing his father and Robot Maria together – he is shown in bed reacting to (as though 'seeing') events occurring elsewhere: the erotic dance of Robot Maria in Yoshiwara driving the male patrons wild with lust. But he also hallucinates Slim as the apocalyptic preacher, declaiming at the foot of his bed.

5) After the children have been rescued, they are taken into 'the sons' club', hitherto the preserve of the rich young men of Metropolis. However, Maria is still outside the club when

Grot (Heinrich George) and the workers come storming up to seek revenge for the deaths of their children – which they blame on Robot Maria. Seeing Maria, they turn on her. Not given time to explain that the children are safe, Maria is forced to flee from the angry crowd. During this, she runs past the revellers who have come out of Yoshiwara with Robot Maria. The two groups collide with one another, but the outcome is that Maria escapes (into the porch of the cathedral) and Robot Maria is seized in her place. The latter is then taken to an improvised bonfire and burned as a witch.

6) In the meantime, Rotwang has recovered consciousness after a fight in his house with Fredersen. (The fight itself is the second sequence which is still missing.) Cryptically, he addresses the statue of Hel: 'Now I'm going to take you home, my Hel'. It's possible that he thinks that he is dead (as in this scene in the novel). As if sleepwalking, he leaves his house, and goes to the cathedral. Seeing Maria running his way, he hides from her inside the porch. Then, whilst Robot Maria is being burnt, he confronts Maria, addressing her as 'Hel'. She flees into the cathedral; he pursues her – as in the cut version.

### The Novel

Inevitably, the restored version brings the film closer to Thea von Harbou's novel of *Metropolis* ([1927] 1963). The complicated relationship between von Harbou's novel, her script and the finished film is teased out by Thomas Elsaesser (2000: 12-16). It was always intended that the novel would be issued in book form as a tie-in to the film's release, but it was serialised in *Das illustrierte Blatt* from August 1926 (2000: 12), and so I am taking it to be the earliest 'version' of *Metropolis*. As Elsaesser points out, the novel's 'appalling prose' makes it 'almost unreadable' (2000: 13). Here a feature of silent movies – the *selective* rendering of dialogue through intertitles – indubitably does von Harbou a favour. In the novel, when Freder tells his father – in their first scene together – what he witnessed in the Machine Rooms, he bumbles on about 'Baal and Moloch, Huitzilopochtli and Durga [...], Juggernaut's divine car and the Towers of Silence, Mahomet's curved sword and the crosses of Golgotha' and much more (von Harbou 1963: 28). In this scene in the film, we see Freder declaiming at length, but von Harbou's purple prose is tactfully withheld from the screen.

It cannot be doubted that the film is a vast improvement on the novel. The visual qualities of the film have been justly praised over the years; the problem for the critics has been its ideological naivety and facile moral, both of which stem from the novel. Nor is the novel much help in accounting for the one moment in the film which clearly does not make sense: when Fredersen orders Grot to open the gates to the Heart Machine, thereby allowing the rioting workers in to destroy it. Fredersen must know that the demolition of the Heart Machine will result in the destruction, not just of the workers' underground city but also of the very infrastructure which supports the life of the upper city of Metropolis. (We know that the destruction causes a power failure: Maria wonders why all the lights are out. But a detail which has received little attention is that the cars are no longer running: the roads are all jammed with empty vehicles.) In the novel, Fredersen at least gives his son an explanation for permitting the destruction: the city will be ruined so that Freder can build it up again and redeem the rioting workers (1963: 172). But it's an insane explanation.

### The Critics

I have read four excellent essays on the various versions of *Metropolis* which have circulated over the years. In chronological order, these are: Roger Dadoun, 'Metropolis: Mother-City – 'Mittler' – Hitler', translated from the French in *Camera Obscura* 15 (1986); the chapter on the film in Tom Gunning's *The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Vision and Modernity* (2000: 52-83); Thomas Elsaesser's BFI monograph *Metropolis* (2000) and Susan Smith: 'Metropolis: Restoration, Re-evaluation' in *CineAction* 66 (2005). Dadoun's essay is primarily psychoanalytical, although he also makes some pertinent observations about the Hitler – 'Mittler' ('Mediator') link, noting elements in the film which might well have appealed to Hitler's sense of his own mission. With detailed reference to the film's imagery, Gunning develops several arguments: the film as an allegory, the clash between 'the Gothic' and modernity in the film, and the hero's Oedipal nightmare. Elsaesser considers the very different critical readings of the film that have been put forward over the years and also provides a historical perspective, both to the film's production and reception and to the various restorations up to 2000. He also notes some of works which either make reference to or show the influence of the film: Thomas Pynchon's novel *Gravity's Rainbow* (1972) and films from *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) to *Dark City* (Alex Proyas, 1998). (One could also add *The Matrix*, Andy & Larry Wachowski, 1999.) He suggests that *Metropolis* 'weathered so well the contradictory treatment it received across the decades [because] it has the robustness of a fairy-tale' (2000: 51). Susan Smith looks at the implications of the missing footage as detailed in the 2001 restoration, made available on DVD in 2003. In that restoration,

many of the film's then-existing narrative gaps were filled in with the help of the film's censor cards, which provided the original intertitles and enabled plot summaries to be written of the missing segments. Accordingly, she is able to consider some of the narrative material which only emerged fully in the restored version, e.g. she notes that Georgy functions as Freder's 'psychic double' (2005: 20). An account by Martin Koerber of the recent restorations – and how each built on the previous – is included in the booklet in the 2010 Eureka DVD of the film.

Collectively, these critics provide a number of different perspectives on the film, and my comments are essentially supplementary to the points they make. The comments are not restricted to the implications of the additional material in the film, but this material often serves to bring out more clearly the elements I wish to discuss.

### A Lang Motif: Hands

Tom Gunning mentions that Lang would insert himself into his films through close-ups of his hand, which would on certain occasions be substituted for the hand of a particular character (2000: 2). However, Gunning does not really discuss the hand as a *motif* in Lang's films. I have looked at 'Hands' as a motif in Hitchcock's films (Walker 2005: 220-237); such an exercise could equally be carried out for Lang. The use of the motif in *Metropolis* could thus be seen as a starting-point.

In constructing his 'Machine-Man' (i.e. the robot), Rotwang sacrificed his right hand, which is now metal encased in a black leather glove. (We do not learn how the loss occurred – whether it was deliberate or accidental.) It is this gloved hand that he waggles at Fredersen when first telling



him about the robot: ‘Do you think the loss of a hand is too high a price for recreating Hel?’, and then, in front of the robot, when he is equally emphatic: ‘Now, Joh Fredersen, isn’t it worth losing a hand to have created the man of the future: the Machine-Man?’. Because of this loss, Dadoun speaks of Rotwang as ‘symbolically castrated’ (1986: 146). But the way Rotwang displays his gloved metal hand suggests the opposite: he is showing off his symbolic phallus, as though it had indeed been used to create his ‘Machine-Man’. There are similar connotations when he seizes and manhandles Maria in the attic room, a scene which clearly suggests rape. As she struggles in his grasp, he uses his gloved hand to ‘master’ her.

Rotwang’s ‘phallic’ gloved hand is then echoed in Slim’s black leather-gloved hand. In the restored version, we see that Slim has an iron grip: there are close-ups of his hand seizing and subduing first Georgy and then Josaphat. These are all instances of the hand as an instrument of power and control. The association of a black leather-gloved hand with power and brutality is taken up later in Lang’s work through the figure of the crime boss Schränker (Gustav Gründgens) in *M* (1931).

By contrast, the love scene between Maria and Freder in the catacombs is played out with them holding and caressing one another’s hands. As they separate, Freder continues to caress Maria’s hand as he backs slowly away from her, so that her arm stretches out towards him – expressing, for both of them, their reluctance to let go. Here the use of the hands motif is delicate, sensuous.



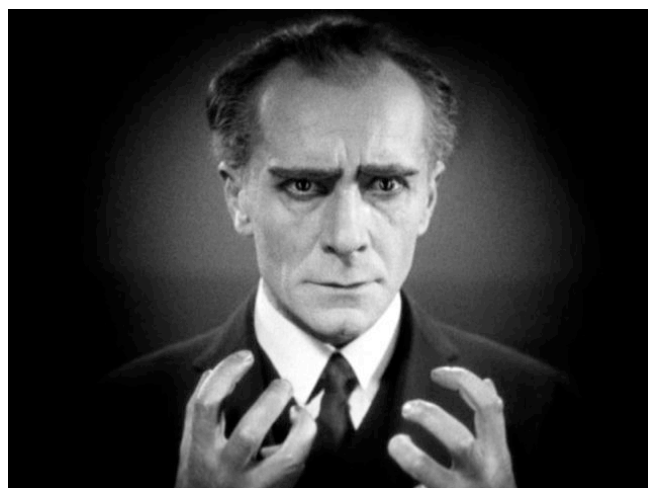
With Fredersen, the motif is articulated differently again. In his first scene, when Freder enters his study, Fredersen merely has to raise his hand, with his back to his son, to stop the latter in his tracks and prevent him from interrupting his, Fredersen’s, train of thought. This naturalistic gesture may be contrasted with other scenes in which, like Rotwang, Fredersen uses his hands ‘expressionistically’, as a heightened expression of his feelings. When he first meets Robot Maria, Fredersen flexes his curved fingers in front of him before ordering her: ‘I want you to go to those in the Depths in order to annihilate the work of your prototype’. The gesture suggests the threat of strangulation, as though he wishes to throttle the workers’ aspirations for a better life.

The film then ends with hands: at the entrance to the cathedral, Freder brings the hands of his father and Grot – the latter in his capacity as leader of the workers – together in a handshake. This is the fulfilment of Maria’s and the film’s mission: Freder is the mediator (Mittler) between the

head (Fredersen) and the hands (the workers). In Tom Gunning’s words: ‘Everybody hates this ending’ (2000: 78). Nevertheless, for all the overtly allegorical nature of both the characters and the scene – which Gunning discusses – it should also be recognised that both Fredersen and Grot have changed. Fredersen’s hair has turned white as a result of his anxiety for Freder, and in his capacity as Master of Metropolis he would never have deigned to shake hands with his foreman before. Earlier Grot betrayed the workers (bringing Fredersen plans concerning their meetings in the catacombs), then he led them in their burning of Robot Maria. Now he, too, seems chastened. It’s by no means a satisfactory ending, but it’s not perhaps such an unmitigated disaster as is commonly held. In fact, the handshake brings the film to a rather abrupt close, with important issues still unresolved. Implicit in the handshake is a new covenant with the workers, but even if Fredersen keeps to this, we cannot say what sort of prospects the workers would be likely to have in the future Metropolis, nor what the consequences would be for the idle rich who have hitherto benefited from their toil.

### Other Themes and Motifs

*Curtains and statues.* Curtains are associated primarily with two locations: Rotwang’s house and Yoshiwara. Curtains conceal but also reveal: they preserve privacy but can also separate stage and audience. In Rotwang’s house, the monumental bust of Hel is hidden behind curtains – which is where it remained in the cut version of the movie. But



Fredersen pulls the cord which opens the curtains, sees the statue and reads the inscription: ‘Hel – born to bring me happiness and a benediction to all mankind. Lost to Joh Fredersen. Died giving life to Freder, Joh Fredersen’s son’. It’s a curious text, designed as much to provide the viewer with crucial information as to record Rotwang’s sense of loss. When Rotwang enters this room (from behind other curtains), he immediately rushes forwards and re-draws the curtains in front of Fredersen, as though the statue and its legend were too personal for Fredersen’s eyes. Later, when Freder comes into this room to ask Rotwang where Maria is, Rotwang appears from behind these curtains and stands in front of them, holding them firmly shut. They hide his secret.

The robot is also hidden behind curtains, and here Rotwang is happy to draw them back to show Fredersen his creation. The curtains in Rotwang’s house are a feature of its gothic décor, but it is striking that behind two of them lie reproductions of women. Moreover, just as Rotwang treats



the bust of Hel reverentially, there is a brief scene – immediately after the monk’s diatribe against the ‘whore of Babylon’ – in which Rotwang kneels before the robot and looks up at her: ‘You will annihilate Joh Fredersen – him and his city and his son’. It’s as though he is addressing a goddess.

This scene is inserted into the sequence of Freder in the cathedral, looking for Maria. Instead, he encounters the statue of Death, flanked by statues of the seven deadly sins – another gothic motif. Later, thanks to Rotwang and Fredersen’s unleashing of Robot Maria, Freder will hallucinate the statue of Death as animated, delivering death to the city. The animated statue echoes the animated robot, which was destined to become Robot Maria. In the film’s apocalyptic vision, the gothic and the futuristic combine to bring death and destruction.

The use of curtains in Rotwang’s house may also be seen as theatrical. Similarly in Yoshiwara. Having provoked a fight between two men over her garter, Robot Maria disappears behind a curtain, leaving her admirers to fight it out – literally, to the death. In *Metropolis*, then, curtains are associated with veiling and unveiling ‘the woman’: as lost love, superhuman robot and temptress. Statues, embodying the idealised and the allegorical, are a linked motif: they may seem to be frozen emblems of the past, but they threaten to come to life.

Like hands, curtains feature at significant points in subsequent Lang films. *Spione* (1928) begins with a close-up of hands and ends with theatre curtains being drawn. *House by the River* (1950) contains perhaps the most unusual use of curtains: at the climax, the villain Stephen (Louis Hayward) hallucinates the body of his earlier victim in one curtain and

then contrives to get another curtain wrapped around his neck in such a way that, wrestling with it, he falls over the banisters to (we assume) his death.

*Doubles.* Maria and her double, the virgin and the whore, have been much discussed over the years. As critics have pointed out, collapsed into the figure of Maria herself are at least two distinct Biblical figures: John the Baptist (she preaches the coming of the saviour) and the Virgin Mary (she is both a virgin and a mother figure). One could add a third: on her first appearance, surrounded by children, Maria evokes sentimental religious paintings of Christ as in *Matthew* 19:14: ‘suffer little children [...] to come unto me’. If one adds to these contradictory associations the figure of the persecuted heroine, the sense of Maria as a character in her own right virtually disappears. All these associations go back to the novel, which is indeed saturated with Christian rhetoric and motifs.

Robot Maria is ‘extracted from’ Maria. The elaborate sequence in which Rotwang pursues Maria up from the catacombs, menacing her with his torchlight (another undoubtedly phallic symbol), and subsequently manhandles her in his attic, is overtly sexualised. And so, when – in the famous laboratory sequence – the sexual figure of Robot Maria is then ‘produced out of’ Maria’s body, it’s as though Rotwang has converted Maria’s sexual anxiety into libido – a libido which flows from her to Robot Maria. But it is a libido which finds a purely *theatrical* expression, in display and performance. There is little sense that Robot Maria is sexually desiring: she conveys, rather, a heightened excitement at her ability to arouse others. There is something supernatural about her effect on the men in Yoshiwara: her





provocative dance leads to them becoming frenzied with lust, and even killing one another. Then, in the catacombs, she rouses the workers to violence, but a violence directed not against their oppressors, but against the machines. This split – the upper classes roused to a frenzy of sexual desire; the lower classes to a frenzy of mindless violence – is a feature of the film’s ideological polarisation. But it is a polarisation which does not really lend itself to a coherent political reading: the film is too confused for that. (The conflicting political readings of the film which have been offered over the years are well covered by Thomas Elsaesser, 2000: 42-49.)

Freder and his double, Georgy, are in a very different sort of structural relationship. As critics have observed, Freder’s replacement of Georgy on the machine provides an excuse for yet another Christian reference: Freder is visualised as ‘crucified’ on the machine, and in his agony, he appeals to his father in terms evoking the crucified Christ. But Georgy’s behaviour at this point is little more than that of Freder before he first saw Maria. Maria’s appearance with the children interrupts Freder’s kiss with the woman chosen to be his ‘companion’ in the ‘Eternal Gardens’. (It is more obvious in the restored version that the master of ceremonies / Heinrich Gotho in this scene is pimping for Freder.) And so, when Georgy goes into the upper world and indulges in a hedonistic night in Yoshiwara, he is behaving as Freder used to. It is only when Georgy sacrifices his own life to save that of Freder that the sense of him as Freder’s double takes on additional resonances. It’s as though Georgy’s sacrificial death paves the way for Freder definitively to cast off his earlier, pleasure-seeking persona. When he returns to the upper world it is as the children’s saviour. Moreover, because, together with Josaphat and Maria, Freder leads the children to safety through the waters, he becomes something of a Moses figure, leading them to the ‘promised land’.

Susan Smith argues that Rotwang can be seen as Freder’s dark double (2005: 16-23), suggesting that the use Rotwang makes of Robot Maria does not simply express Freder’s hostility towards the workers, but also his repressed resentment of Freder, whose birth was responsible for Hel’s death. The restored version does not really support this reading. Rotwang’s obsession with the dead Hel is pointedly contrasted with Freder’s more mature response: ‘A mind like yours, Rotwang, should be able to forget’. The one person Freder is consistently solicitous towards is his son. Even the moment when Freder sees his father holding Robot Maria in a loose embrace – which precipitates his breakdown – can be seen as entirely Rotwang’s

doing: he told Freder that Maria was with his father in order to shatter the trust between father and son. There is no need to cast this moment as Freder’s repressed wish.

*Psychoanalytical undercurrents.* My reading of this scene – in which Freder sees his father and Robot Maria together – is also different from the suggestion, proposed by Dadoun (1986: 145) and followed by Gunning (2000: 70), that it is a version of the primal scene. Of course, the primal scene is alluded to at some level, but I believe that the scene and its aftermath represent rather one of the very few dramatisations in the cinema of a much rarer, but even more potent fear: that the patriarch has the power and authority to take possession of the son’s woman. I can only recall seeing such a scene three times in films, but on each occasion the son (the hero) is lastingly traumatised. Psychically, he is castrated, and the recovery process may take years. Apart from *Metropolis*, the other films in which the trauma is registered are *Autumn Leaves* (Robert Aldrich, 1956) and *Two Weeks in Another Town* (Vincente Minnelli, 1962). In the past of both these films, the hero saw his wife and his father (father figure in *Two Weeks in Another Town*) together in bed, and this led to a spectacular nervous breakdown. In *Two Weeks in Another Town*, the film begins with the hero still in a mental hospital. In *Autumn Leaves*, the hero has ‘blacked out’ (i.e. repressed) the past traumatic event, but he experiences the trauma a second time within the main narrative, after which he suffers an infantilising ‘schizophrenic withdrawal’: he, too, is then hospitalised.

In these films, the traumatic event is buried in past, hidden behind layers of repression and confusion; indeed, it takes much of the film to work out what happened to the hero. Only *Metropolis* shows the impact of the event directly on the hero. Although the actual scene that Freder witnesses is relatively innocent, Lang suggests its terrible impact on him by unleashing a whirlwind of hallucinatory effects, which climax with Freder plunging into nothingness – after which he ends up, feverish and helpless, in bed. Tom Gunning has discussed the cut version of this whole sequence at length (2000: 68-76). In the light of his detailed analysis, I will concentrate here on the implications of the additional material in the scene. In this, Freder hallucinates Slim – at the foot of his bed – as a hell-fire preacher, echoing the words of the monk in the cathedral about the coming of the Apocalypse.



Even in the cut version, the sequence of Freder in bed has masturbatory connotations. Freder sits up in bed, ‘sees’ Robot Maria in Yoshiwara doing her erotic dance, and this

so excites him that the nurse tending him offers him water to sip. Slim at the foot of Freder's bed re-enacting the monk's sermon occurs both before and after this. Robot Maria's sexual dance thus seems to be a part of the sermon: she illustrates the sinfulness which heralds the end of the world. But the film goes further. On the second occasion we see him as the monk, Slim holds up the Bible with its drawing of the whore of Babylon astride a monster, and the film cuts to Robot Maria emerging out of the urn in the same (sexually provocative) pose on a replica of the monster.



Here the editing suggests that Robot Maria on her seven-headed monster is produced out of the preacher's rage, like the return of the repressed. But, just as Freder seems to be seeing Robot Maria in Yoshiwara, so Slim's fury seems to be directed at Freder. On the one hand, the id runs wild; on the other, the superego rages. Caught between these, Freder is reduced to a quivering wreck. It is hardly surprising that the climactic image of this hallucinatory sequence is, as Gunning notes, one of castration (2000: 75-6): the animated statue of Death (another 'return of the repressed') swipes its scythe at Freder / the camera; Freder recoils in terror and, in a scythe-like gash across his body, the emulsion of the film is ripped off. Freder collapses.



This feverish sequence is a superb example of Lang's intuitive grasp of psychoanalytical material. Played out as a combination of hallucination and psychic vision, the sequence shows Freder experience the full force of the shock of (1) seeing (so he thinks) his beloved in an intimate embrace with his father and then (2) 'seeing' her as a 'whore', displaying herself erotically for the gratification of leering

men. After his collapse, we do not see Freder until ten days later, when he sits in his room reading *The Revelation of St John*. Josaphat arrives and tells him what has been happening in Yoshiwara thanks to this woman 'who is also called Maria'. Moreover, she is also addressing the workers in the catacombs. As the first stage towards recovering his potency, Freder goes into the depths and confronts this impostor. But here the workers turn on him: it is thanks only to the sacrificial intervention of Georgy that he survives. Freder and the true Maria then re-meet during the flooding of the



workers' city, when he pushes his way through the clamouring children and climbs on the plinth to embrace her: 'Ja – du. Du bist Maria!' The presence of the children and the symbolic breast-image of the gong on the plinth reaffirm this Maria as safely maternal. In helping to save the children, Freder then demonstrates that he has recovered his potency as hero. There remain further tests, notably rescuing Maria from Rotwang, but when Freder next meets his father, the latter's white hair signals his reduced sexual status. He's now an 'old man'. The hero's Oedipal journey would seem – superficially, at least – to have been successfully negotiated.

*Water and fire.* The image of Freder in the rapidly flooding square pushing his way through the mass of children towards Maria on the plinth is echoed when he pushes his way through the mass of workers towards Robot Maria on the bonfire, believing this, too, to be Maria. He is restrained by the workers, and forced to watch as Robot Maria is burnt. Water as a destructive force would largely disappear from Lang's subsequent films: the flooding of the room in *Das Testament des Dr Mabuse* is a threat, but ultimately the water serves to protect the couple from an explosion. (The flooded river in *House by the River* offers a different sort of threat.) Destructive fire, however, recurs repeatedly in Lang's work: *Fury* (1936), *The Return of Frank James* (1940), *Western Union* (1941), *Secret Beyond the Door* (1948). Andrew Sarris has commented: 'Lang's prevailing image is that of a world ravaged and in flames' (1968: 65), and there is a 'trial by ordeal' element to all this: as if the hero has in some sense to 'go through fire' in his quest. In this respect, as in others, *Metropolis* is something of a seminal Lang film, illustrating the *sort* of ordeal required of his heroes. For Freder, the wish fulfilment sequence of finding and then rescuing Maria and the children from the floods is replaced by the nightmare sequence of seeing Maria (he thinks) burnt alive.

The nightmare, however, is shortlived. Whilst being burnt, Robot Maria turns back into the mechanical Robot.



(This produces one of the film's most baffling visual references: it's as though Robot Maria becomes Joan of Arc.) Freder is momentarily nonplussed, but then looks up and sees Maria being pursued round the parapet of the cathedral by Rotwang. Once again, he is able to *act* and so overcome a traumatic visual experience. He rushes into the cathedral and up the stairs to rescue her.

### Influences

Critics have suggested that this part of the film – Freder doing battle with Rotwang to save Maria – owes something to *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Wallace Worsley, 1923), shown in Berlin in 1925 (see Elsaesser 2000: 52). In fact, both Victor Hugo's original novel *Notre Dame de Paris* (1831) and the 1923 Universal film of the novel, with Lon Chaney as the eponymous bell-ringer Quasimodo, would seem to be invoked. *Metropolis* cues us to make a connection to Hugo during Maria's flight from Rotwang, when she hangs from the rope of the cathedral bell, thereby startling the crowds below by ringing the bell. The gargoyles lining the parapet are also evocative of the famous gargoyles of Notre Dame. But the 1923 version of the novel alters it considerably. At the novel's climax, the archdeacon Frollo watches from the bell tower of Notre Dame as the gypsy Esmeralda, convicted of witchcraft for a crime which he committed, is publicly hanged in the square below. He utters a demonic laugh. Quasimodo, appalled, pushes Frollo – his father figure – off the roof to his death. Here there is no hero, except for the hideously deformed Quasimodo. But in the 1923 movie, Hugo's cynical seducer Phoebus (Norman Kerry) is converted into the hero and Esmeralda (Patsy Ruth Miller) is not, of course, hanged. In this version, she is still on the cathedral parapet at the climax, and the villain – here a much weaker figure than Frollo, Jehan (Brandon Hurst) – does indeed make off with her. Nevertheless, even here, it is Quasimodo, not Phoebus, who saves her, throwing Jehan off the parapet.

The climax of *Metropolis* takes separate elements from the novel and the film. Robot Maria being executed as a witch in the square outside the cathedral comes from the novel; Maria on the rooftop being menaced by a demented villain and saved by devoted admirer comes from the film. The death of the villain falling from the cathedral roof is in all three works, but Rotwang as a character is closer to Frollo: both dabble in alchemy, for example. However, these connections do not add anything significant to *Metropolis*. The climax of Hugo's novel, at least, is exceptionally powerful. The climactic struggle between Freder and Rotwang is entirely conventional.

Another likely influence on *Metropolis* is *Quo Vadis?*, and here it is the 1924 Italian film – directed by Gabriellino D'Annunzio and Georg Jacoby – rather than Henryk Sienkiewicz's 1896 novel that would seem to be the primary source<sup>1</sup>. In *Quo Vadis?*, set in and around Rome at the time of the Emperor Nero, the oppressed group are the Christians. They hold secret meetings in the catacombs, where they are addressed by the apostle Peter. Here, too, the hero Vinicius (Alfons Fryland) comes from the ruling class – he is a young general in the Roman army – and it is his romance with the Christian heroine Lygia (Lilian Hall-Davis) which converts him not just from a promiscuous attitude towards women but also to the cause of the oppressed group. *Quo Vadis?* also involves the destruction of a city – here the burning of Rome, ordered by Nero (Emil Jannings). During the conflagration, Vinicius demonstrates his credentials as hero by saving a Christian mother and child. And here, too, the people who have lost their homes come surging up to demand the death of the person they feel is responsible. They arrive at the palace and call for Nero's head – the guards hold them back. (In *Metropolis*, although the workers encircle and vilify Frederesen outside the cathedral, they cannot bring themselves to touch him.) To protect



himself, Nero blames the arson on the Christians. In the mass slaughter of Christians which follows, some of them are simultaneously crucified and burnt to death by bonfires under the crucifixes. The links are interesting primarily for indicating how von Harbou would draw inspiration and ideas from very different works in her novels and scripts. It is unlikely that the 'Christianisation' of Maria's mission in *Metropolis* came simply from *Quo Vadis?*. But one can see how readily an oppressed group lends itself to being identified in religious as well as class terms.

### The Ending

The problem with the ending of *Metropolis* is not so much the handshake. It's the way that, as the workers move forward behind Grot towards the cathedral, they are advancing in the shape of a wedge, returning to the rigid, symmetrical patterning of the workers in the early scenes. The chaotic surge of people in the scenes of destruction has been curbed, but it has been replaced by rigidity rather than orderliness. Retrospectively, this organisation of bodies into a tight formation is something we associate with the massed rallies of the Third Reich. There is another association. In his analysis of the undercurrents to the thinking of the members of the Freikorps (the extreme rightwing military group of the Weimar years, i.e. future Nazis), Klaus Theweleit devotes a whole section to metaphors of floods and



flowing. Repeatedly, the Freikorps used such metaphors to refer to the hated Bolshevism, which had to be opposed by the rigidity of the members of the Freikorps, characterised by Theweleit as 'soldier males': 'If anything is to move, it should be [...] as *one* man; in formation; on command as a line, a column, a block; as a wedge, a tight unit. Death to all that flows' (1987: 230). Unfortunately, that is also what we see at the end of *Metropolis*.

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Michael Walker was a member of the editorial board of the original *Movie* magazine, and contributed to *The Movie Book of Film Noir* and *The Movie Book of the Western*. His book *Hitchcock's Motifs* was published by Amsterdam University Press in 2005.

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted for this insight to Sheldon Hall, who mentioned to me the links between *Metropolis* and the MGM film *Quo Vadis* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1951).

