
The Shadow Play of Religion in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*

"If the most frequent judgment, ever since its Berlin opening, has been: 'great movie, shame about the story,' this cannot be the whole truth, seeing how many 'readings' the story has by itself provoked."¹

1. Rediscovery

I saw *Metropolis*—I'm tempted to say "for the first time," because that's the way it felt—just last summer at the magnificent Castro Theater in San Francisco. Probably no one had seen it look this good since those first Berlin audiences that thronged the UFA Film Palace in 1927. And what better place to screen it: the Castro, which first opened its doors in 1926, is itself a restored classic, one of the few huge art deco movie houses to have survived the millennium. For me, the event began well before the live organ concert that, along with a dazzling, mirrored ball reminiscent of senior prom, served as Lang's warm-up act. Waiting for over an hour in a line that stretched for blocks and eavesdropping on fascinating stories—not all about previous incarnations of *Metropolis*—was itself part of the fun, not to mention the frantic scheming to get the best possible seats. In the end it was my quicker daughter, able to wend her way through gaggles of slower-moving adults, who secured a few good ones.

How different this was from my first experience with this film, over twenty years ago now, when my German professor pressed us as undergraduates to attend a screening for reasons of cultural literacy. I went to it out of obligation, a wish to be (or seem) cultivated, and probably also to impress my teacher. I was also just plain curious. In the end, I stayed for about an hour—though it felt like an eternity—and wondered what all the fuss was about. The futuristic city was clearly a rudimentary set, the airplanes were flying on wires, and all this was served up on scratched and grainy stock. I had better things to do. *Metropolis* remains one of the few films I've walked out on.

But the restored version—still not Lang's Berlin original, but surely the closest thing we're likely to get to it—is another thing entirely: in a word, gorgeous.² It is only now

1. Thomas Elsaesser, *Metropolis* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), p. 68.

2. It turns out there are several "restored" versions, as Elsaesser explains in *Metropolis*, pp. 30-42. The one treated here is the "Murnau Stiftung Version" and is the most recent.

that I understand how *Metropolis* can be forgiven for its overburdened and sometimes sappy plot. Which is not to say that those of us raised on Hollywood fare will not have some fundamental aesthetic adjustments to make: the restored version is even longer (now two hours), still very slowly paced (“European tempo,” as one might say), and in spots, inevitably, a museum piece. But it is also astonishingly seductive, powerful, and compelling—so much so that, at age seventy-five, it demands a reassessment, beginning with a question. Do we love *Metropolis* despite itself, or for what it actually is?

Critics have typically opted for the former. They find much to adore (usually Lang gets the credit here), but a great deal to regret, too; and here it is often screenwriter Thea von Harbou, whose novel inspired the screenplay, who takes the fall. To put it a bit too simply: we seem to adore the pictures but remain diffident about the story. (Substitute “Lang’s pictures” for “Mozart’s music” and we have the same sense of mixed feelings about *The Magic Flute*, or any number of operas for that matter.) We take one—the superannuated plot—in order to get the other—the real art—though it is not as if we have much of a choice. What I’d like to suggest, however, is that *Metropolis* attracts and fascinates not only *in spite* of its confused and sometimes embarrassingly simplistic story lines. For throughout this narrative tangle there prevails a fairly consistent and insistent affirmation of secularization—a point that has usually been missed by secularist critics because of their assumptions regarding the film’s allegedly “Christian” ending. But the film’s notable use of biblical and Christian imagery should be put down neither to Harbou’s ignorance of its implications nor to her narrative carelessness—at least not exclusively. Rather, it seems to me, *Metropolis* consciously and coherently uses religious elements as a way of reconciling the viewer to a more thoroughly modern and secular view of the world. The film raises fundamental questions—about the locus of political and cultural authority as well as the nature of love, death, and the hereafter—that had perhaps never been presented with such visual force in the post-World War I era.

If *Metropolis* continues to fascinate twenty-first century audiences, I suspect it is because these questions remain deeply relevant. Of the many contested and convoluted “answers” proffered in the film, one seems perhaps so utterly obvious, so true to our own times, that it has thus far evaded critical scrutiny. This is what I will call Lang’s “secularization doctrine,” to which I want to return after a brief digression.

II. Interwar Inspiration: Urban Architecture and the Crisis of Values

“The smokestacks and square tops of buildings made a black uneven wall against the lighter sky and here and there a steeple cut a sharp wedge out of a cloud.”³

Urban landscapes tell their own dramatic story of rapid secularization, as Fritz Lang would have observed during his 1924 visit to New York City. By 1913, with the construction of the Woolworth Building—tellingly dubbed the “Cathedral of

3. Flannery O’Connor, *Wise Blood*, 1949, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001, p. 198.

Commerce”—skyscrapers and factories, power plants and department stores had gradually taken over urban space and crowded out religious edifices that once anchored and dominated the traditional town and city skyline. There is perhaps no more dramatic expression of this development than Lang’s *Metropolis*, where the futuristic city of 2026, according to one version (or 3000, if we follow another) has all but eradicated the last vestige of traditional architecture. Rotwang’s little house with its old-fashioned shingled roof and stucco exterior seems no competition for the mighty and imposing structures of steel and glass that have sprung up all around it.

It may be worth pausing to recall how visionary Lang’s cityscape was. In 1927, neither of the period’s signature skyscrapers, the Empire State Building and the Chrysler Building, had yet seen the light of day. The technology was simply not there yet, as one can see by observing the hulky wing-like annexes to the Woolworth Building, which actually serve as weight-bearing buttresses for what was then the unprecedented height of the main structure. Did the neo-gothic façade of the Woolworth Building serve to soothe anxieties about a futuristic world, or did this commercial “cathedral,” capitalism’s own “Tower of Babel,” perhaps aggravate sensibilities by arrogating to itself the pride of place once reserved exclusively for sacred architecture? It cannot have fooled anybody, of course, except, famously, Kafka’s dimwit protagonist in the fragmentary novel *Amerika*. The naïve greenhorn Karl Rossmann leans out his uncle’s window in lower Manhattan and, upon recognizing the gothic style familiar to him from German churches, insists he is viewing a cathedral. Which is just one of Kafka’s oblique and humorous ways of registering the perceived crisis of orientation in the world after World War I. (Another, perhaps better remembered confusion is Karl’s sighting of the Statue of Liberty with menacing sword rather than torch in hand.) Lang would depend less on the misprision of his protagonist, although young Freder’s hallucinations will concern us for other reasons. Rather it is the stark visual contrast between the modern and the gothic that serves to delineate the secular from the sacred. In the words of Karl Elsaesser, “Lang’s up-down, paternoster division of architectural forms into a language of the class-struggle . . . exploits the potential of the vertical as a universally understood metaphor of social power, a pressure scale and measuring gauge, as well as drawing a historical time-line that reaches from the ‘tomorrowland’ of the penthouse suite to the ‘times immemorial’ of the catacombs.”⁴ Dwarfed and surrounded by the modern city, Rotwang’s ancient house, and the catacombs that lie deep beneath the city, constitute the site from which the drama of the film will emerge. The explosive danger that will threaten Joh Frederson’s modernist empire with destruction erupts from a realm that we may understand to be religious.

It is a mistake to assume, as we sometimes do, that secularization is a done deal for western societies by the end of the First World War. On the contrary, numerous artists, authors, and thinkers are compelled—precisely in the wake of unprecedented mass death and destruction—to inquire into the possible viability of traditional religion in the modern world. In addressing the widespread “crisis of values” that historian

4. Elsaesser, *Metropolis*, p. 67.

up + down
architecture
forms the
language of
class struggle →

contrast betw
modern +
gothic

traditional
religion's
viability

Suzanne Marchand says was a hallmark of the Weimar period, observers could not avoid a confrontation with the “old world” of religion, that traditional supplier of normative values.⁵ There were various responses to this crisis, as Marchand documents; the best known in Germany, Werner Jäger’s so-called “Third Humanism,” sought by means of a reinvigorated philology to extend the already venerable practice of investing high culture—“deutsche Kultur”—with a religious aura and authority. Even so, the “old world” of traditional Christianity of course lives on and pervades this new postwar world, producing a multi-layered aspect of modernity identified in Ernst Bloch’s ungainly term “non-simultaneity.”⁶ Much to the chagrin of his fellow leftists, Bloch argued that modernity does not march forward in a clean linear fashion, but actually preserves premodern elements—not atavistically, and not merely due to some notion of “cultural lag,” but as a structural, necessary feature of the new. All of which begs the question: to what end does Lang represent the Church in *Metropolis*?

confrontation
of the old
world

III. Visualizing the Religious

To focus on the famous final scenes of reconciliation, carefully staged in front of the imposing gothic Cathedral, is understandable—for this is obviously a decisive moment in any film—but also mistaken, if taken out of context of this particular film’s prior representations of religion. This context has not been taken seriously, I think, because critics have not been able to get beyond their distaste for the film’s manipulated and manipulative conclusion. In short, it is one of the most despised final scenes in film history. In the superb chapter on *Metropolis* in his recent book entitled *The Films of Fritz Lang*, Tom Gunning pithily summarizes the critics’ displeasure: “Everyone hates this ending. I will not try to redeem it . . .”⁷ Later he observes: “Harbou (or Lang) does 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 generate, references to nearly all the narratives—political, religious, occult, aesthetic, sexual—that circulated through Weimar culture.”⁸ In trying to crack the film’s psychoanalytic meaning, Gunning’s despair waxes palpable: “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.”⁹ In the end, Gunning manages to make his peace with this narrative mayhem, principally by directing our attention to the energies that pulsate beneath the film’s overt plotlines. But in faulting Lang and Harbou for failing to achieve either a Christian (or any other consistent) resolution, he reiterates, perhaps inadvertently, the widely-held assumption

5. Suzanne L. Marchand, *Down from Olympus: Archaeology and Philhellenism in Germany, 1750-1970* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996), esp. pp. 312-30.

6. Ernst Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, translated by Neville and Stephen Plaice (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), esp. pp. 97-148.

7. Tom Gunning, “*Metropolis*: The Dance of Death,” *The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Vision and Modernity* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), pp. 52-83, here p. 78.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 82.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

that this is something to which the film actually—if only ineptly—aspires.

In order to understand exactly what tensions are “resolved” at the end of Lang’s film, it may be helpful to review the main action. *Metropolis* immediately poses the question of social class by juxtaposing the dark, subterranean machine room, staffed by masses of exhausted and dirty workers, with the open air stadium in which the scantily-clad privileged sons of management physically exert themselves for pure pleasure rather than as a consequence of material want. Maria, an angelic emissary from the depths, leads a group of poorly dressed workers’ children into the “Eternal Gardens” (an erotic playground for the sons of the rich) and proclaims the brotherhood of all mankind—clearly a calculated reproach in this context. Young Freder, son of the master of Metropolis, Joh Fredersen, sees her and is immediately smitten. In hot pursuit of her, he descends to the lower level of machines and observes—apparently for the first time—the “underworld” of work. While there, he witnesses an explosion of the great main machine, the practical function of which is never made clear in the film, and which in Freder’s subsequent hallucination transmogrifies itself into the man-eating Moloch from the Book of Leviticus. Freder flies to his father to report the disaster in the naïve hope that simply conveying this information will result in an immediate improvement of the workers’ plight. He is quickly disabused of this notion. Returning to the depths, he switches places with a worker named Georgy (in a plot line that has survived only sketchily), and attends a religious meeting called by Maria after his long shift. There he hears his new love preach the advent of a mediator who will alleviate the workers’ condition by serving as the heart that will harmoniously unite head (Joh Fredersen) and hands (the laborers).

Freder, who seems pretty sure that he is the one they are all waiting for, arranges to meet Maria the next day at the Cathedral. She cannot keep that appointment, however, because she has been captured by Rotwang, the magician-inventor, who was so deeply in love with Fredersen’s deceased wife Hel, that he is determined to “re-create” her with his science and wizardry. While Freder was busy practicing solidarity with the masses, Fredersen had been consulting with his old rival Rotwang on the meaning of various scraps of paper found in workers’ pockets; they turn out to be maps marking the place of the religious services over which Maria regularly presides. Fredersen asks for and receives Rotwang’s help in creating a false Maria, one who will look exactly like the real Maria (and thus dupe the workers) but who will instead do the master’s bidding. It is this sexualized Maria whom Freder sees in the arms of his father when he next bursts into the master’s office, a scene that triggers “brain fever” (as Elsaesser terms it) and a series of hallucinations that are not always distinguishable from “reality.”

While this account represents just a fraction of an unbelievably convoluted plot, it may, along with interpolated plot references along the way, suffice to explain the unsatisfactory final scene. After unforgettable visions of pitiable workers reduced to deadening routine and robotic movements, the final reconciliation seems trivial at best. “The script of *Metropolis*,” wrote a French reviewer in 1927 whose views are

identical with those of many contemporaries, "is of unsurpassable stupidity."¹⁰ Indeed, the final resolution staged in front of the massive gothic cathedral appears visually to repudiate the celebration of modernist architecture and modern technology that comprises the central experience of the film. After reveling in the new, *Metropolis* seems to beat a hasty retreat. And the Christian imagery—not least of all the "Christian-charismatic" Maria—is often affiliated with this "reactionary" ending.¹¹ The problem with this view, which I myself once held,¹² is that it conflates the film's retrograde politics with its use of Christian imagery, and thereby overlooks the fact that in mobilizing a series of nominally religious motifs Lang actually pursues a consistent policy of secularization, a process that culminates in the apparently "Christian" finale. Since this is a somewhat counter-intuitive argument, allow me to retrace my steps and return briefly to the earlier exposition.

The first indication that *Metropolis* poses a Christian "solution" to the problem of exploited and alienated workers is the entrance of Maria into the Edenic Club of the Sons with a throng of dirty working-class children in tow. At this point, we do not yet know her as the charismatic preacher who will prophesy the coming of a great mediator. Before her role as social prophet is made explicit, she is introduced to us visually in the familiar terms of classic Christian iconography, namely as the *Schutzmadonna* (Madonna-protectress). She moves slowly and gracefully, shawl draped over shoulders and along outstretched arms in a gesture of protective embrace, gently herding her charges into the garden of light, as she teaches them the lesson, "these are your brothers." It is at this point that Freder first eyes Maria, and it is love at first sight.

Maria
as social
prophet

Maria, however, is notoriously changeable. Not only will she undergo a metamorphosis from chaste virgin-mother into dangerous mechanized vamp, but even within the virgin-mother persona she turns out to be interestingly labile. Indeed, the so-called chaste Maria is fully sexualized before and apart from the Frankenstein-like transformation that creates her evil double. After her sermon in the crypt, she gives Freder a couple of sensual kisses that clearly cross the line of sisterly devotion. If we fail to see this, we are perhaps allowing ourselves, no less than the comically leering men of the decadent Yoshiwara cabaret, to be dazzled only by the erotic gyrations of the robotic Maria. In our rush to endorse *Metropolis* as the quintessential proof-text for the great virgin-whore dichotomy, exemplified in the two Marias, we overlook the barely submerged erotic role of the maternal in diverting young Freder's attentions from the half-dressed coquettes flitting about in the garden to the drab but "pure" figure of the *Schutzmadonna*. In sum, Mother was already in competition with the whores, and she won.

10. "Deux erreurs: Metropolis, Princess Masha," *Les Annales* (15 November 1927), qtd. in Elsaesser, *Metropolis*, p. 15. Compare Anton Kaes, "Film in der Weimarer Republik," *Geschichte des deutschen Films*, eds. Wolfgang Jacobsen, Anton Kaes, Hans Helmut Prinzler (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1993), pp. 39-100; here p. 64.

11. Anton Kaes, *ibid.*

12. See my "Die Blendung: Elias Canetti's 'Viennese' Novel," *Sprachkunst* 30.2 (1999): 247-70.

Maria is in fact anything but a stable figure of Christian allegory. When we see her next in the catacombs standing before an altar aglow with candles, she would appear to hail from some indisputably Christian tableau—a female Christ figure, according to Elsaesser. Yet in announcing the coming of someone greater, she seems now to be playing the familiar role of John the Baptist. This distinction may seem pedantic, yet one is compelled to ask what this conflation of roles could possibly mean. If she is truly meant to evoke Christianity, she would have to refer to the second coming of Christ—a development that would herald the end of history, not just the overcoming of an impasse between labor and management. Some readers may accuse me of a reductionist reading here, judging me as literalizing something that is surely meant only figuratively. Perhaps. But what we have here is neither a literal evocation of Christianity nor one that is even coherent metaphorically. What we are confronted with, rather, is the hijacking of Christian imagery as a kind of visual mood music. What Gunning said of the psychoanalytic strand is no less true of the religious imagery that figures in this film: it amounts to a kind of postmodern grab bag. Yet there is a method, it seems to me, to this apparent mayhem.

Maria's departure from any kind of religious orthodoxy is clearly signaled by the time of her unorthodox version of the Tower of Babel story, which constitutes a mini-film within the larger one. The substance of the alteration is fairly obvious: Harbou takes a story about human hubris and divine revenge and makes it into one about—guess what?—the need for a mediating heart to harmonize the strife between “brains” and “hands.” On aesthetic grounds, this revision is objectionable for its utter predictability, but the more disturbing charge is of course its retrograde politics, as many critics have noted. Yet here too, attention to political shortcomings may easily distract us from the substance of the story. In dealing with this allegory, it was apparently enough for leftist critics to bemoan the use of pseudo-scripture to justify capitalist exploitation of workers, for the mediator will of course serve to sanctify capitalist arrangements in the end. No one, though, thought to notice that Maria's “scripture” is not only curiously heterodox, but virtually atheological. Mention of God is retained, but only it seems as an empty gesture of respect for dead tradition. God really has nothing to do with the central conflict of this ransacked and repackaged parable, which pits the elite dreamers against the mass of laborers whose lives will be spent in toil realizing the aspirations of their masters. One can celebrate or regret the evisceration of the divine from Maria's rendition of the tale of the Tower of Babel. What we should not overlook, however, is the manner in which this episode traffics in religious imagery only to arrive at what is ultimately a secular, this-worldly message on the need to quell class warfare while leaving the class structure intact.

religious
imagery
repackage in
secular
terms

If Maria is a chimerical Christian cipher divested of any effectively supernatural dimensions, the same could be said of her suitor, Freder. He has been compared with Siegfried, but the more obvious, even heavy-handed, allusion is of course to Christ. What other connection could we possibly make upon seeing Freder, who has descended into the world of common mortals, taken on their identity, and then allowed himself to be crucified on a machine that metamorphoses into the workers' ten-hour-shift

Freder
as
Christ-like

clock? His cry is not exactly the biblical “My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me?” but it is close enough. When he exclaims, almost collapsing from physical overexertion, “Father—! Father—! Will ten hours n e v e r e n d—??!”—we get the point.

Or we think we do. If we inquire into the substance of the allusion, it dissipates before our very eyes. We hardly need (yet another) allegory to see that Freder is meant to connote a savior figure. But how exactly does the Christ analogy work? Hanging exhausted from the clock-like machine, Freder is after all not speaking to God, but to his actual father. When he does pray, his plea is addressed to Death (the Grim Reaper), not God; and any other devotional energy he can muster is directed exclusively at Maria. Distracted perhaps first by the emotionalism and theatrics of the final reconciliation scene, and then by our own critical preoccupation with its *political* backwardness, we have failed to see that the conflict itself is utterly this-worldly. But it is neither my point to berate Harbou (or Lang) for narrative excess or sloppiness, nor to celebrate their achievement of postmodernist pastiche *avant la lettre*, reasonable as these critical reactions may be. For both responses overlook the larger ideological function of these half-empty Christian signifiers. They are there, I think, to calm the nerves of a society still making the traumatic transition to an unequivocally secular order. Freder is not remotely a Christ figure, but he is allowed to prance around as one because as such he—along with all the others appearing in recognizably Christian costumes—pacifies viewers by making them (us?) feel that what is new and possibly terrifying is after all familiar and somehow traditional.

But this is only half the story of the play of religion in *Metropolis*. Not only do we encounter stock Christian images, characters, and plots only to discover they have been evacuated of their substantial meaning: we notice also an active and direct effort to associate religion with black magic, superstition, and mass hysteria. Once this connection is firmly established—largely through the depiction of the mad inventor Rotwang—the move is to retire religion by branding its main practitioner as evil and then destroying him. A fairytale ending, as Lang himself conceded. More darkly, though the film does not explicitly mark the evil genius Rotwang as a Jew, Noah Isenberg sees in this figure an obvious citation of a Jewish wizard, namely Rabbi Loew in Paul Wegener’s 1920 film *Der Golem*.¹³ I don’t think we need to depend entirely on intertextual evidence here—though I think the film’s viewers might easily have made the association Isenberg suggests—to see that Rotwang, beginning with his very name and physical appearance, fulfills the catalogue of anti-Semitic characteristics almost perfectly. The critic Anton Kaes concurs, reminding us that Rotwang is “dressed like an East European Jew” and that his ultimate removal eliminates the threat of a “scheming Jewish scientist.”¹⁴ Whatever else he may signify, Rotwang, by the time

Rotwang
anti-
semitic

13. Noah Isenberg, “October 29, 1920 Paul Wegener’s *Der Golem: Wie er in die Welt kam* debuts in Berlin,” *The Yale Companion to Jewish Writing and Thought in German Culture, 1096-1996* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1997), pp. 384-89, here p. 385. See also Noah Isenberg, *Between Redemption and Doom: The Strains of German-Jewish Modernism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999).

14. Anton Kaes, quoted in Elsaesser, *Metropolis*, p. 56.

Rotwang as
lecherous
Jew

he pursues Maria with the flashlight in a famous scene that clearly implies physical violation—Elsaesser calls it a “lustful visual rape”¹⁵—has become affiliated with the lecherous Jew chasing after vulnerable blonde German girls. Though introduced as the great inventor, he cannot of course create life, nor can he resurrect Hel. What he can do, rather, is to steal life from Maria in order to vivify and camouflage his metallic robot. So it is not only in “seducing” blonde Teutonic-looking girls that Rotwang evokes the anti-Semitic stereotype, but also in his derivative—even parasitic—effort to enliven a piece of cold machinery. In this the depiction echoes the long-standing stereotype of the Jew as perhaps clever and intelligent, but ultimately not really creative in his own right: one who is dependent on Germans for a “spiritual essence” alien to him. As he drains life from the real Maria in the famous laboratory scene, we may also be reminded of F.W. Murnau’s *Nosferatu* and its own antisemitic iconography.¹⁶

Rotwang's
house

Rotwang’s little house—the only edifice besides the church that has withstood the march of modernity—is clearly a designated site of the religious in the symbolic language of *Metropolis*. As curious as this may seem in light of the foregoing point regarding the wizard’s “Jewishness,” we can’t help noticing that the building’s exterior is marked with several crosses. This clearly does not indicate any particular doctrinal allegiance, but serves rather as a general marker to delimit the surrounding realm of the modern. It is worth recalling that Rotwang is paradoxically first associated not with the wonders of modern technology or the evils of black magic, but with a dream and hope embedded in traditional religion: the existence of an afterlife. Like most people’s, his desire is not abstract, but is centered on a particular person, his dearly departed lover, the Nordic beauty Hel (another unavailable blond)—who just happens also to have been Joh Fredersen’s wife, and young Freder’s mother. Fredersen is hardly sympathetic when, upon seeing the gigantic statue erected in honor of Hel, he declares “A brain like yours, Rotwang . . . should be able to forget.” Rotwang responds, “For me she is not dead, Joh Fredersen,—for me she lives—!” In expressing this sentiment, he would surely elicit even more sympathy were he not already characterized as frighteningly obsessed. It is also worth remembering that in joining forces to create the robotic Maria, Joh Fredersen and Rotwang are at cross purposes: the former wants a kind of agent provocateur to be used in a strategy to quell the workers’ brewing rebellion, while the latter wants initially only to resuscitate his deceased beloved. (The prospect of simultaneously avenging himself on father Fredersen by destroying young Freder simply proves irresistible as the plot thickens.) In short, the emperor of *Metropolis* intends to use technology to simulate religion in order to further his control over workers and capital; the mad scientist, in contrast, wants to use modern technology to realize an ancient dream of religion. His need to do so in the first place implies the failure of religion to deliver what it promises; his own failure to create life—to recreate Hel—is the film’s way of retiring this dream.

Fredersen
technology
to simulate
religion

In the overall conception of *Metropolis*, the only figure constrained to body forth

15. Elsaesser, *Metropolis*, p. 41

16. Kacs, “Film in der Weimarer Republik,” p. 52.

contradictory character traits is Rotwang; all the others are little more than types. Indeed, when it becomes necessary to depict Maria's dangerous sexuality (already implicit in the Madonna, as we have seen), she is given a body double. But as the narrative's implicit "Jew," Rotwang evinces contradictory but prevalent stereotypes: he is the locus of both ultra-rationality and dark, pre-Enlightenment superstition; the robotic Maria is accordingly a product of both. As an embodiment of conflicting ambitions, he both exceeds Joh Fredersen's abuse of instrumental reason in exploiting workers mercilessly, and manages to outdo young Freder's religious excesses in harkening to the preacher's apocalyptic warnings. Moreover, Rotwang's exotically "aberrant" behavior takes center stage visually and emotionally with the film's focus on the transfer of life from woman to machine. In this manner, Rotwang makes both father and son appear like lesser offenders, particularly from the perspective of the film's conclusion when they both repent, whereas Rotwang, before his violent demise (which is almost simultaneous with that of the robot Maria), grows only crazier. He is the iconic outsider vis-à-vis the Germanic family romance, tirelessly scheming to find a way to break into the fold and claim his proper place. Forced to represent extreme cultural positions and excluded from the (national) family, Rotwang is clearly marked for destruction.

Some may counter that Rotwang cannot be said to demonstrate the failure of something which he, as an archetypal "unbeliever," could never have represented in the first place; and this is of course true in the abstract. Yet within the symbolic economy of the film, which as we have seen is organized through starkly contrasting binaries, it seems crucial that there is nothing to oppose Rotwang's "deviant" desire for an afterlife. There easily could have been, given the film's source material: in Harbou's novel, the cathedral plays a much more central role as nemesis to Joh Frederson, such that the master of Metropolis expends a good deal of energy trying to get that sacred edifice demolished. Moreover, in contrast to the film, the novel explicitly invites us to play off Rotwang's deviant wizardry against the more "defensible" claims of orthodox Christianity. In grand sentimental style, Harbou's text concludes with Joh Frederson's mother (who just happens to live in a premodern little house reminiscent of Rotwang's) handing him a letter left behind by Hel, who is thus allowed to speak from the grave. "I am going to God," she says "and do not know when you will read these lines, Joh."¹⁷ She concludes her missive by quoting—and explicitly alluding to—Christ's words to his disciples: "'I have loved thee with an everlasting love.' . . . 'Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.'"¹⁸ In the novel, then, Hel is resurrected, so to speak; and in quoting Christ's promise of eternal life, she firmly "answers" the film's lingering expositional question. New Testament love and the afterlife displace the Old Testament image of ultimate death and destruction served up as Freder's vision of the man-eating Moloch. In this manner we are directed

17. Thea von Harbou, *Metropolis* (Boston: Gregg Press, 1975), [Reprint of the 1927 edition published by the Readers Library, London], p. 250.

18. *Ibid.*

Rotwang
outsider
marked for
destruction

to the “proper” outlet for our supernatural desires, and offered a clear counter-example to Rotwang’s misappropriation. The novel tames modernity by bringing the master of Metropolis back into the Christian fold. Needless to say, this is a plot line the film assiduously excludes; and this refusal comes from a director who in so many other respects luxuriates in excess.¹⁹ Nor does Lang invest Freder—his presumed Christ figure—with any countervailing hunger for the supernatural. When, a century earlier, Georg Büchner had his Lenz attempt to resurrect the dead girl of Fouday—a famous moment in the German cultural confrontation with secularization—he gave us the figure of Pastor Oberlin as a foil providing a sense of orientation and context. Lang offers no such alternative; or rather, he gives us the fully secularized Freder, who murders Rotwang in order explicitly to supersede him and everything he stands for.

To my mind, Tom Gunning’s great contribution to a deeper understanding of the implications of *Metropolis* is his suggestion that the Cathedral, for all its physical plenitude, is not in fact the most memorable image left in our minds at film’s end. Just before Freder flings Rotwang from the roof of the cathedral, the mob has burnt the robot Maria at the stake, evoking unmistakable parallels with the burning of Joan of Arc. In Christian lore, that which remained unburnt, namely Joan’s heart, served as evidence of her sanctification. In other words, the burning is seen as ultimately revelatory, then as now. What survives in *Metropolis*, of course, is the sleek machine, the real determinant of the future. Rotwang and his dream of an afterlife—a dream no less powerful for its distortion of orthodoxy—are summarily dispatched. It is appropriate that we see these two events synoptically, for the elimination of the sexualized Maria and the destruction of the deviant wizard go hand in hand: both represent threats that need to be defeated before order can be restored.

At this moment of apparent closure, the film becomes particularly interesting, and particularly vexing. *Metropolis* is in this respect akin to a great Shakespearean comedy that satisfyingly resolves its *particular* conflict, but leaves you haunted by all the questions it has raised along the way—problems demanding resolution but left strategically unresolved. Robotic Maria and Rotwang are safely out of commission, to be sure, but the energy that drives them remains threatening, and in the film’s compelling argot threateningly “religious.” Maria (via Rotwang) is without question the fanatical instigator, but it is after all the masses who actually rise up and carry out the violence, and the masses who are from the very beginning vulnerable to the eschatological message proffered by Maria during her sermon, and also by the monk in the cathedral, who recites those ominous words from the Book of Revelation. During the times of great economic and social conflict faced by Weimar Germany—after the collapse of the monarchy, through conditions of civil war and the unprecedented inflation of 1923—this film’s viewers were perhaps increasingly susceptible to eschatological narratives. Under such circumstances it is tempting to

19. In this regard, Gunning remarks, “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*: The Dance of Death,” p. 68.

argue that *Metropolis* sends an important message about the dangerous tendency to “get religion” at times of crisis; and perhaps it does. Yet the film appears to qualify this message somewhat by capitalizing on the very sense of crisis and cultural disarray it purports to challenge.

In favor of the first reading—that is, viewing *Metropolis* as critical of exaggerated eschatological glosses of modern social crises—one could argue that construing the robot Maria as the Whore of Babylon (in the Apocalypse) is a misguided association that emanates purely from Freder’s feverish hallucinations and from the allegorical apparatus made available to him via the Church. The problems with this judgment are manifold, however: first, Freder, who is meant to be our interpretive guide, never repents of this apocalyptic view. Second, it appears that he actually learns to distinguish between the good and bad Marias by means of the very “lessons” he has learned from the Book of Revelations and from his subsequent visions. Finally, viewers do not in practice differentiate between Freder’s nightmare and the actual erotic dances performed at the Yoshiwara cabaret; the film has effectively conflated these “objective” visual experiences for the viewer. Finally, Josaphat arrives on the scene to inform Freder (who just happens to be reading the Book of Revelation, by the way), that robotic Maria is in fact the source of serious conflict and death among the upper class clientele of the Yoshiwara. Lang thus literalizes the appearance of the “Whore of Babylon” within the film’s larger story, so the connection between female sexuality and apocalyptic destruction is by no means solely a figment of Freder’s sick imagination. Nor do viewers need to be told who is to blame for inciting the workers to riot. *Metropolis* is very explicit on this point: it is Maria who throws the switch that sends the workers’ city on its course of doom. Thus it would be exceedingly hard to maintain that the film merely lays bare a questionable cultural tendency. As Andreas Huyssen argued long ago in his classic article “The Vamp and the Machine,” *Metropolis* engages fully in the very practice it simultaneously appears to be criticizing: the tendency to cast the fear of technology and modern industry in the all too convenient and available garb of misogyny.²⁰ What Huyssen’s influential essay perhaps underplays, however, is the explicit source of these symbolic possibilities in the classic Christian eschatological scriptures. Indeed, even if *Metropolis* ultimately parts ways with religion, it does so only after mining it quite successfully for misogynistic source material. It seizes on what it needs and leaves the rest.

However we wish to view the erotic robot Maria—as biblical Whore of Babylon, witch, Rotwang’s emissary, the seat of all carnality, or all of the above—it remains clear that her destructive potential cannot be realized without the active involvement of the masses. Though the upperclass men are not spared (who could forget those stupid, leering faces at the Yoshiwara?), it is clearly the working class, poor and uneducated, that is most intimately susceptible to religion and its dangers. Physically, the workers are closer to the realm of the religious in that their subterranean city is

20. Andreas Huyssen, “The Vamp and the Machine: Technology and Sexuality in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*,” *New German Critique* 24 (Fall/Winter 1981), pp. 221-37.

built directly above the catacombs. And it is of course they who, in their righteous desperation, turn to Maria for help. Their authoritarian and submissive propensity is fully evident even before the robotic Maria takes over as agent provocateur inasmuch as they willingly respond to her periodic summons to gather after long hours of exhausting work. Lang's use of the laborers as "mass ornament"—that is, his visual fetishization of de-individualized workers even when they are shown at worship—provided Siegfried Kracauer with his chief argument for viewing this film as proto-fascist.²¹ Listening in humble and worshipful posture, heads bent, hats off, some even kneeling on the ground, they seek instruction from on high. "Meanwhile, down in the catacombs of Metropolis," remarks Thomas Elsaesser, "with their secret mass-sermons of the saviour to come, the sweatshops of Asia and Latin America are only a shout and a prayer away from the religious fundamentalisms, the media evangelisms and voodoo revivalisms that have been fevering towards the Millennium."²² So in the end the false Maria may be dead, but her gullible followers live on.

The peril of uncontrolled religious energy manifests itself in the sudden reversal of the crowd's sentiments as it is urged on to destruction by the robotic Maria. The workers' real threat lies in their irrationality and unpredictability: they reach for violence not in order to prosecute their agenda, but to destroy their very own city, attacking it in fury without even the assurance that their own children are safe. The thought that excited and exploited masses might revolt in ways apparently incommensurate with their evident self-interest can no longer surprise anyone who has lived through the American race riots in the late 1960s, or the more recent unrest in South Central Los Angeles. But growing familiarity with this phenomenon does not serve to reduce anxiety: it may in fact increase it.

Workers' despair need not be connected to religion, of course, but in *Metropolis* it clearly is—in part I think because Lang and Harbou are not really focused on the question of social justice in its own right, but also perhaps because they seem to wish that the danger of irrational revolt could be eliminated simultaneously with the waning of religion as a major cultural authority. But if this is so, their doubts (conceivably reflecting bad faith) come through in the film. Witness the ecstatic dance of the workers before the exploding machine on the one hand, and around the stake where robotic Maria is being burnt "alive," on the other. These are powerful visual testimonies to the pleasure of destruction, explicitly linked to religious notions. We know, of course, the proximate reason for the flooding of the workers' city: Joh Fredersen has given an explicit order to foreman Grot to let the workers riot. He will allow this little disaster to unfold in order to teach them all (or more likely others who will hear about their demise) a lesson; and thus he instigates his own version of the biblical flood story, but in this case without any ark of rescue for obedient servants. Grot tries to explain to the workers the tragic consequences of destroying the very machine that sustains their

21. Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), pp. 149-50.

22. Elsaesser, *Metropolis*, p. 8.

danger of
revolt
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city, but to no avail. When the prospect of having lost the children to their own stupidity seems probable, Grot, formerly the voice of reason, immediately suggests that they hunt down and kill the “witch” who did all this. This instant leap from rationality to emotionalism and this particular kind of violence is linked to Christianity, even if Christianity would prefer to keep it at arm’s length by labeling it mere superstition. The iconography of a witch burning at the stake is simply too intimately connected to medieval Christianity to be securely disavowed. When the flesh burns off robotic Maria and Rotwang drops to his death, the wildly ecstatic crowd falls into a state of hushed awe. Their threatening energies are subdued, for the moment. The immediate danger is gone; but what does the future hold? The implicit lingering threat of another outbreak explains the need for the mediating heart. Well before their desperation reaches crisis levels—a gathering pressure captured beautifully in the image of the ominously rising temperature gauge on the great machine—Freder will somehow intercede to return them to a state of equanimity. Significantly, though, this ostensible Christ figure is not here to bring them religion, but to save them from it.

With the demise of the crazed practitioner of black magic—the film’s Jewish wizard, in the view of Noah Isenberg and Anton Kaes—and that of his mechanized puppet Maria, *Metropolis* can now proceed with its sanitized conciliatory “Christian” ending. Yet, as I have been suggesting, this ending is “Christian” in name—or image—only. Father Frederson notably undergoes no such conversion; and as Siegfried Kracauer famously observed, the film’s end is rigged in favor of management. The members of the final triumvirate all proceed from the secular father: Grot (the Quisling foreman, who betrayed the workers by revealing their plans to meet in the catacombs), son Freder, and father Frederson himself. There is a subtle suggestion pervading the film that—given the love triangle of Joh Frederson, Rotwang, and Hel—young Freder might actually be Rotwang’s offspring. In joining hands now with Grot and his father in the wake of killing Rotwang, young Freder announces his chosen paternal legacy definitively. He will not use technology to pursue the vain dreams of the religious past, like his false father. On the contrary, he knows as clearly as the crowd that gleefully burned robotic Maria that the real future is in the power of technology. As mediator between head and hands, all he can do is oil the gears of the capitalist machine that is now, because of his loving heart, more secure than ever. The film uses stock tropes—the scapegoat “Jew,” and a plethora of skin-deep Christian imagery—simply to help make this outcome more palatable. Lang himself, then, is not so very different from Joh Frederson, who openly attempts to mobilize Christian simulacra (in the “person” of robotic Maria) merely to secure his commanding grip on *Metropolis*.

As a kind of desperate and comforting gesture toward tradition, the film’s so-called Christian resolution makes some sense. Like the Vienna city fathers who, in constructing the historicist *Ringstrasse* felt it necessary to cloak “the truth of industrial and commercial society . . . in the decent draperies of pre-industrial artistic styles,”²³ Lang may have

23. Carl E. Schorske, “The *Ringstrasse*, Its Critics, and the Birth of Urban Modernism” in *Fin-de-siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1981), pp. 24-115, here p. 45; cf. p. 60.

Violence linked to Christianity

Freder Christ figure not to bring religion but to save it from them.

capitalism made more palatable

given in to pressures to present his affirmation of secular modernity in the ill-fitting dress of traditional Christianity. Yet his half-hearted accession to this agenda in the final scene should not obscure the film's own powerful counter-narrative, evident above all in the unburnable remains of robotic Maria. In a way, that final scene of reconciliation in which Freder reaches out with all the Expressionist pathos he can muster to join the hands of Grot and Fredersen does provide a fitting image after all. For this is exactly what Lang provides with his use of religious imagery throughout *Metropolis*: hand-holding for a culture in the final stages of distancing itself from the religious traditions that allowed it, for a time, a sense of moral coherence.