FRITZ LANG’S METROPOLIS AND THE UNITED STATES
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ABSTRACT
Fritz Lang’s Metropolis (1927) has often been analysed in the context of the Weimar Republic and in relation to National Socialism. This essay, while acknowledging the importance of those contexts, seeks to take a fresh look at the film in the context of the effects upon it of the United States. The film’s production, distribution and theme are all bound up in one way or another with the influence of the United States and these circumstances, the essay argues, have a significant bearing upon the kind of images created in the film. In productively exploiting the historically actual cultural and economic tussle between the German and the U.S. film industries, this essay argues that with Metropolis Lang produced a unique mise-en-scène of the ambivalence of technology in the culture of modernity, which helps to explain the enduring fascination exerted by some of the film’s images, especially that of the robot.

What marks Metropolis out among the other products of early German cinema is its unique mixture of sex and machinery. This has certainly not gone unnoticed and a substantial body of criticism explores it.1 The tendency, and this is entirely justified of course, is to set analyses in the context of the Weimar Republic. This brings with it the need to scrutinise the film’s relationship to National Socialism.2 This is likewise entirely justified, indeed necessary, but there is a danger that the subsequent history will colour our response to the film excessively. Nor does this historical contextualisation really address the question why the film – or at least some of its images – have retained actuality until today.

What I want to do in this essay is look at the film not so much in relation to the Weimar Republic or the Third Reich, but in its relations to the United States. This is in fact simply to draw out the implications of an aspect of the film already widely acknowledged, namely the way in which it sits between Expressionism and ‘Neue Sachlichkeit’. The point is that


2 This connection goes back to Siegfried Kracauer’s seminal study From Caligari to Hitler. A Psychological History of German Film, Princeton 1947.

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this does not touch only upon the history of art in the Weimar Republic, but also upon a significant aspect of the role of cinema in modernity.

The many connections between Fritz Lang’s Metropolis of 1927 and the United States are well known. The first such link is the subject matter, the great metropolis of the modern world. What we are dealing with here is a German image of New York, inspired by Lang’s trip there in October 1924, when he recorded – for the benefit of the readers of Film-Kurier – his marvelling response to the Manhattan skyline and illuminated urban canyons of the city and – privately – his alarm at a city that seemed animated by the perpetual anxiety born of universal exploitation.

This story of poetic inspiration has to be seen alongside the actual reason for the trip to New York in 1924. It was a business trip. Lang was visiting New York in the company of Erich Pommer, head of production of UFA. They went to attend the American premiere of Lang's previous film, Die Nibelungen, but they were also on a mission. From visits to the great studios such as Universal, Warner Brothers and United Artists, Lang needed to learn about contemporary American production styles and technical advances.

This represented a further turn in a spiral of American effects upon the German film industry. Ever since The Cabinet of Dr Caligari, early German cinema, largely inspired by the marketing and artistic vision of Erich Pommer, had in a sense been a sort of mobilisation of cultural Germanness in response to the imperious industrial challenge from the U.S. studios. By the mid 1920s the U.S. film industry had decisively entered the European market by virtue of its superior industrial muscle, its aggressive distribution, its banal but popular plots, and its star system. At the same time the distinctive German style was in need of some thematic refreshment, since it was felt in the industry to be too past-oriented.

Metropolis – this seems clear – was designed as a renewal of the commercially viable German art-house film, but now as something turned towards the future as well as the past, and achieved with cutting-edge technology and conspicuously high expenditure. There was, however, a systemic brake upon this massive European move against American market power. Under industrial accommodations such as the Parufamet agreement of 1925, which granted distribution rights to American studios in exchange for a substantial loan to UFA, the U.S. studios had a stranglehold on the distribution side of the German film industry in Europe as well as in the U.S. Metropolis was drastically remade. It was cut by a third and re-edited with

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5 There is an excellent broad contextualisation of this issue in Peter Wollen, ‘Cinema/Americanism/The Robot’, New Formations, 8 (Summer 1989), 7–34.

4 In the following survey I am indebted to Holger Bachmann, whose account of the genesis, production, and early reception of the film appears in Bachmann/Minden. An important source in this connection is Klaus Kreimeier, Die Ufa-Story: Geschichte eines Filmkonzerns, Munich 1992.

5 Recently, doubt has been cast upon the accuracy of this account. See Patrick McGilligan, Fritz Lang, The Nature of the Beast, New York/London 1997, p.108. Nevertheless, it is significant that Lang presented it thus for public consumption.
new intertitles, by American editors for the U.S. market. This was quite explicitly an attempt to ‘Americanise’ what were regarded as self-indulgent German movie-making practices. A severely shortened version was then also re-released in Europe. The ‘original’ was lost to view.

In fact this is not the last twist in the history of relations between the United States and Metropolis. In 1984 (a good year for a return to the future) Giorgio Moroder brought out a state-of-the-art version of the film with a rock sound-track, tinted film, and a good deal of the missing material discovered over the years by the patient labours of film restorers in Germany and elsewhere. This is a curious reversal of the hardbitten appropriation in 1926–7. Now American popular culture, production values and distribution control return to the original images the respect denied them by the first disrespectful cutters, and with it, the full power that dwells within those images.

The history of Metropolis, then, is from the beginning determined to a significant extent by a global struggle within the film industry. Inevitably, traces of this are evident both in the film text as well as in the history of its production and marketing. The effect (if not the intention) of the U.S. re-editing on the character of Rotwang, the film’s ‘mad scientist’ figure, can serve as an example. The intention was to shorten and simplify the film. One of the major ways in which this was achieved was to remove the sub-plot explaining the relationship between Rotwang and Fredersen. This sub-plot concerns the rivalry between two characters over the figure of a woman, Hel, originally Rotwang’s wife, but then the mother of Freder-sen’s son, Freder, the romantic lead in the film. This state of past rivalry between the two ‘father figures’ continued into the present of the film as it was originally conceived. Fredersen, though omnipotent as the master of Metropolis, is none the less hesitant and vulnerable in the magical spaces inhabited by Rotwang. By removing the relationship between Freder-sen and Rotwang, centred on the figure of Hel, a relationship of rivalry is replaced by one of subordination. In the U.S. version, Freder-sen is simply exercising his power over the inventor. In the original it was as an admission of extreme perplexity that the master of Metropolis had to turn to his rival and admit he needed his help. The relevance of this to a German-U.S. power struggle within the film text of Metropolis is that Rotwang is

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8 For details of the restoration work that has gone on in relation to Metropolis, see Enno Patalas, ‘Metropolis, Scene 105’, Camera Obscura, 15 (1986), 165–73, and his updated account of the state of restoration in Bachmann/Minden. Patalas was the technical advisor to Moroder on the Metropolis project.
9 There is an often quoted, but in fact rather unconvincing, account of why the ‘Hel’ sequences were cut, in the patronising article by Bartlett (see note 6, above).

FRITZ LANG’S *METROPOLIS AND THE UNITED STATES* 343

identifiable with the old world of Europe10 and Fredersen with the new techno-industrial world of the U.S. What was once a differentiated relationship between two sorts of power, an old world magical technology and a new world industrial one, is now the simple dominance of the one over the other.11

While it is perhaps doubtful that the American editors intended this nuance, the fact that a differentiated opposition between the old and new worlds is in effect disturbed by the cuts made in the interests of efficient and successful marketing, results from the fact that Lang had organised such an opposition into his text in the first place. It was all part of his and UFA’s way of addressing the American market but in a European artistic language.

In fact the figure of Rotwang expresses very eloquently the European self-image in this film. It is a production intended at once to disavow (as old-fashioned and tormented), and to renew (as technologically advanced, attuned to popular taste and commercially viable), European culture in the face of U.S. rivalry. Rotwang is a Promethean or Faustian figure, at home in the depths of things, in possession of the key to profundity (which is why Fredersen has to turn to him for guidance about what is going on out of sight of his panoptical regime). He is a creator and inventor, but at the same time a tortured individual. His relation to technology is both brilliantly productive – he is the one who made the robot – and problematic, vitiated by his obsession with the lost woman. Indeed, the creation of the – female – robot is as much an unhappy desire to replace his lost bride, as it is part of a plan to replace human workers with machines.

Moreover, his involvement with machines has cost him a hand. This profound but tormented European technology is also a destructive one. The prosthesis recalls the sort of mutilation wrought in the First World War when technology revealed its destructive potential more clearly than ever before. Rotwang is technology as a self-destructive force, representing a problematic Romantic individualism over-ripened into modernity. He embodies a festering expressionistic modernism that, far from transcending the impasse into which European culture had driven itself, is the last symptom of it, surviving in a world otherwise keen to be modern in a purified, clean, way, free from ties with the past. He is a European image of self-disgust. Insofar as he can also be seen as an anti-Semitic stereotype, Jewish self-hatred becomes European self-hatred, and the Jew here becomes the other at the heart of the European self.

Contrasted with Rotwang is the techno-industrialist, Fredersen, as modern and slick as Rotwang is medieval and tormented, a figure representing

10 In the popular formula fiction of Hans Dominik, such as the 1922 novel *Die Macht der Drei*, German scientist-magus figures help overthrow threats posed to European interests by American techno-rationalism. I owe this information to my colleague David Midgley in whose forthcoming book, *Writing Weimar*, it is contained.

11 This notion of old and new technologists owes something to Čapek’s *R.U.R*; see Wollen, 14–15.

the U.S. (and also possibly another kind of anti-Semitism!12). Even without the attentions of the U.S. censors, the film gives precedence to him over Rotwang, since, as an industrially produced film, it must construct a viable relationship with efficient technology and impersonal mass culture, even while distinguishing itself from them in the gesture of product differentiation important to UFA in its rivalry with the American studios.

Rotwang is an image of compromised interiority. His attempt to transfer the values and reality of the inner life into the world of machinery is doomed to be chaotic and destructive, just as, from the post-war perspective, the relation between traditional European culture and modern technology appears terminally problematic. The film distances itself from him but also, clearly, from Fredersen senior who is bereft of all interiority: he is all eye and control (although notably he remains the master of Metropolis at the end of the film despite what appears to have been an act of attempted mass murder). The values of interiority, so the denouement of the plot would have us believe, are re-established in the figure of his son Freder by the intervention of the real Maria. In this way at the end both old and new forms of technological authority are purified (Rotwang’s by ritual burning, Fredersen’s by a rebirth of social responsibility as a result of a new consciousness of parental love) and renewed in a new synthesis, which is embodied in the triumphant product Metropolis: the art-house film at home with technology.

This reading, however, even if it is accepted as far as it goes, cannot account for the continuing power of the film, since everyone agrees that the end of the film is disappointingly sentimental.13 This sentimentality has a dark side also, since it fuses technological power with a patriarchal and reactionary attitude to society in a way that can be said, quite properly, to point forward to Nazi ideology. Yet the film is enduringly successful at the level of its images, and it is at this level that the global struggle between two cultures has left its most important traces.

A word first of all about the range and heterogeneity of images and motifs in the film. It has been argued that Lang’s procedure, his use, to quote one critic, of ‘Art Deco ornament and the utopian image of Americanisation to rejuvenate a German modernism that is seen to be aging’14 effectively prefigures post-modernism in its detachment from the heterogenous materials, and especially the forms of modernism, that it re-

12 In the twentieth century the image of the Jew came to be associated with (the unpleasant aspects of) modernity. In the eighteenth century he had rather stood for resistance to change: always the other to the preferred self-image. I owe this point to Michael Mack. If anti-Semitism there is in Metropolis, it touches both these traditions. For the Jew as the scapegoat in modernity, see E.J. Hobsbawm, Age of Extremes. The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991, London 1994, p.119.
13 However, Ben Morgan disagrees with the tendency to dismiss the film as sentimental, see ‘Metropolis – The Archetypal Version: Sentimentality and Self-Control in the Reception of the Film’, forthcoming in Bachmann/Minden.
combines. This attitude is imputed to Lang, rather than to Thea von Harbou, the author of the story, whose position, it is implied, was straightforwardly Expressionist, that is to say sincerely modernist. In fact, it seems more accurate to impute a prefiguration of post-modernism to Thea von Harbou’s novel, aptly described by Holger Bachmann as ‘passion-laden but ultimately non-committal’. Von Harbou’s work really does incorporate an extraordinary range of materials right across cultural boundaries, from popular kitsch through H.G.Wells, Karel Čapek and Villiers de l’Isle Adam to the full-blown Expressionism of Ernst Toller and Georg Kaiser, as well as religious and mythical symbolism. But this is attributable less to a premonition of post-modernism than to the disorientation experienced among the educated European classes when they attempted to come to terms with the reality of modern mass culture (von Harbou’s books were indeed moderate best-sellers) while still applying to it the aesthetic values and assumptions from the old culture.

What distinguishes Lang’s film from von Harbou’s novel treatment is that the film organises this farrago of motifs in a certain way, and this organisation survives the re-editing and re-arrangements. The way in which the images are ordered is an effect of the inter-cultural tussle from which the film sprang.

What the film achieves, in my view, is to put into play a rivalry between two kinds of image. By this I mean, first, the kind of image associated with the European aesthetic, the old assumptions and values mentioned above. This type of image has a metaphysical, or one might say redemptive relationship to what it represents. The idea of the heart as mediator between head and hands which runs through the film, and which becomes a political idea in National Socialism, is also related to the aesthetic idea given prominence by Kant and Schiller, and continuing in the very different philosophy of Schopenhauer, namely that certain sensually accessible embodiments – images – can rise above the appetites that otherwise characterise the senses, and thus occupy the privileged cultural position of art. The assumptions spawned by this aesthetic survived into the twentieth century in many forms, at least two of which are relevant to Metropolis. This aesthetic survived in a particularly overheated form as Expressionism, and it survived as kitsch. Thea von Harbou, dubbed ‘Lady Kitschener’ by her contemporaries, amalgamated these things in a sort of greedy cultural panic, and the early German Cinema, in Pommer’s programme for a specifically German art-house cinema to be at once different from, and also able to exist alongside, the American product, employed Expressionism, together with other signifiers of serious art for this purpose.

Secondly, there is the type of image characteristic of the American product, that mass technological culture, of which the film industry of the

15 Ibid., pp.44–6.
16 In the introduction to Bachmann/Minden.
17 As Rutsky shows; see note 1, above.
early twentieth century in the United States is one of the most important examples. Such imagery promotes identification by means of the star system and the popular plot, and, being unselfconscious about its commodity status, is addressed to a modern mass audience. It is not metaphysical or redemptive but seeks to tease and please the appetite, and by doing this to console rather than redeem.

*Metropolis*, then, as a cultural event or act, can be seen as the attempt to represent the second type of image through the medium of the first type. It is a struggle of different aesthetics. The point is clear from the moment of *inspiration* to which Lang attributed the genesis of the film, even though the account may be something of an invention (see note 5, above). The idea of inspiration is a topos from the mythology of the artist, and the point of that significant moment, as Lang recounts it for the readers of the *Film-Kurier*, is that Manhattan is to be seen and captured in an image by European artistic eyes. The artistic eye of the German cinema will capture the image of American technological mass culture and *its* images. The reality of the Manhattan skyline, in all its triumphant and intoxicating functionalism, will be caught in images which serve the artistic purposes of the European director, and will be shown to the American audience as they had not seen it, not been able to see it, before. Technology itself will be redeemed, for what is promised is a *purified* technological gaze, a gaze compatible with the artistic vision of former centuries and continuous with earlier forms of representation, yet it will not be debased, but rather realised and enhanced, by its technological medium.

The film’s images of the profoundly unstable and problematic relation between the masses and technology clearly mark mass technological culture as dangerous. They show either dead, Taylorised body-machines, or bodies blown up and destroyed when the machine goes wrong, bodies that are either too controlled or too little controlled. What they omit, as Jordanova says and as H.G.Wells noted at the time, is the *consolations* of mass culture, the notion of the Ford Car for every rationalised worker and the possibility of personal advancement. The danger of insurrection recalls the fear of the masses betrayed by many nineteenth-century German artists and writers from Grillparzer to Theodor Storm who clung to a classical aesthetic of the sort I have alluded to, as part of a nervous defence against the threat of mass disorder, often symbolised, as here, by flooding. This fear of mob disorder is of course only intensified in the twentieth century, from the generalised cultural pessimism of Spengler to the quite specific alarm at the post-war unrest among the middle classes in the short-lived Bavarian ‘Soviet Republic’.

But these representations of the dangerous, dehumanising effects of the
mix of technology and the masses are not the only, or even the most interesting, images in the film. At the centre of the film text, however it is edited, is the image of the robot which becomes a perfect simulacrum of a human being, and not just any human being, but the female star of the film (Figure 1). Now, the star embodies, indeed is the very image of, the modern industrial film. The star is its mechanism of identification, its means of consoling the masses, of feeding the appetite for consolation and its own appetite for industrial efficiency and profit. Thus the American entertainment industry’s most insidious and dangerous application of technology is captured in an image by the German artistic eye. The star system is rendered as an image, and thus overcome, by the German film idiom that is careful to cast unknowns (‘virgin stars’21) in leading roles lest they distract from a film as a ‘geschlossenes Kunstwerk’, and detract from the authority of the creator-director.

The film thus conveys in certain images and narrative moments the invasion of human consciousness, perception, and desire, by technology. A few words about these images of invasion. On the narrative level there is a love story. Now, of course, this plot is the most efficient engine of identification in the popular film, but this is a love story of the early German cinema, and thus more Faust pursuing das Ewig-Weibliche than Mary

\[21\] See McGilligan, p.114.
Pickford and Rudolf Valentino. It is marked as serious by the idealistic component that enriches it. Freder is called away from his vulgar sexual cavortings by the apparition of Maria as virgin-mother, and he embarks upon his – aesthetic – mission of mediation between head and hand, much as Hölderlin’s Hyperion at the urging of Diotima seeks to bring redemption to the fallen struggles of politics. Into this higher love story technology insinuates itself, displacing both the woman and the man. Twice, in the original film, the image of Freder calling for Maria cuts to a shot of Brigitte Helm encased in a transparent plastic or glass tube wearing a metal skull cap (Figure 2). It is palpable how the lovely head is turning into a machine, the brain itself already colonised by metal. The editing conveys how the mental impulse towards high ideals is blocked by this terrifying transformation.

The effect of this invasion is to bring the higher love story down to the level of vulgar sexuality. Where once Freder was transformed by his perception of the beautiful Maria, he is now tormented by feverish visions of her as a strip-tease dancer. It is important that his visions of her are intercut with the same performance as is enjoyed by the self-evidently decadent toffs in dinner-jackets. This intercutting contradicts the logic of the

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22 Reference is made to the reconstruction of the original film, as far as current knowledge allows, made by the Munich Filmmuseum and exhibited there and elsewhere.

narrative circumstances: why should the dream-tossed Freder see exactly the same image as the wide-awake roués? What this shows is that the *film image* – the technological appropriation and debasement of the beauty and redemptive force of erotic feeling – is itself being quoted *as an image*, an image shown to be invading Freder’s mind, just as it enslaves the toffs to their appetites. The only difference is that for Freder the bearers of the great plate upon which the android is served up, are not Nubian slaves but the Seven Deadly Sins from the Cathedral sequence – Freder’s erotic affect is tainted and an expression of brute materiality, stripped of its inner meaning. Indeed, the whole horror is that the inner space invaded by these images is defined by the appetites alone. These colliding images and this technique of editing reveal the materiality of the pleasure which American continuity editing strives to make palatable and possible by techniques which elide and obscure this fact.

It is the invasion of inwardness that is the most telling thing about the robot too. Maria is reduced to pure surface, a screen, behind or inside which there is only machinery. When visual pleasure is attached to this surface, Lang’s work is telling us, the pleasure, though real, is a lure and a deception. Instead of the redemptive force of love, nothing but narcissistic satisfaction is generated.

This insidious, invisible technology is a step beyond the jagged machine-inflicted invasion suffered by Rotwang, that was reminiscent of the First World War. It is the sort of invasion achieved by the medium of popular film, the machine that invades the head and the eye, so that, to quote Graeme Turner, ‘our processes of perception are made material’.23

The effect of Lang’s powerful direction is to stabilise the welter of images at his disposal from von Harbou’s treatment, with the aim of overcoming American entertainment culture by European artistic means. He ‘gives the game away’ in relation to the effect of the seduction of popular cinema, nowhere more evidently than in the famous sequence in which the exposure of the erotic dancer who is really a machine is juxtaposed with a montage of eyes disengaged from their owners’ brains.

However, it will be evident that the kind of image Lang’s film does actually create is finally neither of the one sort nor of the other. By the whole logic of what I have been arguing, at the same time as revealing the inferiority of the American exploitation of immediate gratification, epitomised in the deceptive lure of the screen star (that famous wink), there is also a large investment, in both literal and metaphorical senses, in mobilising the technological capacity and the mass audience appeal in relation to which that sort of image came about. Mounting a rivalry between the two kinds of image results simply in the mutual neutralisation of ‘the “unearned” pleasure’24 of U.S. cinema and European deeper mean-

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ing. It might be objected that the ending, in which a reconciliation between heart and head is choreographed on the steps of a Cathedral, and the Eternal Feminine seems to have the last word, obviously signals the triumph of the old aesthetic. But in the experience of watching the film, this comes across as ornament. The redundancy of the ending is not the result of subversion or irony, it is just that these meanings do not have the power to signify at all beneath the force of the effects that they convey. The film as a whole identifies neither with the tortured creator nor with the well-dressed businessman, and certainly not with the ‘happy couple’. It is obviously on the side of the robot, and to everything else it really shows only indifference, save for its unqualified assent to the sheer effectiveness of the sexualised machinery of cinema, the medium of the new industrial age.

What one can assert, by way of conclusion, is that the film text of Metropolis owes its brilliant mise-en-scène of the ambivalence of technology to a significant extent to its productive, if cynical, exploitation of the U.S.-German tension. It exhibits technology as at once the enemy of the spirit and bringer of unprecedented satisfactions. This surely is what ensures the film’s continuing, indeed increased, actuality today.

25 As one reviewer in the New York Times put it: ‘a picture as soulless as the manufactured women of its story’ (Mordaunt Hall, 7 March 1927). Compare too the analyst in the trade journal The Bioscope of 24 March 1927: ‘Herr Lang has produced a film like his own automaton, bold in imagination, marvellous in accomplishment, awe inspiring in effect, only lacking in human sympathy and heart appeal.’ Lang’s critique of the sort of immediate satisfaction offered by the popular film industry was significantly registered by the Anglo-Saxon critics as a lack of heart and an excessive delight in technology.