Apocalyptic Imagery in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*

The almost complete cut of Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* discovered in Buenos Aires in 2008 not only reinstated long lost footage, thus restoring the film closer to what it looked like at its 1927 Berlin premiere, but the discovery also restored the design of intertitles thought gone forever. The most important of these, an image that in the complete cut appears twice at crucial moments in the film, is the starting point for this essay. Where recent scholarship has for the most part investigated the film’s political context and/or visual and technological influence on subsequent science fiction films (e.g., the articles in Minden and Bachmann, and Telotte), my contribution is to follow up on Tom Gunning’s important 2000 study of Lang’s films by addressing the film as an allegorical and emblematic structure. It is not a matter of replacing these valid political readings, but of complementing them with an emblematic perspective that will tie up a few loose ends of a film that in many respects remains stubbornly intractable. The emblem book, “a book containing drawings with accompanying interpretations of their allegorical meaning” (*OED*), had its heyday during the Renaissance, but the silent movie, with its combination of moving pictures and verbal intertitles, can be said to be a continuation of that tradition, and Gunning shows how Lang as a filmmaker deliberately situates *Metropolis* within it (52-83). The film’s emblematic mode becomes especially pronounced through the restored intertitle, which in itself combines visual and verbal components by depicting a Bible opened at chapter 17 of the Apocalypse, complete with a woodcut of the Whore of Babylon.

The Buenos Aires cut thus makes the viewer more aware of an apocalyptic imagery that has to be interpreted in an allegorical mode. What in earlier versions had been lifeless cue cards explaining the scenes is now revealed to be as important as the film’s paramount emblem, the Tower of Babel sermon preached by Maria to her catacomb
congregation. The connection between the false Maria and the Whore of Babylon is clear already in the earlier, truncated cuts, but only in the almost complete cut is the full extent of the comparison revealed, forcing us to pay more attention to the final book of the Bible, and to the long theological and literary tradition that connects it to the Tower of Babel, a tradition into which Metropolis taps. The newly recovered intertitle in fact makes available an interpretative key that helps us understand why both Maria's sermon and the film's ending ultimately fail as apocalyptic allegory. To demonstrate this I shall also make use of an earlier allegory that, like Metropolis, is based on imagery from the Apocalypse. Book one of Edmund Spenser's The Faerie Queen (1590), a Renaissance text that has uncanny similarities with Lang's film.¹

The two occurrences of the woodcut are positioned as bookends for the Intermezzo (Zwischenspiel), thereby highlighting the apocalyptic resonances of this pivotal middle section of the film. The Intermezzo is also the section that has benefitted the most by the reinstated scenes, becoming more than fifty percent longer than in the previous cut.¹ The Intermezzo starts with Freder, the film's hero, visiting the cathedral in response to an invitation by Maria, a visionary woman he has belatedly found after searching for her throughout the film's long Prelude (Vorspiel). When Maria does not show up (having been captured by Rotwang, an inventor working for Joh Fredersen, Freder's father and the capitalist mastermind behind Metropolis), Freder instead listens to a monk preaching about the coming end: "Verily, I say unto you: the days of which the Apocalypse speaks draw night!" This is one of the few sequences where footage is still missing, so we never actually see the monk, but thanks to the Buenos Aires cut we do get a reproduction of the page from the Bible that he points to:²

Und das Weib war bekleidet mit Purpur und Scharlach und hatte einen güldenen Becher in der Hand. Und auf seiner Stirn geschrieben einen Namen, ein Geheimnis:


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And I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet coloured beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and seven horns. And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, having a golden cup in her hand. And upon her forehead was a name written, a mystery:

BABYLON THE GREAT,
the mother of Abominations of the earth. And I saw the woman drunken with the blood of the Saints. (Revelation 17: 3-6)

Before leaving the cathedral Freder is mesmerized by statues of the seven deadly sins flanking the grim reaper, horrific images that will reappear during his delirium at the very end of the Intermezzo. While his father goes off to observe Rotwang dupe the Metropolis elite with the lifelike appearance of a robotic woman made to look like Maria, Freder remains bedridden at home, having been traumatized by what he mistakenly takes to be his father’s intimacy with the real Maria. In a fevered vision he sees “Slim,” his father’s henchman, being transformed into the monk from the cathedral, and this time the footage does show a monk holding up a massive Bible opened to the pages from the Apocalypse. In addition, the depiction of the Whore of Babylon is now juxtaposed with live action from Rotwang’s gathering—the robotic Maria, after performing a seductive dance, sits with a golden cup in her hand on top of a dais formed like the seven-headed beast:

The image replicates the details of the woodcut, except that a reinstated scene shows the transformation of the figures holding up the dais into the seven deadly sins.

In the scene immediately following the delirium sequence (i.e., the first scene of the film’s Furioso section), we find Freder, calm and seemingly restored, sitting down in an easy chair with a copy of the Apocalypse in his lap. This scene clearly signals that the “Furious” events we are about to see will be apocalyptic. The publication data of the volume are conspicuously paraded in a close-up: “Die Offenbarung Sankt Johannis. Im Avalun-Verlag in Hellerau,” an actual 1923 edition with a print run of only 450 copies. As it turns out, this edition includes ten woodcuts by the contemporary artist Bruno Goldschmitt (1881-1964), including one depicting the Whore of Babylon:
For both *Die Nibelungen* and *Metropolis*, Lang "transformed a series of celebrated paintings into cinematic imagery" (McGilligan 95, 112), and something similar is happening with Goldschmitt's woodcut. Not only does it influence the design of the corresponding live action scene in which the false Maria sits on top of the seven-headed beast, but, as we shall see, also the apocalyptic images of the false Maria riding other beasts (i.e., the mobs formed by workers and the elite).

To better understand the allegorical underpinning of the film, one needs to investigate the connections between the woodcut imagery of the Babylonian whore and the Tower mentioned in Maria's sermon. The Tower of Babel, described in chapter 11 of Genesis, and the later Babylonian empire are distinct entities, separated by time and place (as indeed by historical fact and the mists of Biblical myth). Yet as they came to represent different aspects of human and demonic resistance to God, in time the two became conflated. By the fifth century AD they both as "Babylon" had come to represent the city of man, the antagonistic power that throughout history had stood against the city of God (a.k.a. "Jerusalem"), in the Old Testament represented by the people of Israel and in the New Testament by the church. "That was also how the enigmatic passages in Revelation were understood—there would be a culminating final battle between the two cities: Babylon the great would fall when Christ defeated the satanic dragon, after which the New Jerusalem would come down from heaven and eternal peace would ensue. Within the historical context of the last book of the Bible (i.e., the Roman persecution of the early church) the seven-headed beast was interpreted as representing Rome on its seven hills, a second Babylon in the west."

Combined with the two cities is a layer of erotic metaphors that go back to the prophets of the Old Testament, who described Israel as a woman married to her
Creator, a jealous husband who loves his people but who also brands sin and idolatry as whoring. The New Testament then added to this theme by teaching about the future wedding celebration between Christ and the church, his chosen bride. Consequently, the Whore of Babylon in Revelation 17 embodies all the sinful idolatry of the ages as she rides a seven-headed dragon representing heaven-storming empires from Babylon to Rome (and beyond), but there is also the Woman clothed with the sun, awaiting her wedding with Christ that will take place within a New Jerusalem established once Babylon the Great has fallen.

That the false Maria is associated with the Whore of Babylon has of course been common knowledge since the first screening of Metropolis in 1927, but that the true Maria alludes to the Woman clothed with the sun has not. However, the first verse of Revelation 12 reads: "And a great sign appeared in heaven: A woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars." In the film Maria is consistently portrayed with a halo of light as a defining feature, and throughout the pivotal catacomb sequence she is placed within a circle of star-like candles (unfortunately 15 rather than 12):

In short, the true Maria is clearly meant to signify the woman in Revelation 12. The following verses from the same chapter add further detail of relevance for the film:

And behold a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns and on his heads seven diadems. [...] And when the dragon saw that he was cast unto the earth, he persecuted the woman [...]. (Revelation 12: 3, 13)

The red dragon in this passage is of course the one the Whore of Babylon is riding in chapter 17, and thus the basic antagonism between the good and the false Maria of Metropolis is set up.

Beyond such direct influence on Metropolis, what is especially important for later European culture, both literary and pictorial, is how the Apocalypse becomes interpreted via Augustine (and Plato) in ways that create a dichotomy not just between good and evil, but between true originals and false copies associated with
the two cities: there is not just Christ but the Antichrist, as there is both the true bride of Christ and the false bride, the Whore of Babylon. This development can be seen in many early modern epics, starting in Italy and slowly working its way north. Andrew Fichter is correct to argue that Augustine provides "the two cities that oppose each other in Renaissance epic" (11), but the early church father’s Platonism is also one source for the many doppelgängers that frequent the same works. This is particularly true of what is considered both England’s first epic and its most prominent allegorical text, Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* (1590), whose first Book “The Legend of Holiness” is consciously structured around the two cities, and is almost completely populated with characters who have false copies of themselves walking about (see Bergvall 192-210).

What makes *The Faerie Queene* (*FQ*) especially intriguing for students of *Metropolis* is that the two works have a number of structural and character-driven similarities, not the least of which are two contrasted female characters based on the two women in Revelation. A key antagonist in *The Faerie Queene* is named Duessa (i.e., duplicity and deceit): “[C]lad in scarlet red” (*FQ* 1.2.13), she rides a “dreadfull Beast with seuenfold head” (*FQ* 1.7.19) and bears a “golden cup [...] replete with magick artes” (*FQ* 1.8.14). Her task is much the same as the one given the robotic Maria in *Metropolis*, to dupe and seduce the menfolk (the hero not the least), and she does this by transforming herself into a false copy of the poem’s virgin heroine, Una (“unity,” representing both “truth” and the church). Una for her part is modeled on the Woman clothed with the sun: her face is normally covered by a veil, but when unveiled the viewer is overwhelmed by the “blazing brightnesse of her beauties beame, and glorious light of her sunshiny face” (*FQ* 1.12.23).

The two Marias in *Metropolis* and Una and Duessa in the poem are associated alike with symbolic and mutually antagonistic locations that ultimately derive from the two Biblical and Augustinian cities. Through the film’s apocalyptic images, the true Maria is associated with a religious nexus centered on the catacombs and the cathedral, while the robotic Maria is connected to the Rotwang/Fredersen nexus behind the New Tower of Babel. Book One of *The Faerie Queene*, for its part, centers around two “houses” associated with Duessa and Una respectively: the House of Pride and the House of Holiness. The former is “A stately Pallace built of squared bricke,” which, like the Tower of Babel, “cunningly was without morter laid” (*FQ* 1.4.4), while the House of Holiness, like the cathedral (and the catacombs) linked to Maria in *Metropolis*, is the location where the hero is transformed and prepared for his task. Since the city of man is populated by humans separated from God, the seven deadly sins are featured prominently in both poem and film. In Spenser they are paraded at length within the House of Pride (*FQ* 1.4.18-36), while for Lang they are statues of warning and reproof within the cathedral before, in Freder’s fevered vision, they come alive and carry the dais with the false Maria and her seven-headed dragon. Other similarities include details such as the “delightful bowres” within the House of Pride (*FQ* 1.4.4) that return as the Eternal Gardens at the top of the New Tower of Babel. However, of much greater significance than these arbors, most likely added in homage to the famed
hanging gardens of antiquity, is the fact that both the House of Pride and the New Tower of Babel are dominated by a clock: “And on the top a Dial told the timely howres," we are told about the House \((FQ\ 1.4.4)\), while the city of Metropolis is controlled by an ever-present clock. Unlike their heavenly counterparts both towers are subjugated by the constraints of earthly time.

Indeed, the clock is a recurring image in the film, one we first encounter at the very beginning of the Prologue and that is later duplicated as the crucible on which Freder suffers the hardship of Georgy, a.k.a. 11811, the model worker:

The clock thus comes to represent the sufferings the hero experiences within the city of man, whether Metropolis or the House of Pride.

As Freder in Georgy’s stead is "crucified" on the clock-like machine, so Redcrosse, the hero of Spenser’s poem, at the end of Book One turns into a Christ figure as he reenacts the Easter drama in a three-day battle with the satanic dragon of Revelation (after which he is betrothed to Una, the Woman clothed with the sun). The road to heroism, however, is far from straight for either man, or indeed for Georgy. The motif of belated heroism is greatly strengthened in the Buenos Aires cut, in which Georgy’s story is finally told. Indeed, much of the added footage in the Intermezzo centers on his exploits after trading places with Freder. Having discovered money in the pockets of Freder’s clothes, Georgy succumbs to the temptations of Yoshiwara, the seductive nightclub later associated with the harlotry of the false Maria. Only late in the game does he give his life to save Freder from a knife stab given by a member of a mob stirred up by the robot woman (his last words being “faithful after all”). In many ways Georgy acts as Freder’s alter ego in that both are “crucified” for each other. And both he and Freder, who is described by Gunning as “amazingly ineffective” \((67)\), follow the same trajectory as Redcrosse’s equally belated heroism in The Faerie Queene.

In a scene that is eerily reminiscent of the film, Redcrosse is early on \((FQ\ 1.1.45-55)\) fooled by the magician Archimagos (both “archi-mago,” the archetypal magician, and “arch-imago,” the creator of images), who—much like “Rotwang, the modern magician”\(^{16}\)—has created a false copy of the heroine. Redcrosse is made to see what
he believes to be Una embracing another man, much in the same way Rotwang sets up Freder to find what he believes to be Maria in the arms of his father. For Freder, the result is a dive into a delirium that mixes apocalyptic images of death with the eroticism of the robotic Maria. For Rederosse it means leaving Una and instead joining up with Duessa. Duessa in turn leads him to the House of Pride, and after sleeping with him she turns him over to the giant Orgoglio, allegorically representing both pride and sexual arousal, who locks him up in his dungeon. Rederosse is, like Freder, an “amazingly ineffective” hero, and, like Georgy, he is done in by his libido. In both Spenser and Lang, this philandering ties in with the theme of true love and harlotry as defining marks of the two cities. However, as Freder is saved by Georgy so that he can rescue Maria, so Rederosse is saved by Una, the lady he will then go on to rescue from the dragon. And in an inspired twist, after having been readied for battle in the House of Holiness, Rederosse finds out that his real name is the same as that of 11811 (i.e., George the dragon killer [LQ 12.10.61]). It is no coincidence that Freder is dressed in Georgy’s clothes and carries with him a cap emblazoned with his name:

![Image of a cap with the number 11811]

The cap is prominently displayed in the newly reinstated scenes as Freder/St. George prepares to battle Rotwang, and by implication the apocalyptic dragon Rotwang has unleashed, in order to save Maria.

Leaving Spenser for a moment, it is in this apocalyptic context that the otherwise unlikely flooding of the lower Metropolis becomes significant. In Revelation 12, right after the verses describing the Woman clothed with the sun, the dragon tries to drown the woman and her newborn child:

> And when the dragon saw that he was cast unto the earth, he persecuted the woman who brought forth the man child.... And the serpent cast out of his mouth, after the woman, water, as it were a river: that he might cause her to be carried away by the river. (Revelation 12: 13-15)
This passage provides a reason for the flooding of Metropolis, a deluge that, significantly in the context of the quotation above, “might cause” not only Maria (as the only adult) “to be carried away by the river,” but the city’s children as well. The flooding was likened to the Old Testament flood in contemporary promotional materials, but it has an even stronger connection to these apocalyptic lines from Revelation 12.

The flooding in the film is caused by a mob comprised of workers who have been incited by the robotic Maria, and indeed this overflowing, destructive mob is the manifestation of the apocalyptic beast. Lang brings this out through visual cues, since the mob scenes (both with the workers and later with the Metropolis elite) are depicted with the robotic Maria “striding the beast,” just like the Whore of Babylon strides the dragon in the emblematic woodcut from Revelation (cf. the third and fourth illustrations above):

The satanic connotations of this beast become clear when the false Maria (immediately before the catacomb scene depicted in the left screen capture above) incites the mob to kill Freder, resulting in Georgy being stabbed in Freder’s stead. Both mobs are unleashed in an apocalyptic Witches’ Sabbath presided over by the false Maria, repeatedly called a “witch” in the intertitles.

However, a Witches’ Sabbath typically ends at the break of dawn with the tolling of church bells. In the film this defeat of darkness by light is illustrated by the true Maria twice tolling a bell, first to save the children from the flood (in scenes that have been much extended in the new cut), and then, even more iconically, by swinging on a rope attached to the cathedral bell as she attempts to escape from Rotwang. This climactic scene is intercut with images of the robot woman being stripped of her disguise as Maria’s double (as she is burned on the stake as a witch), and is followed by Freder overcoming Rotwang, who tumbles to his death at the base of the cathedral.
The location is of course deeply significant: the cathedral, like the House of Holiness in Spenser, is a manifestation of the city of God, and it is there that both Rotwang and the false Maria are defeated, with the latter's true identity being revealed much as Duessa is stripped of her disguises in *The Faerie Queene* 1.8.46-48.

To sum up, there are a number of correspondences between Spenser's poem and Lang's film in terms of plot and characterization, similarities that are caused by a common apocalyptic legacy, and that reveal themselves in both poem and film through emblematic images with a long pedigree, such as the two ladies connected to the two cities, the dragon and the dragon-killing hero (known by the name of George). However, despite these similarities, the narrative effect of the poem and the film, when all is said and done, is not comparable. Unlike "The Legend of Holiness," *Metropolis*, for all of its many strengths, including all the apocalyptic images discussed in this paper, is "a text whose allegorical energies seem unable to coalesce into a grand narrative" (Gunning 82).21 To put it bluntly: while Spenser's allegorical universe hangs together, Lang's falls apart. A main reason for this, I believe, is a structural conundrum related to Lang's use of the apocalyptic model.22 He establishes a pattern based on Revelation that presupposes a thoroughgoing dualism in the form of two opposing cities, each associated with a corresponding lady (the two versions of Maria), but then he collapses the distinction by merging the two into one: Jerusalem and Babylon become one (thus by implication also merging the two Marias). The whole message of the allegorical centerpiece, Maria's parable of the Tower of Babel, is that such a conflation is possible, and indeed desirable: the Tower of Babel, and by implication the city of Metropolis, can be both the city of man and the city of God, a view neatly summed up by the tagline of Maria's sermon—"And at the tower's zenith we shall write: Great is the world and its Maker! And great is Man!" According to the sermon and the film, the failure is not the pride of building a Tower of Babel in the first place. Consequently, despite the destruction during the Furioso section, the film does not end with the demise of the New Tower of Babel but with a handshake that will ensure its rebuilding. This ending points back to a basic inconsistency stemming from Maria's sermon that is more noticeable in the newly restored cut,
an inconsistency that undermines the film as a coherent emblematic and apocalyptic structure.

Äke Bergvall
Karlstad University, Sweden

Notes

1 The reason for this essay, however, is not to provide another "source" for *Metropolis*, but to compare two allegorical uses of similar motifs from the Apocalypse.

2 I am comparing the 2003 and the 2010 British DVD editions of the film. The total length of the movie has increased by 24.8 percent (from 117 to 146 minutes), but the distribution between the three sections is uneven. The Prelude is 12.5 percent longer (from approx. 56 to 63 minutes), while the much shorter Intermezzo increases by 53.3 percent (from 19 to 28 and a half minutes), and the Furioso section by 28.3 percent (from 40 to 52 minutes). Due to PAL speedup, these times are 4 percent shorter than if measured in a cinema, but this does not change the percentages.

3 All screenshots are edited in size and do not reflect the proportions of the projected film image.

4 King James version, the edition used in the subtitles of the British Eureka edition.

5 Goldschmitt also made 21 woodcuts with motifs from the Old Testament for a slightly later edition of the complete Bible (Munich: F. Bruckmann, 1925).

6 The topos was developed most conspicuously by Augustine in *The City of God*.

7 On Rome as "another Babylon," see *The City of God* 18.22.

8 See e.g. Isaiah 54: 5-6.

9 See e.g. Ezekiel 23: 30, and Hosca 4: 10.


11 The apocalyptic similarities are corroborated by the novel *Metropolis* (1926), written by the film's scriptwriter (and Lang's wife) Thea von Harbou. The Maria of the novel is described as being "the source of a light, as mild as God" (Harbou 42), and is closely associated with a statue at the top of the cathedral, a "star-crowned virgin" who like the Woman clothed with the sun hovers "on the sickle of the silver moon" (Harbou 8-9). Thus, while there are sometimes striking differences in detail and plot between von Harbou's novel and Lang's film version (based on her screenplay), Harbou in this instance reinforces what is visually present in Lang.

12 All quotations are taken from the Longman edition of the poem.

13 For further explication of the ladies' iconographical associations with the two women of Revelation, consult the entries on "Dessa" and "Una" in Hamilton et al.

14 While Harbou's novel may not be a reliable guide to the plot of the film, she interestingly has a character in the book associate the false Maria directly with the Apocalyptic Babylon: she "is the great city, which reignest over the kings of the earth. [...] The woman who is called Babylon, the Mother of the Abominations of the Earth, wanders as a blazing brand through Metropolis" (91).

15 On the lack of mortar in Babel, see Genesis 11: 3.
Epithet used in contemporary promotional materials (as cited in Minden and Bachmann 76).

Biblical commentators suggest that both the woman and her child symbolize the church, with the child representing its rapid expansion.

See Bachmann 13.

Intriguingly, Harbou emphasizes the "beastly" nature of the mob: "The multitude bowed head and neck low, as though its shoulders, its backs, should be a carpet for the girl. [...] The girl raised her foot and stepped upon the neck of the outstretched beast [...]" (107).

The most iconic representation of this in film history would be the conclusion of the Witches' Sabbath toward the end of Disney's Fantasia.

Rutsky for his part sums up scholarly criticism of the film's "confusing narrative" (179).

The reasons for Lang's idiosyncratic use of the Apocalypse, while outside the scope of this essay, I believe to be both political and personal.

Works Cited


