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Published by: University of Nebraska Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/20688260
Accessed: 04-03-2015 08:39 UTC

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Re-Producing the Class and Gender Divide: Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*

Gabriela Stoica

The following article outlines the economy of gender relations in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927). I approach the topic of gender relations from a previously neglected perspective that examines connections between gender, sexuality, and work as conceptualized by Marx and the early Socialists who preceded him. Close analyses of several key sequences will demonstrate that *Metropolis* translates cinematically the inversion of causality between work and sexuality that Marx introduced after the Saint-Simonians, from whom he otherwise distanced himself. By keeping women either completely outside the cinematic space or relegating them to certain strategic roles within the narrative, Harbou and Lang move towards their own understanding of the relationship between work, gender, and sexuality, suggesting that cinema not only reflects, but actively participates in the creation and maintenance of the status quo. (GS)

Commenting on the line “The debauchees returned, broken by their business”¹ (Baudelaire 85) from “Morning Twilight”²—the same poem in which Charles Baudelaire compares Paris to an “aged workman” (85; “vieillard laborieux”)—Walter Benjamin notes, “With the Saint-Simoni-ans, industrial labor is seen in the light of sexual intercourse; the idea of the joy of working is patterned after an image of the pleasure of procreation. Two decades later, the relation has been revised: the sex act itself is marked by the joylessness which oppresses the industrial worker” (367). As Saskia Poldervaart has shown, sex and sexuality were issues of central concern for Charles Fourier, Saint Simon, Robert Owen, and their proponents, all of whom, taken together, represent the first socialists of the early to mid-nineteenth century. Although Saint-Simonians explicitly rejected utopianism as a doctrine that promotes a static image of society (Poldervaart 61), they are known, to this day, as “utopian socialists”—a derogatory name given to them by Marx and Engels, who

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dismissed the work of their predecessors due to the latter’s rejection of violent class struggle (Poldervaart 41–42). Granted, Fourier, Simon, and Owen did not see eye-to-eye with Marx on the precise means whereby economic and social reform were to come about. Utopian socialists invested sexuality with a strong potential for revolution. They believed in “changing the relationships of production as well as relations between the sexes by problematizing sexuality, the family and the public/private distinction” (Poldervaart 42). Marx, on the other hand, was intent first and foremost on emphasizing the absolute necessity of political struggle for the collapse of an economic system of large-scale oppression such as capitalism—so much so that, in theory at least, he diminished the importance of gender, sexuality, and family issues, absorbing them indiscriminately into the larger goal of class struggle. He did so, for instance, by inverting the relationship of causality between sexuality and work, by appropriating a term such as “reproduction” into the economic vocabulary, and by introducing a major change in the qualitative nature of sexuality. If Saint Simonians still talked about the “pleasure of procreation” (Benjamin 367), Marx introduced a radical disjuncture between the sexual instinct of pleasure (Sexus) and the life instinct of procreation (Eros). His emphasis on the instinctual nature of biological reproduction in proletarian workers provides an example: “The maintenance and reproduction of the working-class is, and must ever be, a necessary condition to the reproduction of capital. But the capitalist may safely leave its fulfillment to the laborer’s instincts of self-preservation and of propagation” (Marx, Simple Reproduction). The sense of assurance that emanates from this sentence is misleading when it comes to capitalists’ and Marx’s own attitude toward sexuality. As my analysis of Fritz Lang’s celebrated film Metropolis will suggest, elites and governments have always sought to regulate gender and sexuality, sometimes precisely by keeping them outside the official political and economic discourse. Subsequently, for all their differences of opinion and doctrine, Marx and his followers did have a lot in common with the early socialists. Of particular interest to me is how they all helped to construct and refine a discourse of direct causality between work and sexuality in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For all of the above-mentioned theoreticians, work and sexuality were key discursive categories, even if, as Benjamin makes clear, Marx and the Saint Simonians produced different and sometimes radically opposite evaluations regarding which of the two categories most influenced the other and with what qualitative difference(s). In line with this argument, I intend not so much to demonstrate which of these two sides Lang and Harbou’s film ultimately supports—if it does so at all—but to trace the dynamic between
work and sexuality specific to *Metropolis* and relate it more generally to the historical discourse initiated by Saint Simonians and continued by Marx.

For a very brief moment, the beginning of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* captures in brilliant visual terms the transition from Saint Simonism to a Marxist critique of capitalism. The film commences with a series of orchestrated shots that suggest a layered structure not only of signification but, as will become apparent later in the film, also of spatial, primarily vertical, organization. The progression from one shot to the next proceeds in less a horizontal, i.e., linear, consequential manner, than top-down, following an associative logic that exposes and deconstructs the palimpsestic texture of Joh Fredersen’s capitalist empire and of the film itself. The opening shots of *Metropolis* vaguely recall Walter Ruttman’s interest in the possibilities of abstract animated film, which he began exploring in 1921 with the first abstract film the world had ever seen, *Lichtspiel Opus I* (Cinema Opus I). In *Metropolis* we first see the mechanism whereby the illusion of geometric shapes is created on-screen through a controlled projection of lights and shadows. The resulting collage of intersecting shapes and lines then brings forth the word *Metropolis*, from which an intensely radiating light grows to inundate the screen and literally starts to dissolve the image. Revealed beneath it are the painted contours of a monumental city panorama, more precisely a mountainous formation of urban architecture envisioned by set designers Erich Kettelhut, Otto Hunte, and Carl Vollbrecht. The word *Metropolis* itself remains intact. Its cropped appearance becomes a bridge to the next shot of skyscrapers, onto which it remains grafted for a few seconds before it finally fades out. A direct visual link is thus established between the first two shots of the film. Here Lang reveals the significance of *Metropolis* for the first time in its entirety: as visualized on the screen, this name not only conjures the title of the film, but also refers specifically to the eponymous city around which the narrative revolves. The impression of animation and the passage of time, evident in the rising sun over Metropolis, derive in this shot from an ingenious lighting effect achieved, in turn, through frame-by-frame shooting.

This trick photography sequence gradually dissolves into a montage of individual documentary-like shots in which movement becomes the key element, possibly as an echo of Marx’s understanding that economic reproduction is concerned not with a static, but with the dynamic motion of an economy. Vertical phallic-like pistons combine with endlessly spinning wheels and other rotating devices to create the impression of a pulsating rhythm with clear sexual overtones, underscored toward the end of the sequence also by the dramatic cadence of a clock, which
grows to dominate the musical score. At first glance, the message conveyed by this montage seems to tie in perfectly with the parallel that Saint Simonians drew between industrial labor and sexual intercourse, although the idea appears here not for the utopian socialist goal of “rehabilitating the flesh by valuing its pleasure and incentives” (Poldervaart 41). Upon closer inspection, the visual depiction of technology in this particular sequence conforms only partially to the utopian socialist idea of patterning the joy of working “after an image of the pleasure of procreation” (Benjamin 367). To be sure, pleasure plays an important role in the almost fetishistic visualization of the technical apparatus. The idea of procreation, on the other hand, is also of some consequence in this scene, but only at the level of the film text itself, not its diegesis. Significantly, in the entire film we never see what the machines actually produce, an approach that diametrically opposes Walter Benjamin’s in his *Arcades Project*. At most one could say that the images of machines simply produce more images of machines, whether identical or different. Multiple exposures convey this idea cinematically, evident in the superimposition of two or more shots of the same or similar rotating devices in the film’s opening montage sequence. Replacing commodities with film images in the production process highlights the self-reflexive dimension of Lang’s cinematography. But the visual ban on physical commodities in *Metropolis* also comments on the sterile environment of technology. This sterility is hardly compatible with the “pleasure of procreation” about which Saint Simonians talked. Instead it provides a point of entry into Marx, more specifically the separation between Sexus and Eros that the German theorist introduced when he transposed the concept of “reproduction” into economic terms.

Marx’s understanding of sexuality becomes apparent in the sequence that portrays the daily lives of the oppressed workers, who are as plagued by the separation between Sexus and Eros as technology itself. The most obvious instance of the proletarian workers’ sublimating desire appears in the striking contrast between the energy emanating from automated machines and the following shot of exhausted human laborers returning home at the end of a working day. The compelling visual and acoustic tempo of the previous sequence gives way to the slow-moving rhythm of a mass of overworked men with whom the camera never identifies, perhaps an implicit acknowledgment on Lang’s part of cinema’s debt to technology. In order to visually translate the rotation of factory shifts, Lang creates the perfect synchronization of one group of workers arriving while another departs. This shift creates the impression of regimented repetition without the possibility of escape, which is sustained visually by the numerous iron bars demarcating the various spaces.
that contain the workers. Day after day, at the end of their shift, labor-
ers descend into the depths of Metropolis, slowly and unenthusiastically
making their way to the lifeless, uninhabited, and uninviting tenements
that retain nothing of the glamour of the upper city. As the camera fol-
low the workers’ downward trajectory, Lang unveils yet another level
of spatial organization, but also reveals for the first time the vertical ar-
rangement of the city. This sequence stands in stark contrast to the
subsequent depiction of the privileged class and its carefree life, but it
prompts no further action on the level of the narrative. This represen-
tation suggests, on the one hand, that the workers’ city represents the
lowest level of Metropolis—a hypothesis that will be revised in the
course of the film—and, on the other, that the sequence itself was
designed primarily to comment on the catatonic state of the workers.

One of the most striking elements in this sequence is the complete
absence of women and children, as male workers return to a seemingly
deserted city. Historically, massive layoffs of women and children from
factories exiled them within the private sphere of the household after
they had constituted the bulk of the industrial proletariat.5 By all rules of
logic, the so-called worker’s city in Metropolis should therefore be a
space inhabited mostly by women and children. Visually, however, there
are no traces of their existence, except perhaps for the dim lights
irradiating from some of the apartments to which the workers return.
This minimalist visual representation of the domestic space marks it as
a potential sphere of resistance because it escapes the capitalists’ visual
perimeter and our own, and it is where the women and children reside.
This interpretation, however, loses much of its subversive potential be-
cause the rest of the film fails to corroborate it conclusively. Addition-
ally, Marx himself refused to acknowledge the importance of women’s
domestic labor for the daily reproduction of workers’ labor power since
it was not remunerated financially. More subtly still, by de-emphasizing
the reproduction of the working class, since it comes about of its own
accord (Marx, Simple Reproduction), Marx purges the term “reproduction”
of any connotations of desire and pleasure that might have carried
over from the sexual realm. At the same time, however, he holds onto
the instinctual implications of the term and mobilizes them to dismiss the
tasks that comprise a woman’s daily activity and maintain the workers.

I will return later to a more detailed discussion about women’s dis-
tribution across various spaces in Metropolis and their link to a complex
discourse about work and sexuality. Remaining for now in the thematic
sphere of industrial labor and reproduction, I will focus on the portrayal
of children in Fritz Lang’s film. Our first glance of the workers’ city
initiates many covert visual references to proletarian children.
Straightforward cinematic representations of children in *Metropolis* generally show them in large groups, separated both spatially and visually from their parents. The process of capital-induced familial alienation decried by some Socialist Feminists finds its literal translation in *Metropolis* on the level of plot and cinematography: “The passage from serfdom to free labor power separated the male from the female proletarian and both of them from their children” (Dalla Costa and James 42). Despite the general invisibility of children in *Metropolis*, the film abounds with implicit visual and/or symbolic cues to their importance. A case in point is the ten-hour clock that appears several times throughout the film. It probably refers to the nineteenth-century struggle for a more humane regulation of children’s work schedule and for the improvement of working conditions at a time when women and children represented the primary work force in English factories. Freder’s first hallucinatory vision immediately following the tragic accident in the machine room also alludes to the centrality of children and reproduction to capitalist ideology. Moloch, the terrifying man-eating monster into which the M-machine transforms, takes its name from a bull-headed Phoenician god to whom parents sacrificed their children. This transformation plunges viewers back in time to a moment when children were the most likely and the most vulnerable victims of capitalist aggression. Marx himself insists in the first volume of *Das Kapital (Capital)* on “the physical deterioration [...] of the children and young persons as of the women, whom machinery [...] subjects to the exploitation of capital.” Further on Marx notes “the enormous mortality, during the first few years of their life, of the children of the workers” (“Machinery and Modern Industry”). But the machine’s metamorphosis into Moloch also raises interesting questions about the relation between mythology and technology, which many years after the release of *Metropolis* still preoccupied critics as famous as Theodor Adorno and Marx Horkheimer. Thirdly, as Andreas Huyssen has argued very convincingly in “The Vamp and the Machine,” the entire film, and this sequence in particular, testifies to the significance of sexuality in negotiating male fears of technology in Weimar Germany. I would like to suggest one way of supplementing Huyssen’s reading of the Moloch machine as a projection of “the male fear of uncontrolled female potency displaced to technology” (“Vamp and Machine” 235). As he recovers from the explosion, Freder sees the killer machine come to life. Ropes haul a group of half-naked men, presumably slaves, up the long flight of stairs that leads straight into the monster’s gaping mouth. The ascent progresses with great difficulty, primarily because the slaves resist. The camera closes in on the men several times to capture their futile struggle. After the entire
group of slaves succumbs to the machine’s unquenchable, murderous desire, subsequent groups emerge at intervals as if on a conveyor belt. The upward trajectory remains the same throughout, but slaves are now no longer the ones on whose flesh the machine feeds. Proletarian workers take their place, recognizable as such by their constraining factory uniforms and perfectly coordinated movements. Unlike the slaves, the workers are neither subjected to coercive physical measures nor reluctant to jump into the abyss. This portion of the Moloch sequence consists of a single, extreme long shot that prevents us from getting close to the victims. Once again, identification with the workers is strongly discouraged. The wave-like distorting effect that traverses the image from left to right at the end of the scene suggests a point-of-view shot, confirmed then by a cut to Freder as he reaches out to the chimera-Tableau in a futile attempt to touch what he sees. It is thus through Freder’s eyes that Lang has us observe the workers as they rhythmically march up the stairs. The sequential arrangement of the shots linking slaves and workers comments on the affinity between slavery and capitalism. Workers may lack shackles on their feet but, since they also fall prey to Moloch, one could hardly consider them free. Throwing oneself into the mouth of a monster no longer represents a noble act of sacrifice. But it does not proceed from an exertion of will either. If anything, the implacable movement of the workers testifies to a complete erasure of individual will. This reading challenges Marx’s belief in the link between freedom of employment and the freedom of workers to rule over their own lives as they see fit: “[As against slavery,] the capitalistic form presupposes, from first to last, the free wage-laborer, who sells his labor-power to capital” (Marx, Co-operation). What then compels the workers to renounce their own lives? Here the children once again become significant. By conjuring Moloch as the locus of absolute terror in Metropolis, especially so soon after proletarian children have made their first on-screen appearance in the Eternal Gardens, Harbou and Lang suggest that male fear of technology not only demonizes female sexuality, as Huyssen has argued, but articulates workers’ fear of losing their offspring to the same capitalist machinery that necessitates individual and generational reproduction and that reduces human laborers to productive and reproductive abilities. According to Lloyd Spencer, the word “proletariat” itself comes from the Greek proles, or offspring, thus denoting quite fittingly those “who have nought to offer but their offspring” (66). While children remain invisible in the Moloch sequence, adult male workers take over their role as victims. This switch suggests the way men have historically replaced women and children on the assembly line. Beyond this, by stepping into the shoes of their
children, the workers of Metropolis have, theoretically at least, the chance to break the chain of destruction in which their offspring would be caught otherwise. They could thus follow through with a revolutionary sense of empowerment released through the love for one’s children. Yet the workers’ automated movements suggest the impenetrability of an unrelenting mechanism that will eventually devour the children as well as the adults. What remains clear is that reproduction and workers’ sexuality play a crucial role in the negotiation, whether in the form of mobilization or restraint, of illicit political energies.

Women’s part in this process is significant. Judging by the large cast of men and the minimal intervention of proletarian women in the plot, one might conclude that the separation between Sexus and Eros affects primarily men, or that women’s exclusion from the sphere of paid work signals their insignificance in the eyes of the state. These are both erroneous conclusions that reinforce the patriarchal tradition described by Kate Millett: “Since the Enlightenment, the West has undergone a number of cataclysmic changes: industrial, economic, and political revolution. But each appeared to operate, to a large extent, without much visible or direct reference to one half of humanity” (64; my emphasis), i.e., to women. In actual fact, however, women’s lives were impacted, even if in ways which critics have only recently begun to uncover, by men’s choices and by the constantly changing ideological investment in human sexuality. Furthermore, as I will demonstrate using specific examples from Lang’s film, women’s bodies, with their unique reproductive ability, often became indispensable vehicles throughout history for implementing official discourses on sexuality and politics. Being outside a normative category such as that of wage laborers does not exclude women from other less visible categories and hierarchies with which the state keeps its subjects in check. It is precisely these unseen norms and categories that interest me, as well as the ways in which they operate in Metropolis.

By activating the Sexus/Eros divide, certain categories of sexual relations were legitimated and others criminalized in order to establish specific economic and political doctrines and maintain desired structures of domination. Reproduction provides a case in point. Historically, it became the single most important criterion by which human interaction among members of the proletariat was evaluated in the nineteenth century. Drawing on Gunnar Heinsohn and Rolf Knieper’s seminal work Theorie des Familienrechts: Geschlechtsrollenaufhebung, Kindervernachlässigung, Geburtenrückgang (1976, Theory of Family Law: Abolishment of Gender Roles, Neglect of Children, Decline in the Birth Rate), Maria Mies explores some of the reasons why the German state
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intervened in the “production” of people. For the early industrial proletariat, “the family, as we understand it today, was much less the norm than is usually believed” (Mies 183). The propertyless proletariat had even less material interest in the production of children than in marriage, because children provided no insurance in old age, unlike the sons of the bourgeoisie. Farmers also tended to have large families because they needed as much help as possible to work the land. So in order to inspire the proletarians to produce enough children for the next generation of workers, it became imperative to find ways of channeling their sexual energies “into the straightjacket of the bourgeois family” (Mies 184). The colonization of workers by the bourgeois morality was carried out through concrete state legislation and police measures, as well as ideological campaigns, many of which were aimed at curbing sexuality “in such a way that it took place within the confines of the family” (Mies 184). As a consequence, sexual intercourse before and outside of marriage was criminalized. Aside from ensuring a future generation of workers, the legal provisions and ideological campaigns designed by the German state to boost reproduction among the proletariat also provided an effective way of keeping in check the growing threat posed by women both at home, via the sexual liberation characteristic of the Weimar period, and outside the home in the labor market. Women’s presence in the labor market and within the sexual revolution was deemed so dangerous to patriarchy as to necessitate “getting women out of the factory altogether and back into the safety of the ‘home’” (Millett 87). Possible reasons for this drastic measure were, according to Kate Millett, the disruption of the family structure, including the authority of the father as provider and head of household, and the fact that women worked too hard in the factory to serve in the home (87).

One of the more concrete historical measures implemented in Germany during the early industrial period was the so-called “housewifization campaign” whose origins can be traced back to the bourgeois ideal of the domestic woman and which quickly caught on among male workers. This campaign reinforced patriarchy at a moment in German history when women were supposed to throw off their sexual inhibitions and make way for the “emanzipierte Frau.” On a more abstract ideological level, patriarchy could be sustained through a tight control over female sexual desire and by sanctioning certain forms of sexuality in various types of women. Carol Diethe, for instance, argues that more often than not in Weimar Germany the pervasive but unseen control of female sexuality revolved around an idealization of the mother’s role (120). This argument applies only partially to Metropolis. The elaborate religious symbolism surrounding Fritz Lang and Thea von Harbou's
Maria suggests that she is meant to embody the idealized form of motherhood perpetuated to this day by the Christian doctrine. Yet Maria’s role is not always entirely straightforward, and neither is that of the proletarian women in *Metropolis*. Visually, they are hardly ever portrayed as mothers. The presence of children does imply that workers’ wives have given birth, but we never see them with the children performing their maternal role. Moreover, on the rare occasions when proletarian women take center stage, they form a “flowing mass of female aggression” (Ruppert 7) that evokes anything but maternal feelings. The de-individualized female figures that participate in the workers’ rebellion lack Maria’s maternal nurturing and care, and she in turn lacks any biological ties to the workers’ children. Arguably this latter detail links Maria to the figure of the Virgin Mother, but on a non-symbolic level it suggests a multiply deficient motherhood.

In an attempt to untangle the symbolic ramifications of the “raging femininity” in *Metropolis*, Andreas Huyssen has suggested that the timing of the proletarian women’s first appearance on screen is anything but arbitrary. According to him, this moment signals women’s threat, which challenges both the machines and the men, replacing the threat of technology (Huyssen, “Vamp and Machine” 232). In *After the Great Divide* (1986) Huyssen offers a more detailed explanation for the nineteenth-century gendering of mass culture and rebellious crowds. Beginning with the negative feminine characteristics normally associated with mass culture toward the end of the nineteenth century (“serialized feuilleton novels, popular and family magazines, the stuff of lending libraries, fictional bestsellers, […] not, however, working-class culture or residual forms of older popular or folk cultures” [49]), Huyssen then traces the gendering of masses in general back to the gendering of mass culture: “In the age of socialism and the first women’s movement in Europe, the masses knocking at the gate were also women, knocking at the gate of a male-dominated culture” (47). This kind of genealogy applies very well to *Metropolis*, especially if we bear in mind that Thea von Harbou’s novel was first serialized in a magazine before being published as a book and eventually turned into a screenplay. It also helps complete the picture of what exactly fueled male fears of femininity in the industrial era and why proletarian women make their first major appearance in *Metropolis* as a raging mob. Just as the gendering of angry mobs in modernity is not accidental, so too is the fact that proletarian women have children not fortuitous. Despite its puzzling absence in the first half of *Metropolis*, the maternal instinct becomes a decisive factor in the outcome of the workers’ rebellion. Attention to the dynamic of this rebellion can help deconstruct the mechanism that undermines the
rule of capital, which is then restored by a cosmeticized and highly problematic reconciliation at the end of the film. Understanding this dynamic requires first off an analysis of class and sexuality in Joh Fredersen’s empire.

The same Sexus/Eros divide that characterizes both technology and the workers can be applied more generally to the two social classes that are locked in a dialectical relationship of opposition and mutual dependency. Sexuality in Metropolis splits into two apparently incompatible categories. Each category comes with its own set of prescribed sexual practices and enacts a boundary that divides the rich from the poor. The capitalist thinkers enjoy a virtual monopoly over a hedonistic type of sexuality that underemphasizes biology and usurps the female procreative role. The most resonant scene in this regard takes place in the Eternal Gardens and focuses on the freedom of capitalists’ sons in pursuing the gratification of their wildest sexual desires and fantasies. The film offers no corresponding exploration of the domestic/erotic spaces inhabited by the workers, implying that the proletariat is confined by a reproduction-oriented sexuality that tends to overemphasize biology.

Except for Hel and María, all of the women in Lang’s film are either prostitutes or proletarian mothers/housewives. Whether or not one female character has access to the world of the thinkers or that of the workers depends solely on her bodily experiences and the category in which these experiences situate her. This kind of categorization in women is directly proportional to the two class-based types of sexuality discussed previously. The reason for this is that the Sexus/Eros divide, as well as masculine identities themselves, are constantly negotiated in the film over the bodies of women. Separating reproductive and non-reproductive sexuality in Metropolis depends largely on a function-alization of women’s bodies, i.e., on efforts to graft their bodily experiences onto their class affiliation. In turn, this process dictates the specific intra-diegetic spaces to which women can gain access, as well as the extent to which they can literally lay claim to visibility in Lang’s film.

If, following Walter Benjamin, the separation between pleasure and procreation has its origins in the introduction of industrial labor, one would expect it to affect men only, since they dominated the labor market after the gradual but steady elimination of women and children from factories. Given women’s exile from wage-paying industrial labor to the private, wageless sphere of domestic labor, why does the female body in Lang’s film become the perfect ground for negotiating and implementing the Sexus/Eros divide? Huyssen offers one possible answer when he underscores male fears of errant female sexuality in both the film and Weimar culture in general. Yet one must question the
expectation that people not directly involved in the reproduction of capital are not influenced by this sphere, or that capitalism offers the only means for neutralizing women’s bodies through objectification and marginalization. Both of these latter points seem evident in Metropolis, especially if one considers the events that allow women to become visible and how this impacts the other social actors.

The prostitutes in the Eternal Gardens are the first women to appear on screen, at least according to the most recently restored but still incomplete version of Metropolis. They also become the largest female presence overall in the world of the thinkers. At no point in the narrative does it become unequivocally clear to which class the prostitutes belong and whether they feel the pleasure they deliver to the rich. All we can infer is that the presence of prostitutes in the Eternal Gardens derives primarily from their ability to produce pleasure without children. According to Walter Benjamin, “the depraved woman stays clear of fertility” (556). Prostitutes embody a sexuality apart from pregnancy and family, relieving their clients temporarily of the burdensome prospect of parenthood. With their attire and demeanor, the prostitutes blend into the décor of the Eternal Gardens. We first see them summoned by an odd-looking man, presumably the master of ceremonies, under a cavernous canopy that resembles the sculptural shape of the prostitutes’ skirts. This canopy invokes both Jugendstil (Art Nouveau) and the works of Antoni Gaudí, a famous Spanish architect who died one year before the release of Metropolis but whose sculptures can still be admired in present-day Barcelona. One of Gaudí’s most notable merits was developing a uniquely organic style influenced by shapes and structures from the natural world—sinuous curves, stylized creatures, and floral motifs that betray an aversion to straight lines and symmetry. Later on in the same sequence, Freder prompts a panning shot of the Eternal Gardens in which all architecture disappears, giving way to various exotic plants and trees. One could argue that the canopy suggests an architectural style designed to reconcile human, in this case female, and natural shapes. The women themselves stand out, first through their provocative clothes, which nevertheless blend in with the decorative style of the set. The camera also insists on the prostitutes’ theatrical movements and gestures as they compete with each other to entertain Joh Fredersen’s son. By having the actresses look straight into the camera as they bow and turn, Lang allows the spectator to choose a prostitute for Freder. Eventually the main hero chooses one himself, which suggests the illusory nature of spectators’ agency. Linking viewers with the subject of the gendered cinematic gaze is nevertheless important insofar as it contributes to a fetishization of the female body in its performance of femininity.
By the very nature of their work, prostitutes qualify as ideal mouth-pieces for the separation between sex and the desire to procreate, an idea to which the affluent people of Metropolis generally subscribe. But prostitutes also protect the boundaries of the Eternal Gardens from potential intrusions by gratifying the sexual needs of the rich young men within the walls of Joh’s empire. The Eternal Gardens thus function as a pressure valve that thwarts the pursuit of sexual pleasure beyond its gates among the lower class. But the forbidden fruit inevitably emerges to challenge the legitimacy and haunt the permeable boundaries of this sanctioned outlet. The actual breach takes place in the sequence in which Maria enters the Gardens surrounded by a large group of children. Paradoxically, such a vigilantly guarded space dedicated exclusively to the enjoyment of physical pleasures proves highly vulnerable to the lower levels of the city. Like the introduction of prostitutes in the beginning of the sequence, the intrusion of uninvited onlookers is framed in a theatrical manner. First we see the doors open, as if a curtain had gone up to allow eye contact between actors and members of the audience. Long shots alternate with medium ones, some from Freder’s perspective, to show Maria and the children advancing on a stage-like platform until they come into full view. A series of point-of-view shots associated successively with Freder and Maria follows, although it remains unclear who watches. Prostitutes gather slowly around Freder in disbelief, projecting their inquisitive gaze onto Maria who, in turn, registers the artificial quality of the frozen tableau unfolding before her eyes and the children’s. Maria’s assertive gaze, which the camera holds and with which it identifies on more than one occasion, suggests an actress who refuses to pretend that she does not see the audience watching her. By Maria’s own admission, her presence in the Eternal Gardens is motivated by an intention to show the workers’ children how their richer “brothers” live. Of course, this makes little sense if we bear in mind the activities that go on inside. But the presence of children is crucial in establishing the main female character as a would-be mother figure from the very beginning. The transition to the second class-specific understanding of sexuality evident in Metropolis is thereby completed.

When Freder, surrounded by prostitutes and holding one of them in his arms, meets Maria in the Eternal Gardens, we witness the first of several head-to-head confrontations between sexuality as physical enjoyment and motherhood as biological procreation designed to perpetuate capitalism by replenishing the workforce with ever new labor power. Presented with the alternative model of sexuality embodied by Maria, Freder starts to oscillate. He becomes unsure about how to respond to Maria—as a lover, as a would-be father figure to the children, or as a
son. All of these roles suggest that Freder now longs for integration into Maria’s maternal tableau. Physically, however, he remains frozen until Maria leaves the Eternal Gardens, and he continues clutching the prostitute he had previously chased. Spatially and ideologically, Maria occupies a diametrically opposed position, which explains why Lang never films them all in the same frame, preferring instead a series of point-of-view shots that suggest some kind of interaction.

The opposition implied in this sequence between the good mother and the prostitutes anticipates the subsequent split between the good and the bad Maria. But Kate Millett’s argument that “one of the chief effects of class within patriarchy is to set one woman against another” (38) should make us wary of such antagonisms and suspicious of systems of domination that try to cover up the precarious situation of all women. Even mothers and prostitutes turn out to have things in common, starting with the way they disappear from the screen as imperceptibly as they appeared on it. Emma Goldman, writing to her English countrywomen in 1910, addressed the incredible openness of nineteenth-century Britain toward prostitution by citing academic sources that link industrial labor with vast masses of people in a competitive market that drove many working girls and married, working-class women into prostitution, mostly due to sheer need (121). In addition to this direct historical link between these two categories of women, Metropolis suggests that what prostitutes share with the wives of factory workers is a rather curious and paradoxical double standard. Although wageless women do not count for much in the eyes of the state, unofficially a lot of ideological work goes into promoting certain roles that are then imposed on women to keep the status quo in place. Strangely enough, this gesture suggests a silent recognition of women’s potential for subversive action, even if capitalism quickly finds solutions for neutralizing any shred of resistance among those who fall between the cracks of state-sanctioned categories.

In light of the confrontation between reproductive and non-reproductive sexuality that takes place in the Eternal Gardens, the instant chemistry between Freder and Maria can be interpreted as the attraction of two opposing individuals for what the other represents. Predictably, a series of transgressions follows, replete with Biblical associations. Unable to put the encounter with Maria behind him and on the verge of venturing into her unfamiliar space, Freder takes a good long look at what he would leave behind. The camera pans horizontally from right to left, revealing the wondrous vegetation and visual pleasures that Freder is about to renounce. According to sources that cite Günther Rittau, one of Lang’s two cinematographers in Metropolis, this panoramic shot was taken with a Debrie camera that could not be moved. Hence, the relief
painting of the landscape representing the Eternal Gardens had to be moved manually in front of the camera. The resulting dream-like appearance of the painted backdrop may reflect Freder’s exhilaration, but it also suggests that whatever the Eternal Gardens once offered him can no longer hold him back. As Freder dashes with resolve through the swinging doors of the Eternal Gardens, we realize that the panning shot did not deter him from pursuing his dreams. If anything, it precipitated his final decision. By moving beyond the walls of the Eternal Gardens, Freder breaks some of the unwritten rules of his father’s dominion. He casts his descent into the workers’ city as an unruly act by lying to Joh Fredersen about his reason for visiting the machine halls: “I wanted to look into the faces of the people whose little children are my brothers, my sisters.” The threat that Freder and Maria’s escapade poses to the capitalist empire derives from the ease with which Freder escapes his father’s rule in precisely the space over which Joh should have ultimate control: the machine halls and the workers’ city.

Like Freder, Maria strives to exceed the type of sexuality she embodies at the beginning. As I argued previously, she emerges in the Eternal Gardens via an assertive gaze, even as she becomes an object of the male gaze in the same scene. This dynamic alerts Maria to her sexual potential much earlier and in a much less violent form than in the chase/rape scene with Rotwang’s light in the catacombs. To be sure, Freder’s gaze upon Maria in the gardens of pleasure differs from the gaze of the capitalists’ sons during the robot Maria’s erotic dance. Still, Freder’s gaze opens up for Maria the possibility of circumventing the position of icon, maternal reproductive medium that marriage would ultimately bring. Carol Diethe’s contention that the real Maria “has no sexuality to speak of” (116) may hold true in the beginning of Metropolis, but the visual narrative of the film revises this hypothesis immediately thereafter. It is precisely through her discovery of sexuality that, despite her pleas for patience among the workers, Maria threatens to transgress the rigid boundary between the upper and the lower classes. If this combination of pleasure and motherhood makes Maria a serious threat to paternal authority and to the social divide between the rich and the poor, it then makes sense for the capitalist ruler to produce a unidimensional robot-like prototype—the incarnation of “pure” female sexuality cleansed of all maternal feelings. Beside the cyborg’s emotional incompatibility with the role of a mother, it is also safe to assume, given her mechanical origins, that the false Maria could never give birth. Like the prostitutes of the Eternal Gardens, she may restore the separation between sexuality as pleasure and sexuality for procreative purposes. The fact that Joh can only bring this cyborg to life by artificial
means comments ironically on the ideological function of the false Maria, since she keeps capitalism in place by discouraging a subversive model of hybrid sexuality that combines pleasure and procreation. Yet the outcome of Joh’s endeavors is hardly negative. In fact, the successful separation of sexuality and the maternal becomes apparent already at the end of Rotwang’s experiment. Two Marias instead of one virtually undoes the real Maria’s earlier attempt to unite pleasure and the maternal within herself. Furthermore, the original Maria and her double subsequently emerge as two distinct and irreconcilable characters, as if to demonstrate that sexuality and motherhood have indeed been distilled and can be kept apart successfully for the benefit of political and economic ideology: “By the end of the film, Maria is no longer an object of sexual desire for Freder” (Huyssen, “Vamp and Machine” 215).

But in order for the ruling ideology to be restored completely, divorcing sexuality from motherhood and reassigning each of them to the thinkers and the workers respectively would have to be replicated exactly and be successful on the much broader scale of social action. The first step toward implementing this strategy involves a detour from its intended goals. Through provocative vocabulary and body language during her inflammatory speech to the proletariat, the cyborg Maria introduces the crowd of workers to a sexual drive that had previously been denied to them: [Cyborg Maria to the workers:] “Who lubricates the machine joints with their own blood?” In theory the transgression of social boundaries presupposed by this sexual awakening increases the potential for genuine revolutionary action. The actual odds of bringing about a revolution are, however, very small if we bear in mind the political apathy that the good Maria advocates in the catacombs. Despite her virginal appearance, Maria espouses a dangerous regime of repressive tolerance that acknowledges the workers’ latent revolutionary energies but also finds, quite literally, a Christian way to keep them bottled up. Since, in Josaphat’s words, “only their hope for a mediator is keeping the workers in check,” Joh should be content that Maria preaches passivity to the lower class. Joh’s decision to send the robot-woman to the workers appears at best superfluous from a political point of view, but it makes sense in light of my earlier suggestion that what Joh fears is primarily Maria’s attempt to erase the distinction between hedonism and procreation.

In this context the unexpected appearance of women workers finds a surprising justification. With sexuality as the driving force behind the crowd’s rampant actions, the presence of women workers casts motherhood as a temporarily repressed force that returns all the more
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vigorously to perform its initial, ideologically prescribed function: to keep sexuality in check among the workers. Realizing that they have left their children in the flooded abodes underground, the workers surprisingly do not return to save them but instead turn against the cyborg. They chase the false Maria through the city until they have destroyed her. The proletarians’ thirst for revenge trumps their concern for their own children until Grot, the chief foreman of the Heart Machine, announces that the workers’ children had been rescued and led to safety in the Club of the Sons. This turn of events presents an unsavory view of the workers, one that points to the film’s ideological bias. More telling is how the workers blame their absent-mindedness solely on the women. As a consequence, women once again disappear from the screen just when the outcome of the rebellion is negotiated.

This return to a repressed femininity had been announced from the very beginning of the rebellion by a musical reference to the French Revolution, in which thousands of women fought but were similarly excluded from politics by the end of the insurgency. In the sequence where the false Maria rallies all the adult inhabitants of the workers’ city on the central plaza, a shot of the female cyborg moving her head convulsively accompanies an acoustic reworking of the Marseillaise. The same musical score continues in the next shot, in which two women run out of the tenements toward the camera. By the end of the film, however, no women remain in the crowd. The renewed invisibility of workers’ wives in the final shot of Metropolis suggests that motherhood has first been demonized, then put in its proper place along with hedonistic female sexuality, as male workers’ patriarchal interests are re-activated. 9 If the upper and the lower classes cannot unite to pursue a common political goal, they can still co-exist peacefully in the face of a common threat, namely woman, with all her excesses. What makes the final reconciliation in Metropolis possible is precisely the “healthy and strong” partnership of patriarchy and capital that Socialist Feminists like Heidi Hartmann have long decried (360). Paradoxically, this partnership renders Harbou and Lang’s male workers blind to the immediacy of their own defeat. The artificiality and unexpectedness of workers’ docility at the end of the film can only suggest the price male workers pay for excluding women from the final shot. Like prostitutes, and with an equally indirect involvement in the capitalist mode of production, proletarian women keep the revolutionary energies of male laborers in check, thereby policing the boundaries between the higher and the lower classes: “The family […] has been […] the best guarantee that the unemployed do not immediately become a horde of disruptive outsiders. […] On this family depends the support of the class, the survival of the
class—but at the woman’s expense against the class itself” (Dalla Costa 48, 50; my emphasis).

Metropolis curbs revolutionary impulses and puts them in the service of a highly adaptable system of large-scale repression designed to keep capitalist ideology in place. To cite Heidi Hartmann again, “in the absence of patriarchy a unified working class might have confronted capitalism, but patriarchal social relations divided the working class, allowing one part (men) to be bought off at the expense of the other (women)” (361). In a way, one could hypothesize that most critics’ skepticism vis-à-vis the artificial, regressive ending of Metropolis is fueled by their nostalgia for the imagined benefits of class unity. The question that lingers is whether we recognize that imagining class unity remains utopian if we fail to address and acknowledge the importance of gender issues for political struggle.

What then emerges at the end of this investigation is the need to re-evaluate the differing effects of the industrial revolution on each member of society, given categories such as age, class, and gender. As I suggested earlier, despite the marginal position that women occupy in Harbou and Lang’s filmic narrative, Metropolis aptly demonstrates that even the lives of those not directly involved in the process of production are affected by it, more often than not negatively. One of the most painful lessons of the French Revolution is forgotten in Harbou and Lang’s film: instead of boosting the subversive potential of women’s autonomous participation in revolutionary struggle, their exclusion from direct production relegates them to the private sphere of the household, where women better serve capitalists’ goal of curbing male workers’ illicit energies. Whether demonized or idolized, female sexuality emerges as perpetually subject to ideological manipulation. Metropolis does not promote the naïve alternative of re-introducing women into the labor force, but it also does not suggest a better alternative for women’s emancipation. Faced with the problematic resolution of Lang’s film, we can only hope that, if everyone realized that the primary social and political distinctions are not based on wealth or rank but rather on sex (Millett 65), things might change. We have no way of knowing whether this hope will ultimately prove realistic. But at least it is a start.

Notes

I would like to thank Professors Karin Crawford, Laurie Johnson, Brigitte Peucker, and Henry Sussman for their useful comments on earlier versions of this article.
1 “Les débauchés rentraient, brisés par leurs travaux” (Baudelaire 84).
2 “Le crépuscule du matin.”
3 All quotations and analytic references to individual scenes contained in this film are taken from the authorized restored version put together in 2002 by Enno Patalas and his Munich team of film restorers.
4 The large ten-hour clock has multiple functions within and beyond the opening sequence of Metropolis. First of all, it fits in quite nicely with the other mechanical devices that dominate the opening sequence. Like them, it does not produce anything, but instead measures things, although the arrangement of shots does ascribe to it generative powers since it sets off the shift whistle. Marx himself suggests yet another connection between clocks and the industrial revolution: “The two material bases on which the preparations for machine-operated industry proceeded within manufacture during the period from the sixteenth the eighteenth century […] were the clock and the mill. […] Both were inherited from the ancients…. The clock as the first automatic device applied to practical purposes; the whole theory of production of regular motion was developed through it. […] There is no doubt that in the eighteenth century the idea of applying automatic devices (moved by springs) to production was first suggested by the clock” (qtd. in Benjamin 695). Secondly, the clock’s ten-hour dial may be a historical reference to a reform campaign that took place in England throughout the 1830s and was designed to secure legislative protection for child workers by limiting the working hours of all children below the age of eighteen to ten hours per day. Critics and historians, such as Marc Harbor and Heidi Hartmann, argue that the real purpose of the so-called Ten Hour Movement in England and elsewhere was to increase adult male employment by reducing the number of hours women and children could work: “Protective labor laws, while they may have ameliorated some of the worst abuses of female and child labor, also limited the participation of adult women [and children] into many ‘male’ jobs” (Hartmann 361). In this context, the ten-hour clock can be directly related to some of Marx’s writings in volume 1 of Das Kapital on the length and extension of the working day under capitalism, as well as on the struggle for the limitation of working hours.
5 It is estimated that by 1910 women and children made up almost one third of the workforce in early European factories. Factory owners needed cheap labor and docile workers, and they found both of these in the underage and female segments of the population. With few alternatives for work, women took whatever pay and conditions were offered in order to feed themselves and their families. They became even more attractive as laborers once World War I broke out and many men had to leave. As soon as the war was over, however, women were expected to return to their traditional
domestic roles. Marc Harbor and Heidi Hartmann suggest that efforts to reduce the presence of women and children in factories to an absolute minimum had begun as early as the 1830s under the guise of protective labor laws.

6 Earlier in this article I identified at least one previous sequence with visual cues implying the presence of women. Therefore, the sequence that captures the outbreak of the proletarian revolution does not mark the first time women’s presence is felt but rather the first time that the camera captures a visual impression of them.

7 Having a narrative revolve almost exclusively around the figure of a prostitute was common practice among modernist writers and artists, most notably Walter Benjamin in his monumental monograph on the Paris arcades.

8 This brings to mind the antidemocratic potential of the very principle of freedom of thought, detected a hundred years ago by Gilbert Keith Chesterton: “Managed in a modern style, the emancipation of the slave’s mind is the best way of preventing the emancipation of the slave. Teach him to worry about whether he wants to be free, and he will not free himself” (qtd. in Žižek 2).

9 Incidentally, the incrimination of women on grounds of neglectful parenthood is something that was actually practiced in the nineteenth century as part of the housewifization campaign. Marx takes a so-called medical inquiry from the year 1861 as conclusive proof that the high death rates in young children were “principally due to the employment of the mothers away from their homes, and to the neglect and maltreatment consequent on their absence [...]; besides this, there arises an unnatural estrangement between mother and child, and as a consequence, intentional starving and poisoning of the children” (“Machinery and Modern Industry”).

Works Cited

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