

*Ștefan Borbély****Metropolis (An Analysis)***

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**ABSTRACT**

“I have often said – director Fritz Lang declared long after making the film in 1927 – that I did not like *Metropolis*, and this is because I can’t accept today the leitmotif of the message of the film. It is absurd to say that the heart is the intermediary between the hands and the brain, that is, of course, between the employee and the employer. The problem is social and not moral.” Accordingly, the main tendency even nowadays is to confine the message of the film to that of a social dystopia, embedded in the discrimination of the de-humanized workers by the intellectual masters of a futuristic city. The following reading of *Metropolis* assembles scattered psychoanalytical structures and symbols in an analytical proposition which suggests that the script of the movie draws primarily on Judeo-Christian myth and deep psychology, treated in an expressionist vein as an epic struggle between good and evil.

**KEYWORDS**

*Metropolis*; Fritz Lang; Dystopia; Myth; Psychoanalysis.

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The adventure of *Metropolis*, Fritz Lang’s dystopian silent movie of 1927 (the premiere was on 10 January that year, at the Ufa-Palast am Zoo in Berlin, the largest projection hall of the German capital at that time) started in October 1924, when the director visited America in order to explore and study the new film-making methods used by the American studios. “It was terribly hot at that time” – Fritz Lang recalled later, in a discussion with Willy Ley, Tonio Selwart and Herman G. Weinberg, recorded by Gretchen Weinberg and published in *Cahiers du Cinéma* in 1965. “While visiting New York I felt it was the crucible of the multiple and confused human forces, with blind men scrambling around in the irresistible desire to exploit one another, thus living in perpetual anxiety. I spent an entire day walking the streets. The buildings seemed to be a vertical veil, very lighting and scintillating, a luxurious backdrop suspended from the gray sky to dazzle, distract and hypnotize. At night the city gave only the impression of living; it lived as illusions do.”<sup>1</sup>

Returning home, Lang “knew that [he] must make a film of all these impressions,” and commissioned his wife, the actress and film director Thea von Harbou (1888-1954) to conceive a manuscript, which was published initially in the *Illustriertes Blatt*



magazine in Frankfurt, then as a book by August Scherl Verlag, and was eventually transformed into a movie between May 1925 and the end of the following year. Thea von Harbou's novel grew in fame, as did the film's reputation, although critics remarked that the plot was rather dull and stereotyped, except for the technical procedures used in making the picture, which were pioneering and brilliant. Fritz Lang distanced himself from the script, after divorcing his wife in 1933: "I have often said that I did not like *Metropolis*, and this is because I can't accept today the leitmotif of the message of the film. It is absurd to say that the heart is the intermediary between the hands and the brain, that is, of course, between the employee and the employer. The problem is social and not moral." Later on, in an interview recorded by director Peter Bogdanovich (who made among others *What's Up, Doc?*) in his book *Who the Devil Made It: Conversations with Legendary Film Directors* (Ballantine Books, Alfred Knopf, New York, 1997), Lang came back to the subject: "The main thesis was Mrs. Von Harbou's, but I am at least 50 percent responsible because I did it. I was not so politically minded in those days as I am now. You cannot make a social-conscious picture in which you say that the intermediary between the hand and the brain is the heart. I mean, that's a fairy tale – definitely. But I was very interested in machines. Anyway, I didn't like the picture – thought it was silly and stupid – then, when I saw the astronauts: what else are they but part of a machine? It's very hard to talk about pictures – should I say now that I like *Metropolis* because something I have seen in my imagination comes true, when I detested it after it was finished?"

As we shall see, the plot of the film and its hidden structures contradict somehow Lang's intentions to read the film as only a social metaphor. We must go back to

depth psychology in order to understand its real meaning.

Many expressionist creators – like Kafka, for instance, in *The Verdict* – relied on depth psychology and elaborate symbols based on gender tensions and on the bloody conflicts between fathers, mothers and sons, that is, between generations. The interpretation below is fuelled by the assumption that Lang and Thea von Harbou were true representatives of the period they existentially and intellectually shared. One cannot omit the fact that Lang was, in his films, a great master of psychological darkness and human violence. He was obsessed with crimes against children (in *M*, for instance), or by mass psychology, triggered by the complex transfer of reality into fiction and illusion. The following reading of *Metropolis* puts together scattered psychoanalytical structures and symbols in a proposition which tends to be nothing else but an alternative to the "hard" analyses of the film, which insist on social outcomes and elaborations.

Fritz Lang's bad feeling comes from the explicit Marxian filter of the world presented in *Metropolis*, which is seen as a multi-layered tower (similar to the biblical Tower of Babylon), inhabited, at its upper level, by the masterminds of the city and, at its lower floors, by the de-humanized workers, who wear numbers, work into exhaustion in artificially prolonged shifts of ten hours, and whose only reason to exist is to serve the huge machinery that sustains the city and makes it function. The discrepancy between the inhuman force of the machines and the feeble powers of the workers turns the latter into robots, chained to clocks which regulate the system – which is mathematically organized – or tied to a central "Heart Machine", which is eventually destroyed by the turbulent workers, flooding their underworld city and putting their children in jeopardy.

The main social plot is confined to a fantastic, typically Expressionist tower, imagined as a futuristic projection of high-in-the-sky boulevards, lights which dash into the depth of the night and cars, planes or Hindenburg-like airships which criss-cross frantically high above the earth, in a frenzy similar to madness. One never knows whether Fritz Lang elaborated only on his personal impression or studied related popular representations, but imagining future New York as a gigantic urban monster was a genuine stereotype of the period, millions of people enjoying it as the projection of their own fears and anxiety. Psychiatrists and psychoanalysts conceived New York's development towards the gigantic and the inhuman as the surfaced expression of a repressed underworld energy, which has to be controlled by turning it into a living nightmare, whose essence is the relativity of the human being, and the feebleness of the organic as contrasted to the uncontrollable march of the machines. Will man still be a living creature, sustained by dignity, reason and soul, or will he be a mere function of the de-humanizing technology, which transforms people into robots? It was obvious in the popular futuristic drawings of the beginning of the twentieth century that the accent shifts from man onto technology, which is conceived as immense, morally neutral and utterly inhuman. Men are nowhere, for instance, in Louis Biedermann's famous sketches concerning *New York City as It Will Be in 1999*, published in Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* on 30 December 1900, which show the Behemoth city of Manhattan challenging decency and God with immensely tall skyscrapers. On 12 February 1922, *The Ogden Standard Examiner* located in Utah provided its readers with a "paleo-futuristic" dream by an illustrated article entitled *Ten Thousand Years from Now*, full of floating cities very similar to the floating islands

seen in *The Avatar*, James Cameron's famous movie of 2009. Let us also mention King Camp Gillette's socialist utopia of 1894, who imagined that the future America would concentrate in 40,000 glass skyscrapers scattered around the Niagara Falls (to enjoy both the good living and the scenery), left behind by its author in order to invent the less utopian safety razor, or Richard Rummell's sublime bird's eye drawings and watercolours, which include a series of *Future New York*, published in *King's Views of New York* in 1911 and 1912. Utopian as they are, they credit the dwarfing of man as compared to the monstrous growth of architecture, putting forth the idea that the future leader of civilization will contemplate and enjoy life from a distant and inaccessible height, unaware of the misery below.

Joh Fredersen, the omnipotent ruler of *Metropolis* shares this belief by concentrating the masterminds of his city on the upper levels of the tower. His name resembles Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament, also indicating that many structures and symbols of the plot are taken from Judaism and Christianity. For example, the New Tower of Babylon, inhabited by Joh Fredersen, rises high in the sky in the centre of *Metropolis*, marking the difference of altitude between the masterminds belonging to light and the workers who live under the ground, in filthy abodes and in darkness. The prophetess of the underworld is called Maria, represented as a strong maternal figure, as a sort of pure and de-sexualized angel, encircled in beauty and light, as she is in the deep catacombs of the Workers' City, where she preaches to the exhausted people who have escaped from the shifts, trying to save them and to heal their sorrows. The creepy Rotwang, the inventor, appears as Fredersen's devilish counterpart, living in a "strange house" which seems to be immemorial as compared to the standardized,



geometrical skyscrapers of the masters and the underworld dwellings of working class. Anatomically, Rotwang embodies the famous “Doppelgänger” of Romanticism and of the coming cultural eras, through the symbol of his dead hand, lost when trying to recreate his formal dead lover Hel, which indicates that he belongs simultaneously to life and death, being a creature who links the upper world to the underworld, a detail confirmed by his knowledge of the catacombs and by his invitation addressed to Joh Fredersen to go into the deep in order to see what the workers are doing over there. Needless to say that he is “Rot,” that is red, a detail which is not thoroughly exploited in the film, except for the fact that Rotwang’s power arises from his ability to manipulate death by creating “Machine Men and Women”, automata or robots (the word, rather new at that time, coined by Karel Čapek in *R.U.R. [Rossum’s Universal Robots, 1920]* does not appear in the movie).

Dichotomies mark the whole development of the screenplay, transforming the “Doppelgänger” motif into an artistic obsession. The young Freder Fredersen, Joh’s seemingly irresponsible and happy offspring, belongs to life and death simultaneously, because his mother, the beautiful Hel (“born for mankind’s blessing,” as the caption of her statue reads) died giving birth to her unique son. In the specific mythical grammar of Expressionism, this means that death has always grown inside his being, but has been repressed by his other half, which belongs to life. In order to attain completeness, the protagonist has to capture his missing energy through a journey into the otherworld: the basic structure of the plot is based on the descent into the depths, which is – interestingly enough – strongly feminine in its symbolism in *Metropolis*. An apparently innocent encryption of letters M, F and H reveals further nuances of the gender symbolism in the film. By going

down into the city of the workers in order to find Maria, who made a striking impression on him when she summoned a few children to show them the luxury of the “Eternal Gardens” from the upper world, Freder Fredersen witnesses an explosion of the M-Machine, likened to a hungry Molluch, avid for more and more renewed bodies. Beyond the M-Machine, at the centre of the system, providing the living force necessary for the entire Metropolis, is the *Herz-Maschine*, or the “Heart-Machine”, which will later on break down, flooding the whole city. The main moral message of the film, disavowed by Fritz Lang, but captioned at the beginning of the images, is that the Brain (*Hirn*, in German) and the Hands (*Händen*) must be united and coordinated by the Heart (*Herz*)<sup>2</sup> as their mediator. If you add the H from Hel, Rotwang’s former beloved, who had been mercilessly separated from him by Joh, in order to die giving birth to Freder, we may conclude – without any intention to push the interpretation too far – that the genuine message of the letters F and H is, psychoanalytically speaking, the integration of the female energy represented by Hel/Harbou by the masculine one, embodied by Freder/Fredersen, a word having the same initial as Fritz, Lang’s first name.

We do know, in order to conclude, that the couple Harbou/Lang was obsessed with infanticide, their next film, *M. Eine Stadt sucht einen Mörder (M. A City Seeks a Murderer, 1931)* showing a serial killer preying on children. Lang was so pleased with his first talking picture that he considered it the best he had ever made. A long line of serial killers spread anxiety in Germany in the 1920s, the complex popular psychology of the period being highly representative for a nation that felt guilt after being defeated in World War I. The twofold symbol of the abandoned children is also present in *Metropolis*. The well-accomplished fathers of the



upper world – the captions say – have built a serene landscape for their sons, composed of athletic clubs, lecture halls or libraries and the famous “Eternal Gardens”, reserved for aristocratic relief and refined erotic play. The gender bias is evident in the socio-geography of the upper world: the privileged are all boys, dressed alike, in white. Girls are missing, young females being degraded to the role of frivolous courtesans or courtiers. Mothers are also absent, as a projection of Joh Fredersen’s grief for the lost Hel. Apparently protected by the high walls of the upper city (vegetation is nowhere, except for the emphatic ornaments of the Eternal Gardens), the boys are actually abandoned, deprived of their maternal self. It is exactly what Freder Fredersen discovers visiting Maria: the missing mother figure, as she appears surrounded by children, protecting them, encircling them with the magic of love. On the other hand, the motif of the abandoned children is recomposed in the underworld, through the destruction of the central Heart Machine by the rioting workers. Led by the devilish Maria, the robot counterpart of the real one, constructed by Rotwang, the angry workers simply forget that their children remained in the lower city, menaced by flooding due to the failure of the pumps. The most dramatic part of the film shows Maria and Freder rescuing the children, taking them upstairs on an escape ladder, thus becoming, symbolically, the happy “family” which the system had lacked so far.

The dialectics of light and darkness bring both psychoanalytical and Gnostic archetypes into the movie. The athletic rallies, the luxury of the Eternal Gardens, with their sensuous lust and refinement turn the City of the Sons into a place of deprived, superficial pedagogy, as the interiority of the soul – belonging to the mothers – is absent from the scenery. By seeing Maria and by

falling in love with her, and later on by witnessing the explosion of the Moloch-Machine, the young Freder Fredersen suddenly discovers the inner, dark dimension of his being, composed of tormented feelings of guilt and anxiety, instilled by the fear that the de-humanized workers could eventually revolt against the masterminds and conquer their properties. A counterpart of the distilled City of the Sons from the upper world realm and of the alienation of the workers below is the highly sensuous Yoshiwara Club, which absorbs Georgy, the exhausted Clock Worker (no. 11811) rescued by Freder through exchanging roles and clothes with him. Sexuality, the suggestion goes, filters the passages between the High City and the Low City, posing threats to the “Mediators”. When leaving behind Josophat, his father’s dismissed former aid, Freder says that he must undertake a journey into the underworld in order to heal and regain himself. In the end, the journey ends by rescuing the children amidst the Apocalyptic destruction of the machines celebrated by the frenzied workers, and by retrieving the “real Maria” from the Evil Maria sent into the underworld by Rotwang as the former’s robotized copy, assimilated to the Whore of Babylon from the Bible.

By doubling the real Maria with her robotized copy, Rotwang gives birth to the main symbol of the film. The *Intermezzo (Zwischenspiel)*, inserted at the end of the second part, deserves a detailed analysis, because it represents the key of the whole encryption. Searching for Maria seized by Rotwang in order to transfer her face to the already constructed robot, Freder hears her cries and ordeals in Rotwang’s odd house, marked at the entrance by David’s Star (not an innocent discrimination on behalf of the authors...). Here he is “buried alive” by a smashing door, as a replica of his prior visit to the cathedral, where he sees the seven deadly sins embodied by cadavers; later on,



they will come to life through the fake Maria's apocalyptic dance, the caption saying that Death has descended in Metropolis. After Maria's transformation into her robot counterpart through a complicated laboratory procedure which involves paradoxical alchemy and highly spectacular displays of electric energies, Freder sees her in his father's arms, and faints, falling ill. The symbol of the castrating father is then combined with the striking image of a dark priest who reads the Apocalypse and predicts the coming reign of the Whore of Babylon (Revelation 17: 4sq), the "Mother of Harlots" and mistress of fornication.

A party thrown by Rotwang in order to resurrect the Whore, which enlists Joh among its participants – again: all of them are men! – suggests, beyond any doubt, that the social outcome of the film, that is the revolt of the workers envisaged in the third part, is a mere subtopic of an intellectual complex built on intrinsic psychological imprints and symbols. Formally, this is approached as a problem of the "mediation" between the Brain and the Hands achieved by the Heart. The actual meaning of the movie is called by the psychoanalysts "individuation", and was understood by Jung as the integration of the conscious with the unconscious in order to achieve integrity. In *Metropolis*, the process is split between the repressed female energy of the dead mother and the living exclusivity of the male complex. By descending into the underworld, Freder retrieves the missing half of his being through love and tenderness, and prepares to be the "Father" Joh Fredersen refused to be because of rigid self-repression and discipline. *Metropolis* is not only a social film, but the hidden expression of ritualized symbolic violence.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Apud: Lawrence French, "Director Fritz Lang on the Making of Metropolis", *Cinefantastique*, May 10, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> In German: *Mittler zwischen Hirn un Händen muss das Herz sein!*