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**FRITZ LANG'S CRITIQUE OF CAPITALISM THROUGH BODY LANGUAGE IN
*METROPOLIS***

UNDERGRADUATE HONORS THESIS
9. May 2023

by

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Under the supervision of Dr. Christopher Chiasson

College of Liberal Arts
Under direction of SIU University Honors Program
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
May 2023

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ABSTRACT

This honors thesis argues that Fritz Lang's 1927 silent film *Metropolis* contains nonverbal narrative elements (including body language, architectural proxemics, and phallic imagery) that align the film with Marxist class structures. The film provides a moral epigram, "the mediator between head and hands must be the heart," which this paper aims to define through a Marxist lens. This thesis narrates *Metropolis*' verbal and nonverbal narratives through observing intertitles in the film alongside the elements that perplex the viewer and overload the senses. The aim of this paper is to notice where the *head*, *hands*, and *heart* make various unexpected appearances throughout the film – in *Metropolis*, the conceptual *head* and the productive *hands* are aligned to specific socioeconomic statuses. The heart is what must aid dysfunction between the two.

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CHAPTER ONE

BROTHERS AND SISTERS OF CAPITALISM

In this paper, I will analyze the narrative patterns in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) that critique capitalism. Written originally in 1925 by Lang's second wife Thea von Harbou as a novel with the intention of being a companion piece to his film, the viewer's senses are bombarded with spectacular cinematography and illusion, angelic musical storytelling, and allegorical visual effects as the viewer watches it for the first time. Throughout *Metropolis*, the viewer is exposed to an avant-garde appreciation of the working class. The film does this by telling a story of its protagonist (a city master's motherless son) through his rebellion against his capitalist father. As this film was produced in the 1920s, the narrative methods available for cinematic use were limited compared to those available today, but the film makes good use of what was available at the time – sound was often live orchestral music that accompanied film on screen and spoken dialogue was often given through intertitles, as done in *Metropolis*. In many German expressionist silent films of the Weimar era (1919-1933) including films such as Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu*, the audience understands cinematic narrative by reading intertitles of verbal communication alongside observing film aesthetics and sound. Expressionist artists emphasize “undoing the modern individual's alienation, fragmentation, and isolation” caused by declining individuality in German culture ¹. While the intertitles tell one story, it often seems in *Metropolis* that the design aesthetic tells a different, ambiguous one, even though the intention is that the story is told through these

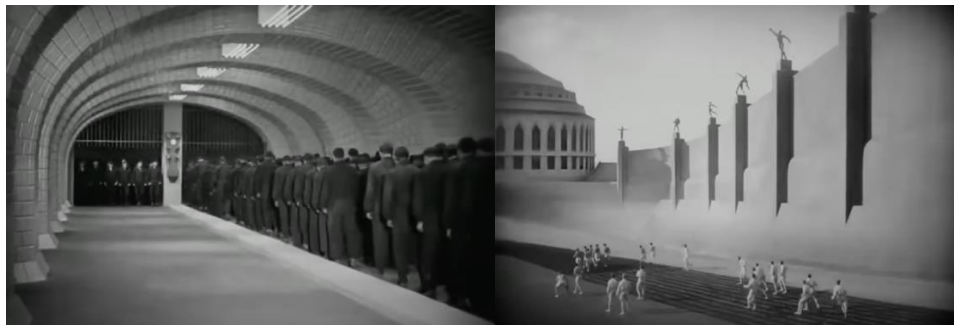
¹ Anton Kaes, "The Industrial Battlefield: The Hunger for Religion," in *Shell Shock Cinema: Weimar Culture and the Wounds of War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 188.

intertitles. The film's intertitles are what are *intended* to be determinant, while many of the other sequences are indeterminant ². Even though intertitles in silent cinema provide an understanding of the surface discourse between film characters, *Metropolis'* dialogue is largely nonverbal – the aesthetics consume more screen time and thus carry heavier significance, yet the scenes are narrated verbally through intertitles. *Metropolis'* intertitles are quite ambiguous in that the message the viewer is to take out of the film – “the mediator between head and hands must be the heart,” seems to be embodied in the relationships among the main characters but is not directly solved through the intertitle narration. At the same time, the relationships we *see* are much more complex, and the ways they play out do not unambiguously uphold this message. The depth of the relationships in *Metropolis* is most apparent through the way its pieces communicate within their own inaudibility. The visual associations between people and symbols on screen narrate the film in greater depth than solely the dialogue we are given in intertitle narration. According to Murray Smith, narration is the force that “generates recognition, alignment, and allegiance, the basic components of the structure of sympathy in fiction” ³ – the viewer develops relationships and sympathetic feelings towards the protagonists, in this case the capitalist's son who sees exploitation and fights it. In contrast to the straightforward intertitle narrative, the nonverbal narrative symbols such as architectural design, body language, and cinematographic choices lend themselves to various possible interpretations, even if the viewer might not be aware of all these possibilities. Various scholars on *Metropolis* have taken the same pieces I use here in a Marxist perspective to construct feminist, Freudian, and technophobic

² Billingham, Jimmy. “Indeterminate Film-Thinking and Interpretation.” *Networking Knowledge: Journal of the MeCCSA Postgraduate Network* 2, no. 1 (2009), 11–14.

³ Smith, Murray. “Altered States: Character and Emotional Response in the Cinema.” *Cinema Journal* 33, no. 4 (1994), 34–56.

interpretations, among others. The elite technocrats ⁴ reside in a city-state by the name of Metropolis that entertains itself through the energy produced by the forced slave labor of workers who live below the surface, unknown to those above. They are the first characters we see as viewers in the film -- they march in orderly lines as a piece of what Anton Kaes, author of *Shell Shock Cinema*, describes as the “industrial battlefield” at the end of their workday back to their homes. ⁵ Various shots later throughout the film will explore the different variations of choreographed “battleline” formations. The film sets up its Marxist critique early on by rapidly transitioning from these shots to the life of the bourgeoisie above the surface.



Figures 1A and 1B: The proletarian man vs. the bourgeois man. The city’s underground workers march in orderly lines in an extreme long shot, which is then in the next scene contrasted with another extreme long shot of the *fraternized* activities of the bourgeoisie. In these two shots, only the subjects’ backs are seen as they move around with the other men in their socioeconomic cohort, but the visual setting and costumes clearly distinguish the classes, and there is a clear contrast between how the bourgeoisie and proletariat move on-screen. (*Metropolis*, 1927).

The affluent men of the upper city, in direct contrast to the workers below, are first shown in a spectacular arena – “the Club of the Sons”, where the sons of the elite can fraternize

⁴ Emilio Audissino, “Gottfried Huppertz’s *Metropolis*: ‘The Acme of ‘Cinema Music’,” in *Today’s Sounds for Yesterday’s Films: Making Music for Silent Cinema*, ed. KJ Donnelly and Ann-Kristin Wallengren (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 49.

⁵ Anton Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema: Weimar Culture and the Wounds of War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011)

and be entertained. This space is described in the intertitles as a male-exclusive area that contains “lecture halls, libraries, theaters and stadiums” that tower above (*Metropolis*). The bright, spectacular, and grandiose setting of the Club of the Sons is opposed to the claustrophobic hallways the workers deep underground must walk through to return home. For the extreme long shot that showcases the Club of the Sons, Williams notes that the cinematographers utilized well-known special effects artist Eugen Schüfftan (1893-1977)’s method of using a mirror to combine a seemingly large set backdrop (in this case, the Club of the Sons arena) with the bourgeois young men racing “not to place them within this space but to place them against a necessarily grand backdrop”.⁶ The proletariat workers are choreographed in the hallway extreme long shot to walk in a straight line towards the elevator in depressed unison. We see the young men by comparison in the Club of the Sons enjoy fresh air and open spaces; as they are running and cheering on the track field, statues of athletic men remain in the foreground, reminiscent of mythological centers of learning associated with Olympus or ancient Athens.⁷

Freder Frederson, the film’s protagonist, is introduced as one of the “club sons” who partakes in luxurious activities and fraternization with his male friends, and later is implied to be “*a son of the system*” (capitalism). He is the only biological child of the city’s ruler, Joh Frederson. Harbou’s novel distinguishes Freder from the other sons of elites, yet she notes how these entertainments still make him feel “godlike”. She indicates that Freder has an inner conflict

⁶ Tomas Rhys Williams, “Tricks of the Light: A Study of the Cinematographic Style of the Émigré Cinematographer Eugen Schüfftan” (dissertation, University of Exeter, n.d.), 42.

⁷ Alex McAuley, “Savior of the Working Man: Promethean Allusions in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927),” in *Classical Myth on Screen*, ed. Monica S. Cyrino and Meredith E. Safran (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 109-19.

between partaking in bourgeois pastimes or entertaining himself elsewhere; Harbou writes that Freder's character often spends time in the cathedrals, which we do later see replicated in the film. He also spends time in a workshop, which is a detail only noted in the novel:

"Freder was but a rare visitor to the Club of the Sons. He preferred his work-shop and the starry chapel... But when once the desire took him to fling himself into the radiant joyousness of the stadium competitions, he was the most radiant and joyous of all, playing on from victory to victory with the laugh of a young god". Thea von Harbou, *Metropolis*.⁸

It is quickly apparent that the men of the upper class thrive on entertainment throughout much of the film – for the younger men earlier on in the film, this venue is the “Eternal Gardens,” (Ewigen Gärten in German) while their older father counterparts go to a burlesque club, Yoshiwara, named after Tokyo's historic red-light district of the same name.⁹ The two separate entertainment locations also highlight that the characters are at varying levels of sexual maturity, which I will expand on further later in this paper. Freder leaves his afternoon marathon of elites at the Club of the Sons to entertain himself with women in this garden, who are lined up for the chance to appeal to the master's son. They are asked by the garden's “pimp,” a man in a suit and round glasses seen only once through the film, “who would like to entertain the son of the master today?” This is a soft form of indication they are prostitutes. To prepare for Freder entering the garden, the pimp-man puts makeup on the women and teaches them how to curtsy properly for his arrival. The Eternal Gardens are described in the film's intertitles as “a miracle creation by fathers, for whom every revolution of a machine wheel meant gold, to their sons”

⁸ Thea von Harbou, *Metropolis* (Jovian Press, 2016), 11.

⁹ Gary P. Leupp, “Capitalism and Homosexuality in Eighteenth-Century Japan,” *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 33, no. 1 (2007), 140-141

(Metropolis). It is visually striking as unworldly, particularly because of the costume choices in this scene.

Freder chases a girl in a short skirt around a fountain to a soft musical accompaniment. The scene has an innocence to it – the characters on-screen are adults, but their childlike splashing by the fountain and frolicking keeps the characters in a state of innocence separate from the characters seen later in the Yoshiwara club, Freder included.¹⁰ A violin suite plays as a beautiful woman walks through an enormous door entrance to the garden with a group of dozens of small, impoverished children. Intentional by the production team or not, all the shots feel as if they were filmed indoors, with only a few shots that give any indication of the contrary. This contributes to an essence of living spaces being isolated inside of other architectural parameters. This woman making a grand appearance is named Maria and is described by Harbou as “the austere countenance of the Virgin”.¹¹ By writing the word “Virgin” in capital letters, Harbou indirectly implies Maria is of the same designation as the biblical Mary. The children stand in awe before the Eternal Gardens, having apparently never been above the surface before. Metropolis’ classes are entirely segregated from one another, and it seems things had always been that way up to Maria’s grand appearance in the garden– the depiction of its two-tiered society fits Marx’s theory that “wealth is compelled to preserve its own existence and thereby the existence of its opposite, the proletariat”¹². Published originally in a rare magazine that

¹⁰ Andreas Huyssen, “The Vamp and the Machine,” in *After the Great Divide* (Indiana University Press, 1986), 78-79.

¹¹ Harbou, *Metropolis*, 11.

¹² Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Alienation and Social Classes,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (Norton, 1978), 133.

resurfaced in London recently, an article from The Smithsonian contains a map that outlines the organization of the civilization ¹³.

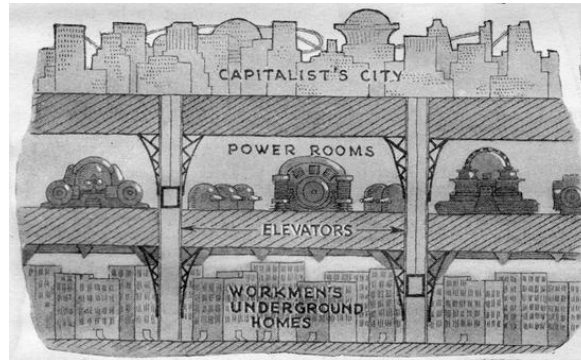


Figure 2: Map of Metropolis.
(Matt Novak, “1927 Magazine Looks at Metropolis”, *The Smithsonian*)

Gates and locks prevent the laborers from interacting socially with the “heightened” world of the bourgeoisie. It is unclear exactly how Maria was able to access the Eternal Gardens, but she found a way to sneak in with the children somehow.

In contrast to the abstract costumes of the bourgeois women in the garden, Maria is a sobering character ¹⁴. Her character, while it is the Virgin Mother by default, also depicts Germanic-Christian femininity idealized in folklore, with blonde hair and an innocent, submissive expression. Nossett notes, however, that Lang and Harbou perhaps took partial inspiration for Maria from the character Lotte in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* ¹⁵.

¹³ Novak, Matt. “1927 Magazine Looks at Metropolis, ‘A Movie Based on Science.’” Smithsonian.com, July 19, 2012.
<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/1927-magazine-looks-at-metropolis-a-movie-based-on-science-4328353/>.

¹⁴ Lauren Nossett, “The Virginal Mother in German Culture: From Sophie von La Roche and Goethe to Metropolis” (Northwestern University Press, 2019), 145.

¹⁵ Nossett, “The Virginal Mother”, 143



Figure 3: The bourgeois man in this shot exhibits conventionality and status, while the women in the shot are in absurd costumes (some of which even have wings) and are in this scene portrayed as creatures by comparison.

With Maria's arms held out to her side, she exclaims to the people in the garden, "These are your brothers!" Maria and the children are eventually sent away back into the worker's city, but just within this short exchange in the garden, Freder's *heart* is moved by her. He holds his hand on his heart as if it pained him to not have known the existence of his "brothers in capitalism". He leaves the woman in his mating garden behind – what he does not know is that this woman will end up as the unexpected hellraiser for the whole film.

CHAPTER TWO

ORGASMS OF THE BOURGEOISIE



Figure 4: 3D model of Moloch machine by itself, (Fiorentino). The machine which turns into the cannibal demon Moloch is a phallic structure. Workers are quite literally “thrown” as sacrifices into the phallus as part of an arousal cycle. Their sacrifice into the machine as disposable labor is the climax itself.

Huyssen comments on the recurring appearance of the “male gaze” in relation to technological innovation in *Metropolis* – technology is “completely under male control and functions as an extension of man’s desires” ¹⁶. As Freder dashes out of the Eternal Gardens towards the Virgin mother figure, he does not find her, but rather discovers his own budding fantasies he is fighting against as a son of capitalism and the slave labor which produces the entertainment he regularly consumes. In a room full of advanced machinery, exhausted workers slave away as Gottfried Huppertz (1887-1937)’s score sets the tempo. This scene is a particularly good example of the film’s use of “Mickey-Mousing,” where movements on-screen are synchronous with the tempo in the nondiegetic music accompaniment. ¹⁷ The workers’ bodies

¹⁶ Huyssen, “The Vamp and the Machine,” 73.

¹⁷ Rüdiger Steinmetz et al., “DVD, Musik,” in *Filme Sehen Lernen* (Zweitausendeins, 2011).

here are musically synchronized with the scene's arousal buildup. The music continues to get louder, and as it does, the workers become evermore exhausted. Indicated by a pressure gauge in the style of a mercury thermometer, the collective exhaustion of the workers rises. The build-up of pressure in this gauge is the increasing erection of the bourgeois man. When the gauge is at its fullest and the film score reaches peak excitement, the "bourgeois orgasm" occurs in an explosion. The machine transforms itself into the demonic figure of Moloch. Male human worker sacrifices are pulled by ropes and forcibly inserted into a pit of fire inside the mouth of the phallic monster. Quite literally, the bourgeois orgasm inserts the workers into the phallus itself. In an extreme long shot, the rest of the workers then march in orderly lines up the large stairwell into the fire itself, a comment on the association between human sacrifice and line infantry (i.e. march formation). Like lines of men going off to the front, the factory workers march forward towards their inevitable sacrifice of their humanity – the estrangement of their labor as "pieces of the machine".

After the score transitions out of its most-excited state, the phallic Moloch machine enters a refractory period – during this time, the machine returns to its normal operations. After a few injured workers are carried off-camera on stretchers, new ones replace them, and the arousal cycle starts once more with new workers. The cycle is continuous as the workers are disposable. For a few seconds, the same music from the beginning of the scene repeats itself before Freder then dashes off once more, but this time to his father.



FIGURE 5A and 5B: As the mercury-thermometer pressure gauge gains length, the worker becomes increasingly exhausted (Metropolis, 1927). In this respect, the visual shows the arousal of the bourgeoisie at the exhaustion of the proletariat.

Metropolis seems insecure lest it appear small on any scale – the film had the largest budget of any German film ever produced at the time of its creation ¹⁸, and it is an early example of a mass-scale film project intended to be a spectacle. The audience is exposed to imagery that criticizes the arousal of the bourgeois man all throughout the film; the sequence with the Moloch Machine is just one of these. Stunning cityscape shots often are shown while optimistic fanfares highlight an overarching theme of the architectural “footprint” of mankind credited to the capitalist but not to the hands of production. The city’s working class is tethered to this “grandiose arousal” insofar as they produce the energy to keep the city moving, but the real “thrill” gained for the bourgeoisie is that they do not have to do the work of the proletariat themselves. When the workers are exhausted or *the machine* is threatened, buildings in the capitalist city “release this pressure” through thick white steam – this hard labor of the proletariat is “exciting” to the capitalist city, as it keeps it ever more energized.

¹⁸ Thomas Elsaesser, *Metropolis* (London: British Film Institute, 2012), 7.

As Freder rides in a taxicab across the city to his father's office in the New Tower of Babel, one of these fanfares occurs, and his father's office building stands as a large phallus sitting over the whole city among airplanes and trains that travel through the air. Freder's father Joh Frederson is unsympathetic to the horrors Freder witnessed in the machine rooms and sends one of his men, "The Thin Man", to observe his actions for the remainder of the film. Feeling guilty and having had enough of his bourgeois life, Freder tries to sacrifice his elite status by swapping clothes with an over-exhausted worker in the machine rooms named Georgy, who operates a clock with only ten hours. This sacrifice highlights Freder's role as the son of the Virgin Mary. As Freder's father Joh is the master behind the operations of the city-state's society, his character also easily finds its place as the city's god figure, even though Catholicism exists within the filmic world (*Metropolis*). As Georgy goes above into the city in his new bourgeois clothes, Freder begins to operate the clock, but it soon is unbearably exhausting for him. "Father! Father! Will ten hours never end?!", Freder exclaims, while his arms are stretched out on this clock over its second and hour arms in a reference to the crucifixion of Christ (*Metropolis*).

This scene also contains a bourgeois orgasm. As Freder sacrifices all his energy at the clock of his crucifixion, we see another pressure gauge rise, followed by an explosion of more white steam coming from the tip of another phallic-shaped building, this time not in the machine halls, but in the capitalist city itself.

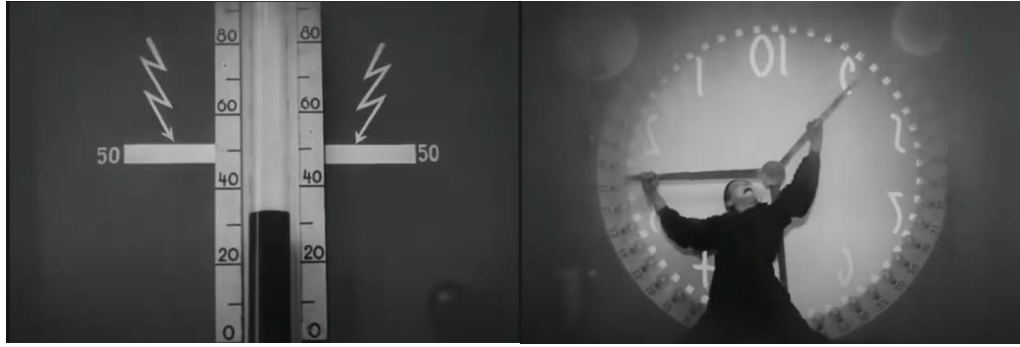


Figure 6A-D: In Freder's crucifixion sequence, he too becomes a subject of a bourgeois arousal cycle. This ends in his total exhaustion resulting in an ejaculation of steam encompassing his energy. Source: *Metropolis*, 1927.



His sacrifice of his bourgeois status for his heretofore unknown “brothers and sisters” of capitalism is contextually similar to Christian tradition of Jesus’ crucifixion as a sacrifice in the name of God’s forgiveness of sin. The examples of the Moloch machine and the crucifixion clock are the best pieces of evidence of this phenomenon throughout the film. Later in the film in a similar manner we do also see shots of water shooting out of the ground like a geyser and moments that are aesthetically “aroused,” however, the later portion of the film focuses more on

the Virgin Mother's innocence being stolen, and the transformation of her image against her will into the polar opposite "Whore of Babylon"¹⁹.

¹⁹ Nossett, "The Virginial Mother", 149.

CHAPTER THREE

CONCEPTUALIZATION OF PRODUCTION

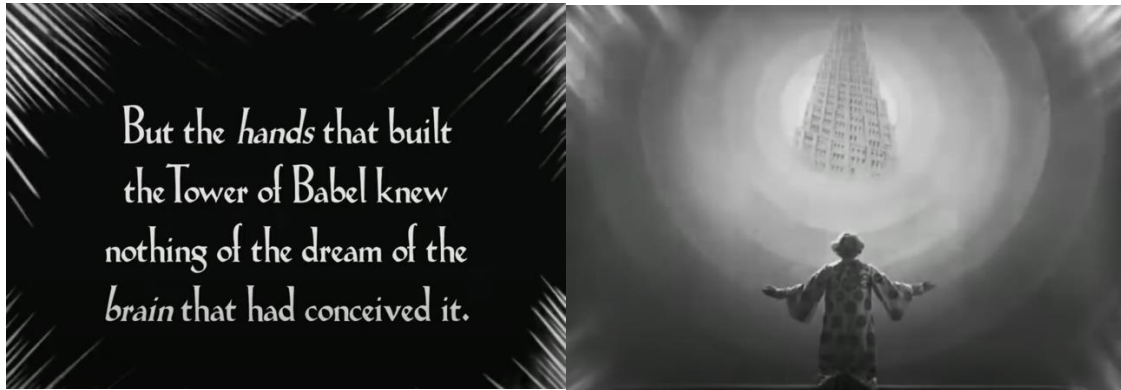


FIGURE 7A and 7B: This scene provides context that further expands and defines the epigram narrative through a retelling of the biblical Tower of Babel story.

One of the notable examples of body language narrating Lang's critique of capitalism is in the first sequence of the workers going to listen to Maria speak. This exciting sequence contains far fewer innuendos than the Moloch machine scene but retains some of the questionable phallic imagery. The scene also defines what the head, hands, and heart in the film's epigram might be associated with. After Freder's ten hours "on the cross" are finally over, he hears word from another worker that Maria has summoned the workers into the catacombs for a congregation. The workers and Freder, still disguised, walk deep into the catacombs. According to the intertitles, these are 2000 years old (Metropolis). Freder's hidden proletariat disguise doesn't last long, as his father and Rotwang, an inventor who is creating a "Maschinenmensch" (machine man), are already spying on the congregation from a hidden spot. Maria's body is surrounded by crosses and candles. She stands with her hands in an *orans* posture, with both arms held outward – she clearly has a unique relationship to *some* divine

power. The orans posture “represents the attitude or posture of a divinity, with the hands raised as a benediction”²⁰. She preaches to the workers the legend of the biblical Tower of Babel, originally an Old Testament story about the origin of multiplicity of languages as a result of an attempt to build a tower that reached the heavens²¹. In its use here, Maria tells a visual story that highlights the missing piece needed to mediate between the conceptual head and the hands in production.

The workers do not seem particularly engaged with the human Maria – only Freder is awestruck by the angelic figure. Freder does not exactly know how he should act around Maria – on the one hand, she is a mother guiding him to his hitherto unknown “brothers and sisters”, and on the other hand he acts upon sexual desire around her – he originally met her in his “mating garden,” after all. Bringing “the good news,” Maria also functions as a spiritual missionary for the working class – her character organizes the proletarian workers to congregate as a mass, whether spiritual or political. The congregation Maria organizes with the workers in the catacombs in this scene is both. Unlike the robot Maria seen later in the film, Maria calls upon an unknown outside savior to mend the disconnect between *head* and *hands* without a revolution, and tells the workers that if they remain patient, their mediator will come and free them from their misery as slave workers.

If we trust Maria’s narration, the legend of the Tower of Babel concerns slave workers, depicted as “hands,” who build the initially far-fetched dream of the tower. Although the masterminds who designed the tower do not realize it, they exploit the workers when they try to make their dream a reality. Her depiction of the legend is a Marxist take on a biblical moral

²⁰ Reita J. Sutherland, *Prayer and Piety: The Orans-Figure in the Christian Catacombs of Rome* (University of Ottawa, 2013).

²¹ Genesis 11:1-9, New International Version

insofar as it highlights the unfair advantage of someone having an idea and then capitalizing on it by outsourcing the labor. The workers shown in Maria's legend are visually like the workers in the undercity already, but they contrast with the violent mob from her legend. She has kept them in a state of impatient non-violence for what appears to be a long time. She reflects on the current misunderstanding between the head and hands within her sermon but does not herself advocate for the workers to destroy their machines of labor. They are instead told that a mediator will come and aid them.

Through part of Maria's legend, the viewer sees a shot of a bunch of god-figures sitting around the Tower of Babel, watching it continue to grow in disappointment. Both the Tower of Babel from Maria's legend and the New Tower of Babel, where Freder's father works, are phallic structures. The film's narrative (and apparently the gods as well) are critical of abundant grandiose spectacle of the conceptualizing head, which takes advantage of the producing hands.



Figure 8A and 8B: Painting used as inspiration for the Metropolis' visual by Dutch-Flemish painter Peter Breugel the Elder, "*The Tower of Babel*" (1563), (on left). Tower of Babel in Metropolis (on right). ²²

²² Breugel the Elder, Peter, *The Tower of Babel*, 1563.

After hearing Maria's graceful preaching, the spotlight falls on Freder and he places himself into the role of the mediator or "chosen one" who can bridge the metaphorical head and hands (bourgeoisie and proletariat) and fulfill the necessary mediation to ensure workers are not exploited. The workers, however, are doubtful of the appearance of this hero and hardly notice Freder. The workers seem unenlightened by her sermon as they exit because they are losing faith altogether in someone freeing them from their slavery. The workers had potential escape routes earlier in the film that leaked above-ground from the catacombs. This alone indicates faith in a savior's arrival is very low. The workers only will take Maria seriously when she is the robot form of herself. They leave Freder alone with Maria, as they depart in exhausted spirits, while maintaining built-up pressure and rage.

The rest of the scene is angelic but extremely nonverbal. Maria's kinesic language (her expressions, sensory behavior, gaze) finds harmony with Freder's in cutting and continuity in a musical hand ballet. As she walks towards Freder, who is on his knees, her body language pays homage to artistic depictions such as the *Heart of Mary* (~1820s-1830s) from Leopold Kupelwieser, who popularized a depiction of Mary holding one arm in orans posture and another on the heart.



Figure 9A and 9B: *Maria mirroring "Heart of Mary" (Leopold Kupelwieser), 19th century*

At the end of this scene, Freder kisses Maria for the first time, and they depart from one another in a lengthy nonverbal exchange wherein the epigrammatic body parts interact as they mesh with one another in filmic space.



Figure 10A-D: The “ballet hand salutation” occurring when Freder departs from her – it is visible that there is interaction between hands, head, and heart, colorized Metropolis.

So far, the filmic plot form has been very sporadic and, this too, makes the sequencing of arousal cycles visible – it’s difficult for the viewer to predict when the film’s climax is going to occur (if at all), because many of the climactic shots are already used very early in the film. Within the first hour of the film the most exciting shots are already used (i.e., the Moloch machine illusion and the Tower of Babel sequence)– each one of them is associated with a build-up of pressure, and then explosion or destruction. The phallus in this film does not function in the same way that the head, hands and heart do – it is a bit subliminal. Psychoanalytical scholars

have noticed these various phallic structures in Metropolis, and how they seem to rather be aligned with the “conceiving head” of the bourgeoisie. Nast writes about the appearance of phallic authority throughout the film -- “the phallic authority of the capitalist rests on control over the economic means of imagining and realizing industrial projects, a very different kind of conception that deemphasizes the body and emphasized the conceiving head” ²³.

²³ Heidi J. Nast, “The Machine-Phallus: Psychoanalyzing the Geopolitical Economy of Masculinity and Race,” *Psychoanalytic Inquiry* 35, no. 8 (2015): 766-785

CHAPTER FOUR:

SEXY ROBOTS AND FAILED REVOLUTIONS

Metropolis presents women through a much different lens than the film's men. With the film's phallic associations and its male-dominated main cast, it comes as no surprise that Maria is the only female character that has any notable role in the film. The film's opening credits list Brigitte Helm as five different roles in the film -- "Der schöpferische Mensch (The Creative Man), Der Maschinen-Mensch (The Machine Man), Der Tod (Death), Die sieben Todsünden (The 7 Deadly Sins), and finally Maria herself. Gunning remarks that Brigitte Helm's character is a "mare's nest of gender contradictions"²⁴ and that she can be used where men in both production and in the story want to place her. While Brigitte Helm indeed plays the Maschinen-Mensch and Maria, her other credits make other appearances across the film — for example, we see "der Tod" not as Robo-Maria but rather as the feminine essence that threatens impending apocalypse in Freder's visions and as death descending upon the city" uplifted by the seven deadly sins. Crediting Brigitte Helm with an association to Death doesn't seem to make sense, and doing this reflects that the film paints women out to be blamed as hindrances to the modernization of patriarchal society.

Rotwang stalks Maria and eventually locks her up in his home to be forcefully copied onto the *Maschinen-Mensch*, whom he intends to program to follow only his command. Over the years, the programming of robots to meet the perverse needs of an inventor became a common trope in science fiction, such as the recent example seen in Alex Garland's film *Ex Machina*

²⁴ Tom Gunning, "Metropolis: The Dance of Death," in *The Films of Fritz Lang, Allegories of Vision and Modernity* (London, England: British Film Institute, 2000), 67.

(2014). In this film, a prodigy programmer builds naked artificially intelligent female robots to keep in his room for his own entertainment, including many who cannot speak but are nonetheless programmed to have sex with him.²⁵



Figure 11A-D: As Maria wanders around the catacombs (we are unsure of her destination) holding onto her heart, she is chased in a sequence where she is lit with a flashlight in a dark room. She finds herself trapped in Rotwang's house, where she is tied down and her "face is stolen" to make a radical, exhibitionistic robot woman.



As Maria and Freder end their intimate "hand ballet" in the catacombs, she is stalked and chased by Rotwang in a rape allegory of the Virgin Mother losing her virginity against her will.

²⁵ Alex Garland, dir. *Ex Machina* (A24, 2015), DVD.

²⁶ By chasing Maria through the catacombs with his flashlight, Rotwang steals Maria's youth through the trap of the male gaze. The darkness of the setting is visualized with extreme long shots of Maria frantically running around and bumping into things— for a few shots, only light from this flashlight is illuminating her. This makes her appear miniscule in comparison to the darkness that only finds illumination with this gaze.

Rotwang's character is easy to psychoanalyze – his former lover and the former wife of Joh Frederson died giving birth to Freder. He acts upon this grief by targeting Maria, whom he already knew Freder loved, to develop the Maschinen-Mensch. To him, Maria both reminds him of his former lover (and Freder's mother) Hel, and is also a powerful beauty that can be warped into a tool to destroy the city of Metropolis. If the scene can be metaphorically understood as Rotwang's rape of Maria, this event is what causes the "expansion of Maria's narrative necessity." Only after Maria is "raped" does her character take on the full number of roles outlined in the opening credits. The creation of her robot double is another climactic visual of all the items in Rotwang's laboratory being "aroused" and coming to life as they form the body of the new Maschinen-Mensch woman over the robot suit – Gunning describes this as a "process of mechanical reproduction of foaming liquids and shooting sparks". ²⁷ This illusion is not exactly the "bourgeois orgasm" seen in earlier sections of the film but rather a "frankensteinian" laboratory dance that visually conveys the inventor's arousal, rather than that of the bourgeoisie. The relationship between Rotwang and Maria stands out, particularly because the two characters

²⁶ Andreas Huyssen, "The Vamp and the Machine: The Male Gaze and the Dialectic of Discipline and Desire," in *After the Great Divide*, 75.

²⁷ Gunning, "Metropolis: The Dance of Death," 67.

appear to have access to both sides of the city. Rotwang's crooked old house and Maria's attire also are similarly out-of-place in the film.

Once her copy is made and the human Maria is kept locked up in Rotwang's house, she herself becomes the new spectacle of bourgeois male entertainment and her entire persona shifts. Up to this point, her motherly relationship to Freder has only been as a religious homage to the Mother Mary. Freder is romantically interested in the human Maria, he kisses her throughout the film and at this moment is frantically searching for her as she had gone missing after being kidnapped by Rotwang. When he finally reaches his father's office, however, with no clue of Maria's whereabouts, his worst Oedipal betrayal nightmare comes to life -- Freder's father is sexually aroused by her new robotic form, and Freder faints at the sight of seeing who he believes to be the real Maria and his father embracing, sending him briefly into hallucinogenic shock.²⁸



Figure 12: Freder's "Oedipal nightmare" come to life. (Metropolis)

²⁸ Gunning, "Metropolis: The Dance of Death", 69.

Robot-Maria's new persona created by Rotwang is a hypersexualized satanic revolutionary, whose main goal is to create chaos. She dances before all the elites, young and old in Yoshiwara as Freder simultaneously experiences the performance in a vision while he lies in bed. The new risqué femininity she exhibits is, in Freder's eyes, an apocalyptic premonition. Her "raunchy" belly dance at Yoshiwara sends the men into a frenzy. They gaze and pant at her like animals and begin to fist-fight each other over her panty-hose.

Eventually at Yoshiwara, Maria's copy makes the full transition from being the austere Virgin Mary into the biblical Whore of Babylon – she rises up topless sitting above seven dragons on a platform, lifted up by gargoyles that each represent one of the seven deadly sins.



Figure 13A and 13B: Maria's performance at Yoshiwara mirrors a piece of scripture
(Revelation 17:3-9) (Metropolis)

In the catacombs later in the film, the robotic Maria uses her hands to "pull at the heartstrings" of the workers in order to put them into a hypnotic trance to engage in violent revolution. "You know that I have always spoken of peace, but your mediator has not come..." (Metropolis). The workers, previously uninterested in Maria, suddenly are hypnotized into

engaging in violent revolution against the machinery. Every single last member worker immediately runs in a mob towards the elevators. “Not one man -- or woman remain behind!,” one of the females in the worker’s city exclaims as she rides the elevator up to the machine halls (Metropolis). All the children are now trapped – the destruction of the machines inevitably will flood the lower city.

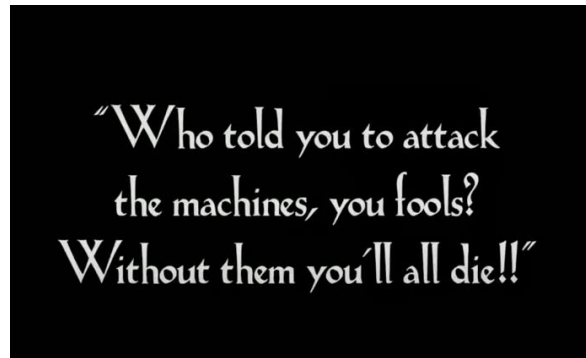


Figure 14A and 14B: Robot Maria hypnotizes the group of workers by using her hands to “pull at their heartstrings” (on left). Grot asks the workers (as an intertitle) who told them to attack the machines (on right).

After human Maria is able to escape from Rotwang’s house where she is being held captive, she makes her way back down to the worker’s city, where there is nobody to be found. Simultaneously, the workers continue wreaking havoc on the machinery, and the worker’s city begins to flood. She immediately realizes that all of the children were left behind by their parents, and signals with a bell in the center of the worker’s living quarters for all of the children to meet in one place. As this bell rings and the children run towards her, the bell rings the sound of a *heartbeat* and beats to the rhythm of such. Freder and an employee of his father’s, Josaphat,

who was fired from his job in the beginning of the film, together go down into the worker's city to assist in getting the children up to the surface before they drown.

As Maria, Josaphat, Freder, and all of the children make it to the capitalist's city, a brawl between mobs takes place. The people at Yoshiwara remain in their hypnosis and dance throughout the streets, even though all the electricity is out. The workers are also in a hypnotic trance until Grot, the operator of the *heart machine*, reminds them of their children and they are able to regroup with them. At this point, Freder still has no clue that a double of Maria even exists, so when the workers decide to tie up Robot Maria and burn her at the stake for apparently being a witch, he can hardly hold himself back from screaming. At the same time she melts into the bare suit of the robot to everyone's intense shock, human Maria grabs the attention of the entire city by jumping onto the rope under the cathedral bell and ringing it. However, Rotwang once again kidnaps her, and carries her body over his shoulder to the top of the church roof, where Freder, realizing his love is in danger, climbs up and knocks Rotwang to the ground, killing him.

Most viewers watching the end of *Metropolis* would argue the film has a 'positive' ending. Maria and Freder are happy together and nobody was killed in the destructive "apocalypse" except for Rotwang. The workers are united with the children, and, as their city is flooded, the city theoretically must relocate its workers to the upper city at least temporarily. In a final Schüfftan process shot, Grot leads all the workers as they walk in a triangle configuration towards the cathedral. Joh steps out with Freder and Maria on each side of him. As Joh and Grot both hesitate to shake hands, Maria finally suggests, "head and hands want to join together, but they don't have the heart to do it ... Oh Mediator, show them the way to each other!" And with

this suggestion, Freder the Mediator slowly yet “successfully” bridges the socioeconomic gap between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie through a handshake between Grot and Joh.

The workers’ revolution and subsequent destruction of their own city creates an opportunity for the proletariat to enter the city of the bourgeoisie. However, it should be noted that, if the film is to be viewed through a Marxist lens, it is a massive failure for the proletariat. Leigh writes in *Marxism and the Movies*, “the seemingly sentimental ending of the film, therefore, is exactly what Marx warns will happen if the revolution is not undertaken fully and with the right ideals in mind—the masters are still in charge, and the proletariat have placed their trust in a member of their own society who has demonstrated complicity with the ruling structure.”²⁹ The film does a spectacular job creating an epigram formed around body language that can support a Marxist structured reading, but the attempted revolution was a failure because the total dismantling of the capitalist system remained a mere ideal.

Now that we have seen the full extent of Maria’s roles, it is clear the epigram of *Metropolis*, “the mediator between head and hands must be the heart,” appears in unexpected places all throughout the movie – in the relationships, the main characters each constitute a side of it. This is outlined in my own epigram and relationship tree. The film’s epigram is to be understood as the relationship between the conceptualizing head behind production, but not the labor behind the production itself, the hands as the labor itself but not the idea behind conceptualization, and the heart being the piece that can find balance in this dysfunction. By giving Freder the role as the mediator throughout the film, the savior for the brothers and sisters,

²⁹ Mary K. Leigh, “Marx and Metropolis: The Farce of Religion in the Face of Dystopia,” in *Marxism and the Movies: Critical Essays on Class Struggle in the Cinema*, ed. Mary K. Leigh (United Kingdom: McFarland, Incorporated, Publishers, 2013), 17.

the head and the hands *must* be mediated by him. Grot cannot be the mediator between the head and the hands – his character may be associated throughout the entire film with the heart (including operating the heart machine), but the shot at the end of the film with Freder, his father, and himself puts Freder between the two. For the purposes of positioning main characters within the epigram, I have decided to associate the heart machine with the epigram in the same way. Hands are important reminders of Maria's complex character position in both her human and robotic form and are associated with the workers in general. This is why we see Grot as the "hands" at the end of the film and not Maria. Thea von Harbou perhaps narrates it the best:

"This book is not of today or of the future.

It tells of no place.

It serves no cause, party or class.

It has a moral which grows on the pillar of understanding:

*"The mediator between brain and muscle must be the Heart."*³⁰

³⁰ Harbou, *Metropolis*, 1.

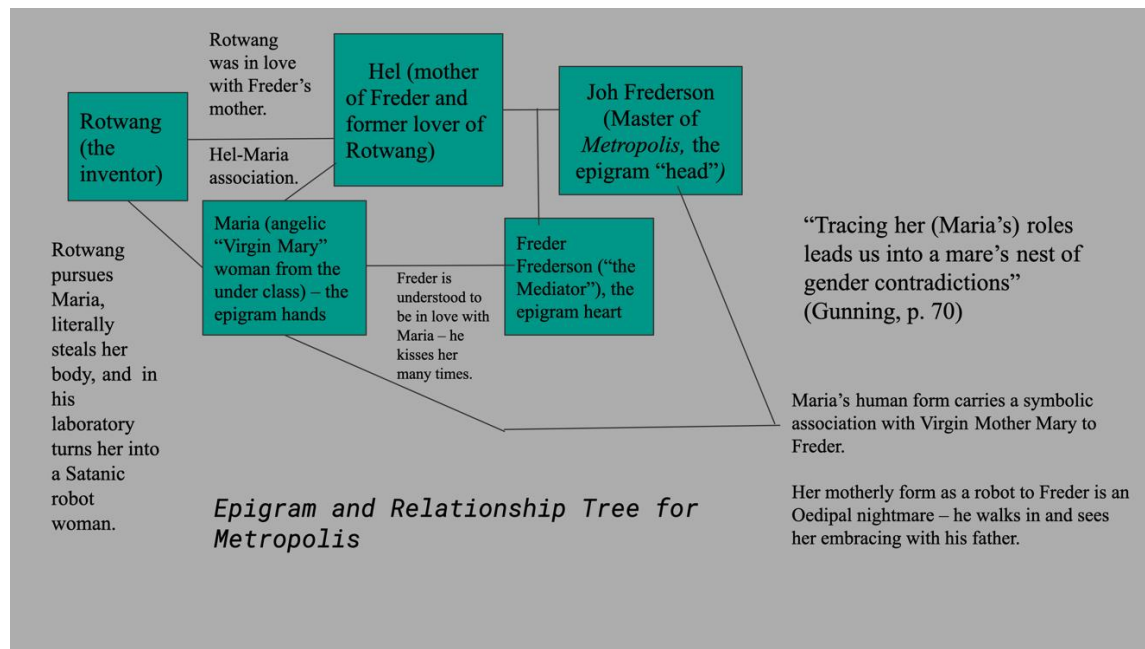


Figure 15: *Epigram and Relationship Tree for Metropolis*, original work.³¹

Gunning comments on all the various "Marias" that her character is a "mare's nest of gender contradictions".

³¹ Gunning, "Metropolis: The Dance of Death", 70.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, I would like this paper to be in memorial of my three grandparents who have passed away in the last six years –

Kathryn Sickling (1933-2022), who spent more time throughout her life reading than anyone I've ever met,

Loren Sickling (1932-2017), who spent his time delivering mail, gardening, and learning everything from beekeeping to ice fishing,

Bill Bailey (1940-2020), who taught me it was always important to work hard and be humble.

I send gratitude to my living family, friends, and local community who have shaped me into the person I am today. I am a bit of a recluse sometimes, especially while writing a paper of this length, but I would like to express again my gratitude for all the continued support and love over the years.

I must next send gratitude to my thesis supervisor who first introduced me to *Metropolis* in 2021, Dr. Christopher Chiasson. As a student, he has profoundly impacted my life and I've probably learned more from him than anyone else. I consider myself lucky every day to be his student, particularly completing this project with him. I appreciate his kindness and patience through the bumps of writing this massive paper. The background required for this paper would not have been possible at all without the many courses I have taken with him since 2020. I'd also like to recognize Dr. Mary Bricker for her commitment to directing the German program at SIU Carbondale and for overseeing my German teaching with the Goethe-Institut.

I would like to send a long-distance thank you to Geska Jäkel and Roland Dahl in Germany for introducing me to the German language and welcoming me as a foreign exchange student in Ulm in 2016, as well my close friends Max and Fernando, who have both for years stayed in very good touch with me regardless of our distances apart between here, Germany and California.

I would like to send my gratitude to the Southern Illinois University Carbondale University Honors Program team, including Lauren, Elizabeth, and Dr. Kapur for accepting my project proposal and giving me this fantastic opportunity to throw myself into more intensive research.

Finally, I'd like to send a special thank you in memoriam to the continued legacy of Dr. Helmut (1930-2018) and Mary Liedloff (1929-2010), whose German scholarship has fully funded my tuition since Fall 2021. I cannot thank the Liedloff family enough for their tremendous investment into my education.

BIOGRAPHICAL

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