

*The Vamp and the Machine: Technology and Sexuality in Fritz Lang's Metropolis**

by Andreas Huyssen

Fritz Lang's famous and infamous extravaganza *Metropolis* has never had a good press. While its visual qualities have been praised,¹ its content, more often than not, has been condemned as simplistic, ill-conceived, or plain reactionary. When the film was first released in the United States in 1927, Randolph Bartlett, the *New York Times* critic, reproached the director for his "lack of interest in dramatic verity" and for his "ineptitude" in providing plot motivation, thus justifying the heavy re-editing of the film for American audiences.² In Germany, critic Axel Eggebrecht condemned *Metropolis* as a mystifying distortion of the "unshakeable dialectic of the class struggle" and as a monumental panegyric to Stresemann's Germany.³ Eggebrecht's critique, focusing as it does on the emphatic reconciliation of capital and labor at the end of the film, has been reiterated untold times by critics on the left. And indeed, if we take class and power relations in a modern technological society to be the only theme of the film, then we have to concur with these critics. We would also have to agree with Siegfried Kracauer's observation concerning the affinity that exists between the film's ideological punch line, "The heart mediates between hand and brain," and the fascist "art" of propaganda which, in Goebbels' words, was geared "to win the heart of a people and to keep it."⁴ Kracauer pointedly concluded his comments on *Metropolis* with Lang's own words describing a meeting of the filmmaker with Goebbels that took place shortly after Hitler's rise to power: " 'He (i.e., Goebbels) told me

*An earlier version of this article was read as a paper at the *Rhetorics of Technology* colloquium which was held at the Centro di Linguistica e Semiotica at the University of Urbino, Italy, in the summer of 1980.

1. Cf. Paul M. Jensen, "Metropolis: The Film and the Book," in Fritz Lang, *Metropolis* (Simon & Schuster: New York, 1973), p. 13; Lotte Eisner, *The Haunted Screen* (University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969), pp. 223 ff.

2. Randolph Bartlett, "German Film Revision Upheld as Needed Here," *The New York Times* (March 13, 1927).

3. Stresemann was one of the leading "reformist" politicians of the stabilization phase of the Weimar Republic after 1923. — Axel Eggebrecht, "Metropolis," *Die Welt am Abend* (January 12, 1927).

4. Goebbels at the Nuremberg Party Convention of 1934.

that, many years before, he and the Führer had seen my picture *Metropolis* in a small town, and Hitler had said at that time that he wanted me to make the Nazi pictures.”⁵

One problem with such ideology critiques based on notions of class and political economy is that they tend to blur the political differences between the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich by suggesting that social-democratic reformism inexorably contributed to Hitler’s rise to power. The more important problem with this approach is that it remains blind to other aspects which are at least as important to the film’s social imaginary, especially since they are clearly foregrounded in the narrative. While the traditional ideology critique is not false, its blind spots lock us into a one-dimensional reading of the film which fails to come to terms with the fascination *Metropolis* has always exerted on audiences. This fascination, I would argue, has to do precisely with those elements of the narrative which critics have consistently shrugged aside. Thus the love story between Freder, son of the Master of Metropolis, and Maria, the woman of the depths who preaches peace and social harmony to the workers, has been dismissed as sentimental and childish (Eisner, Jensen); the elaborate recreation of Maria as a machine-vamp in Rotwang’s laboratory has been called counterproductive to the flow of events (Kracauer); certain actions of the mechanical vamp such as the belly dance have been called extraneous and inexplicable (Jensen); and the medieval religious-alchemical symbolism of the film has been criticized as inadequate for the portrayal of a future — or, for that matter, present — urban life (Eggebrecht). I am suggesting, however, that it is precisely the doubling of Maria, the use of religious symbolism, the embodiment of technology in a woman-robot and Freder’s complex relationship to women and machines, sexuality and technology, which give us a key to the film’s social and ideological imaginary. Even though Kracauer’s concrete analysis of *Metropolis* remained blind to this constitutive mesh of technology and sexuality in the film, he was essentially correct when he wrote in *From Caligari to Hitler*: “*Metropolis* was rich in subterranean content that, like contraband, had crossed the borders of consciousness without being questioned.”⁶ The problem is how to define this subterranean content, a task which Kracauer does not even begin to tackle in his analysis of the film

Of course the critics’ attention has always been drawn to the film’s powerful sequences involving images of technology, which, to a large degree, control the flow of the narrative:

— The film begins with a series of shots of the great machines of *Metropolis* moving and turning in inexorable rhythms.

— The machine room where Freder witnesses the violent explosion and has his vision of technology as moloch devouring its victims, and the sun-like

5. Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, New Jersey, 1947), p. 165.

6. Kracauer, p. 164.

spinning disk of the central power-house presents technology as an autonomous deified force demanding worship, surrender, and ritual sacrifice.

— The imagery of the tower of Babel (the machine center of *Metropolis* is actually called the New Tower of Babel) relates technology to myth and legend. The biblical myth is used to construct the ideological message about the division of labor into the hands that build and the brains that plan and conceive, a division which, as the film suggests, must be overcome.

— The capital/labor conflict is present in the sequences showing the Master of *Metropolis* in his control and communications center and the workers in the machine room, with the machines being subservient to the master but enslaving the workers.

— Finally, and perhaps most importantly, technology is embodied in a female robot, a machine-vamp who leads the workers on a rampage and is subsequently burned at the stake.

Eggebrecht and Kracauer were certainly correct in relating Lang's representation of technology to the machine-cult of the 1920s which is also manifest in the literature and the art of *Neue Sachlichkeit*.⁷ In my view, however, it is not enough to locate the film within the parameters of *Neue Sachlichkeit* only. The simple fact that stylistically *Metropolis* has usually and mainly been regarded as an expressionist film may give us a clue. And indeed, if one calls expressionism's attitude toward technology to mind, one begins to see that the film actually vacillates between two opposing views of modern technology which were both part of Weimar culture. The expressionist view emphasizes technology's oppressive and destructive potential and is clearly rooted in the experiences and irrepressible memories of the mechanized battlefields of World War I. During the 1920s and especially during the stabilization phase of the Weimar Republic this expressionist view was slowly replaced by the technology cult of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* and its unbridled confidence in technical progress and social engineering. Both these views inform the film. Thus on the one hand, *Metropolis* is strongly indebted to Georg Kaiser's expressionist play about technology, *Gas*. In both works the primary technology is energy, gas and electricity respectively, and the industrial accident sequence in *Metropolis* is remarkably similar to the explosion of the gas works in act I of Kaiser's play. But, on the other hand, the shots of the city *Metropolis*, with its canyon-like walls rising far above street level and with its bridges and elevated roads thrown between towering factories and office buildings are reminiscent of Hannah Höch's Dadaist photomontages and of scores of industrial and urban landscape paintings of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (Karl Grossberg, Georg Scholz, Oskar Nerlinger).

7. On the *Neue Sachlichkeit* see John Willett, *Art and Politics in the Weimar Period: The New Sobriety, 1917-1933* (Pantheon Books: New York, 1978). On the machine-cult of the 1920s see Helmut Lethen, *Neue Sachlichkeit 1924-1932* (Metzler: Stuttgart, 1970) and Teresa de Lauretis et al. (eds.), *The Technological Imagination* (Coda Press: Madison, Wisconsin, 1980), especially the section "Machines, Myths, and Marxism."

Historically and stylistically then Lang's *Metropolis*, which was conceived in 1924 during a visit to the United States (including New York) and released in January 1927, is a syncretist mixture of expressionism and *Neue Sachlichkeit*, and, more significantly, a syncretist mixture of the two diametrically opposed views of technology we can ascribe to these two movements. More precisely, the film works through this conflict and tries to resolve it. Ultimately the film, even though it pretends to hold on to the humanitarian anti-technological ethos of expressionism, comes down on the side of *Neue Sachlichkeit*, and the machine vamp plays the crucial role in resolving a seemingly irreconcilable contradiction. For his indictment of modern technology as oppressive and destructive, which prevails in most of the narrative, Lang ironically relies on one of the most novel cinematic techniques, Schüfftan's *Spiegeltechnik*, a technique which by using a camera with two lenses, focuses two separate images, those of models and actors, onto a single strip of film. As I shall argue later, doubling, mirroring and projecting not only constitute the technological make-up of this film, but they lie at the very core of the psychic and visual processes that underlie its narrative.

The Machine-Woman: A Historical Digression

To my knowledge, the motif of the machine-woman in *Metropolis* has never been analyzed in any depth. In his recent reinterpretation of *Metropolis*, Stephen Jenkins has taken an important step by pushing the question of the significance of the female presence in Lang's films to the forefront.⁸ Although many of Jenkins' observations about Maria and Freder are correct, his analysis is deficient in three areas: his reading remains too narrowly oedipal moving as it does from Maria's initial threat to the Law of the Father to her and Freder's reintegration into *Metropolis*' system of domination; secondly, Jenkins never problematizes Lang's representations of technology and thus remains oblivious to that central political and ideological debate of the 1920s; and thirdly, he never explores the question how or why male fantasies about women and sexuality are interlaced with visions of technology in the film. It is my contention that only by focusing on the mechanical vamp can we fully comprehend the cohesion of meanings which the film transports.

Why indeed does the robot, the *Maschinenmensch* created by the inventor-magician Rotwang and intended to replace the human workers, appear with the body features of a woman? After all, the world of technology has always been the world of men while woman has been considered to be outside of technology, a part of nature, as it were. It is too simple, to suggest, as Jenkins does, that the vamp's main function is to represent the threat of castration to

8. Stephen Jenkins, "Lang: Fear and Desire," in S.J. (ed.), *Fritz Lang: The Image and the Look* (British Film Institute: London 1981), p. 38-124, esp. p. 82-87. I only came across Jenkins' essay while revising an earlier version of this article.

Freder; that purpose could have been achieved by other narrative means, and it also leaves unanswered the question of what technology may have to do with female sexuality and castration anxiety. Precisely the fact that Fritz Lang does not feel the need to explain the female features of Rotwang's robot shows that a pattern, a long standing tradition is being recycled here, a tradition which is not at all hard to detect, and in which the *Maschinenmensch*, more often than not, is presented as woman.

A historical digression is in order.⁹ In 1748 the French doctor Julien Offray de la Mettrie, in a book entitled *L'Homme machine*, described the human being as a machine composed of a series of distinct, mechanically moving parts, and he concluded that the body is nothing but a clock, subject as all other matter to the laws of mechanics. This extreme materialist view with its denial of emotion and subjectivity served politically in the 18th century to attack the legitimacy claims of feudal clericalism and the absolutist state. It was hoped that once the metaphysical instances, which church and state resorted to as devices of legitimizing their power, were revealed as fraud they would become obsolete. At the same time, however, and despite their revolutionary implications such materialist theories ultimately led to the notion of a blindly functioning world machine, a gigantic automaton, the origins and meaning of which were beyond human understanding. Consciousness and subjectivity were degraded to mere functions of a global mechanism. The determination of social life by metaphysical legitimations of power was replaced by the determination through the laws of nature. The age of modern technology and its legitimator apparatuses had begun.

It is no coincidence that in the same age literally hundreds of mechanics attempted to construct human automata who could walk and dance, draw and sing, play the flute or the piano, and whose performances became a major attraction in the courts and cities of 18th-century Europe. Androids and robots such as Vaucanson's flutist or Jacquet-Droz's organ player captured the imagination of the times and seemed to embody the realization of an age-old human dream. With the subsequent systematic introduction of laboring machines, which propelled the industrial revolution, the culture of androids declined. But it is precisely at that time, at the turn of the 18th to the 19th century, that literature appropriates the subject matter transforming it significantly. The android is no longer seen as testimony to the genius of mechanical invention; it rather becomes a nightmare, a threat to human life. In the machine-man writers begin to discover horrifying traits which resemble those of real people. Their theme is not so much the mechanically constructed automaton itself, but rather the threat it poses to live human beings. It is not hard to see that this literary phenomenon reflects the increasing technologiza-

9. In the following I am indebted to Peter Gendolla, *Die lebenden Maschinen: Zur Geschichte der Maschinenmenschen bei Jean Paul, E.T.A. Hoffmann und Villiers de l'Isle Adam* (Guttandin und Hoppe: Marburg, 1980).

tion of human nature and the human body which reached a new stage in the early 19th century.

While the android builders of the 18th century did not seem to have an overriding preference for either sex (the number of male and female androids seems to be more or less balanced), it is striking to see how the later literature prefers machine-women to machine-men.¹⁰ Historically, then, we can conclude that as soon as the machine came to be perceived as a demonic, inexplicable threat and as harbinger of chaos and destruction — a view which typically characterizes many 19th-century reactions to the railroad to give but one major example¹¹ — writers began to imagine the *Maschinenmensch* as woman. There are grounds to suspect that we are facing here a complex process of projection and displacement. The fears and perceptual anxieties emanating from ever more powerful machines are recast and reconstructed in terms of the male fear of female sexuality, reflecting, in the Freudian account, the male's castration anxiety. This projection was relatively easy to make; although woman had traditionally been seen as standing in a closer relationship to nature than man, nature itself, since the 18th century, had come to be interpreted as a gigantic machine. Woman, nature, machine had become a mesh of significations which all had one thing in common: otherness; by their very existence they raised fears and threatened male authority and control.

The Ultimate Technological Fantasy: Creation Without Mother

With that hypothesis in mind let us return to *Metropolis*. As I indicated before, the film does not provide an answer to the question of why the robot is a woman; it takes the machine-woman for granted and presents her as quasi-natural. Thea von Harbou's novel, however, on which the film is based, is quite explicit. In the novel, Rotwang explains why he created a female robot rather than the machine *men* Frederson had ordered as replacements of living labor. Rotwang says: "Every man-creator makes himself a woman. I do not believe that humbug about the first human being a man. If a male god created the world . . . then he certainly created woman first."¹² This passage does not

10. Examples would be Jean Paul's *Ehefrau aus bloßem Holze* (1789), Achim von Arnim's Bella in *Isabella von Ägypten* (1800), E.T.A. Hoffmann's Olympia in *Der Sandmann* (1815), and Villiers de l'Isle Adam's Hadaly in *L'Ève future* (1886), a novel which strongly influenced Thea von Harbou in the writing of *Metropolis*. More recent examples would be Stanislav Lem's *The Mask* (1974), the puppet mistress in Fellini's *Casanova* (1976/77), and a number of works in the Franco-German art exhibit *Les machines célibataires* (1975).

11. The disruptions which the early railroads inflicted upon the human perceptions of time and space have been magnificently analyzed by Wolfgang Schivelbusch in his book *Geschichte der Eisenbahnreise: Zur Industrialisierung von Raum und Zeit* (Hanser: Munich, 1977); an English translation was recently published by Urizen. Cf. also Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (Oxford University Press: New York 1964).

12. Thea von Harbou, *Metropolis* (Ace Books: New York, 1963), p. 54.

seem to fit my hypothesis that the machine-woman typically reflects the double male fear of technology and of woman. On the contrary, the passage rather suggests that the machine-woman results from the more or less sublimated sexual desires of her male creator. We are reminded of the Pygmalion myth in which the woman, far from threatening the man, remains passive and subordinated. But this contradiction is easily resolved if we see male control as the common denominator in both instances. After all, Rotwang creates the android as an artifact, as an initially lifeless object which he can then control and dominate.

Clearly the issue here is not just the male's sexual desire for woman. It is the much deeper libidinal desire to create that other, woman, thus depriving it of its otherness. It is the desire to perform this ultimate task which has always eluded technological man. In the drive toward ever greater technological domination of nature, *Metropolis'* master-engineer must attempt to create woman, a being which, according to the male's view, resists technologization by its very "nature." Simply by virtue of natural biological reproduction, woman had maintained a qualitative distance to the realm of technical production which only produces lifeless goods. By creating a female android, Rotwang fulfills the male phantasm of a creation without mother; but more than that, he produces not just any natural life, but woman herself, the epitome of nature. The nature/culture split seems healed. The most complete technologization of nature appears as re-naturalization, as a progress back to nature. Man is at long last alone and at one with himself.

Of course it is an imaginary solution. And it is a solution that does violence to a real woman. The real Maria has to be subdued and exploited so that the robot, by way of male magic, can be instilled with life, a motif, which is fairly symptomatic of the whole tradition. The context of the film makes it clear that in every respect, it is male domination and control which are at stake: control of the real Maria who, in ways still to be discussed, represents a threat to the world of high technology and its system of psychic and sexual repression; domination of the woman-robot by Rotwang who orders his creature to perform certain tasks; control of the labor process by the Master of *Metropolis* who plans to replace inherently uncontrollable living labor by robots; and, finally, control of the workers' actions through Frederson's cunning use of the machine-woman, the false Maria.

On this plane, then, the film suggests a simple and deeply problematic homology between woman and technology, a homology which results from male projections: Just as man invents and constructs technological artifacts which are to serve him and fulfill his desires, so woman, as she has been socially invented and constructed by man, is expected to reflect man's needs and to serve her master. Furthermore, just as the technological artifact is considered to be the quasi-natural extension of man's natural abilities (the lever replacing muscle power, the computer expanding brain power), so woman, in male perspective, is considered to be the natural vessel of man's reproductive capacity, a mere bodily extension of the male's procreative

powers. But neither technology nor woman can ever be seen as solely a natural extension of man's abilities. They are always also qualitatively different and thus threatening in their otherness. It is this threat of otherness which causes male anxiety and reinforces the urge to control and dominate that which is other.

Virgin and Vamp: Displacing the Double Threat

The otherness of woman is represented in the film in two traditional images of femininity — the virgin and the vamp, images which are both focused on sexuality. Although both the virgin and the vamp are imaginary constructions, male-imagined "ideal types" belonging to the realm Silvia Bovenschen has described as "*Imaginierte Weiblichkeit*,"¹³ they are built up from a real core of social, physiological and psychological traits specific to women and should not be dismissed simply as yet another form of false consciousness. What is most interesting about *Metropolis* is the fact that in both forms, femininity, imagined as it is from the male perspective, poses a threat to the male world of high technology, efficiency, and instrumental rationality. Although the film does everything in terms of plot development and ideological substance to neutralize this threat and to reestablish male control in Metropolis, the threat can clearly be perceived as such throughout the film. First, there is the challenge that the real Maria poses to Frederson, the Master of Metropolis. She prophesies the reign of the heart, i.e., of affection, emotion and nurturing. Significantly, she is first introduced leading a group of ragged workers' children into the pleasure gardens of Metropolis' *jeunesse dorée*, suggesting both childbearing ability and motherly nurturing. But she also alienates Freder from his father by introducing him to the misery of working-class life. While at the end of the film Maria has become a pawn of the system, at the beginning she clearly represents a threat to the Master of Metropolis. This shows in the sequence where Frederson, led by Rotwang, secretly observes Maria preaching to the workers in the catacombs. The very fact that Frederson did not know of the existence of the catacombs deep underneath the city proves that there is something here which escapes his control. Looking through an aperture in a wall high above the assembly at the bottom of the cavern, Frederson listens to Maria preaching peace and acquiescence to the workers, not revolt. Prophesying the eventual reconciliation between the masters and the slaves she states: "Between the brain that plans and the hands that build, there must be a mediator." And: "It is the heart that must bring about an understanding between them." Rather than perceiving this notion as a welcome ideological veil to cover up the conflict between

13. Silvia Bovenschen, *Die imaginierte Weiblichkeit: Exemplarische Untersuchungen zu kulturgeschichtlichen und literarischen Präsentationsformen des Weiblichen* (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt am Main, 1979).

labor and capital, masters and slaves (that is certainly the way Hitler and Goebbels read the film), Frederson backs away from the aperture and, with a stern face and his fists plunged into his pockets, he orders Rotwang to make his robot in the likeness of Maria. Then he clenches one fist in the air and continues: "Hide the girl in your house, I will send the robot down to the workers, to sow discord among them and destroy their confidence in Maria." In social and ideological terms this reaction is inexplicable, since Maria, similar to Brecht's Saint Joan of the Stockyards, preaches social peace. But in psychological terms Frederson's wish to disrupt Maria's influence on the workers makes perfect sense. The threat that he perceives has nothing to do with the potential of organized workers' resistance. It has, however, a lot to do with his fear of emotion, of affection, of nurturing, i.e., of all that which is said to be embodied in woman, and which is indeed embodied in Maria.

The result of Frederson's fear of femininity, of emotion and nurturing, is the male fantasy of the machine-woman who, in the film, embodies two age old patriarchal images of women which, again, are hooked up with two homologous views of technology. In the machine-woman, technology and woman appear as creations and/or cult objects of the male imagination. The myth of the dualistic nature of woman as either asexual virgin-mother or prostitute-vamp is projected onto technology which appears as either neutral and obedient or as inherently threatening and out-of-control. On the one hand, there is the image of the docile, sexually passive woman, the woman who is subservient to man's needs and who reflects the image which the master projects of her. The perfect embodiment of this stereotype in the film is the machine-woman of the earlier sequences when she obeys her master's wishes and follows his commands. Technology seems completely under male control and functions as intended as an extension of man's desires. But even here control is tenuous. We understand that Rotwang has lost a hand constructing his machine. And when the robot advances toward Frederson, who stands with his back to the camera, and extends her hand to greet him Frederson is taken aback, and recoils in alarm, a direct parallel to his first spontaneous physical reaction to Maria. Later Rotwang transforms the obedient asexual robot into Maria's living double, and Frederson sends her down to the workers as an *agent provocateur*. She now appears as the prostitute-vamp, the harbinger of chaos, embodying that threatening female sexuality which was absent (or under control) in the robot. Of course, the potent sexuality of the vamp is as much a male fantasy as the asexuality of the virgin-mother. And, indeed, the mechanical vamp is at first as dependent on and obedient to Frederson as the faceless robot was to Rotwang. But there is a significant ambiguity here. Although the vamp acts as an agent of Frederson's manipulation of the workers, she also calls forth libidinal forces which end up threatening Frederson's rule and the whole social fabric of *Metropolis* and which therefore have to be purged before order and control can be reestablished. This view of the vamp's sexuality posing a threat to male rule and control, which is inscribed in the film, corresponds precisely to the notion of technology running out-of-

control and unleashing its destructive potential on humanity. After all, the vamp of the film is a technological artifact upon which a specifically male view of destructive female sexuality has been projected.

The Male Gaze and the Dialectic of Discipline and Desire

It is in this context of technology and female sexuality that certain sequences of the film, which have often been called extraneous, assume their full meaning. The mechanical vamp, made to look exactly like Maria, the virgin-mother-lover figure is presented to an all male gathering in a spectacular *mise-en-scène* which Rotwang has arranged in order to prove that nobody will be able to tell the machine from a human being. In steam and light the false Maria emerges from a huge ornamental urn and then performs a seductive strip-tease attracting the lustful gaze of the assembled male guests. This gaze is effectively filmed as an agitated montage of their eyes staring into the camera. Cinematically, this is one of the film's most interesting sequences, and it casts a significant light on earlier sequences involving appearances of Maria and the robot. The montage of male eyes staring at the false Maria when she emerges from her cauldron and begins to cast off her clothes, illustrates how the male gaze actually constitutes the female body on the screen. It is as if we were witnessing the second, public creation of the robot, her flesh, skin, and body not only being revealed, but constituted by the desire of male vision. Looking back now on earlier sequences it becomes clear how the eye of the camera always places the spectator in a position occupied by the men in the film: the workers looking spell-bound at Maria preaching from her candle-lit altar; Frederson, his back to the camera, staring at Rotwang's robot; Rotwang's flashlight pinning Maria down in the caverns, and symbolically raping her; and, finally, the transference of Maria's bodily features onto the metallic robot under the controlling surveillance of Rotwang's gaze. Woman appears as a projection of the male gaze, and this male gaze is ultimately that of the camera, of another machine. In the mentioned sequences, vision is identified as male vision. In Lang's narrative, the male eye, which is always simultaneously the mechanical eye of the camera, constructs its female object as a technological artifact (i.e., as a robot) and then makes it come to life through multiple instances of male vision inscribed into the narrative. This gaze is an ambiguous mesh of desires: desire to control, desire to rape, and ultimately desire to kill, which finds *its* gratification in the burning of the robot.

It is also significant that the artificial woman is constructed from the inside out. First Rotwang constructs the mechanical "inner" woman; external features such as flesh, skin, and hair are added on in a second stage when the body features of the real Maria are transferred to or projected onto the robot in an elaborate chemical and electric spectacle. This technical process in which woman is divided and fragmented into inner and outer nature is later mirrored

in the subsequent stages of the vamp's destruction: the outer features of the vamp burn away on the stake until only the mechanical insides are left and we again see the metallic robot of the earlier scenes. My point here is not only that construction and destruction of the female body are intimately linked in *Metropolis*. Beyond that, it is male vision which puts together and disassembles woman's body, thus denying woman her identity and making her into an object of projection and manipulation. What is interesting about Lang's *Metropolis* is not so much that Lang uses the male gaze in the described way. Practically all traditional narrative cinema treats woman's body as a projection of male vision. What is interesting, however, is that by thematizing male gaze and vision in the described way the film lays open a fundamental filmic convention usually covered up by narrative cinema.

But there is more to it than that. Lang's film may lead us to speculate whether the dominance of vision *per se* in our culture may not be a fundamental problem rather than a positive contribution to the advance of civilization as Norbert Elias would have it in his study of the civilizing process.¹⁴ Actually Elias' sources themselves are open to alternative interpretations. He quotes for example from an 18th-century etiquette manual, La Salle's *Civilité* (1774): "Children like to touch clothes and other things that please them with their hands. This urge must be corrected, and they must be taught to touch all they see only with their eyes." And then Elias concludes as follows: "It has been shown elsewhere how the use of the sense of smell, the tendency to sniff at food or other things, comes to be restricted as something animal-like. Here we see one of the interconnections through which a different sense organ, the eye, takes on a very specific significance in civilized society. In a similar way to the ear, and perhaps even more so, it becomes a mediator of pleasure, precisely because the direct satisfaction of the desire for pleasure has been hemmed in by a multitude of barriers and prohibitions."¹⁵ The language both in the source and in Elias' text is revealing. Corrections, barriers, prohibition — the terms indicate that there is more at stake here than the satisfaction of desire or the progress of civilization. It is of course Michel Foucault who, in his analysis of modernization processes, has shown in *Discipline and Punish* how vision and the gaze have increasingly become means of control and discipline. While Elias and Foucault differ in their evaluation of the observed phenomena, their micrological research on vision corroborates Adorno and Horkheimer's macrological thesis that the domination of outer nature via science and technology in capitalist society is dialectically and inexorably linked with the domination of inner nature, one's own as well as that of others.¹⁶

14. Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: The Development of Manners* (Urizen Books: New York, 1978).

15. *Ibid.*, p. 203.

16. See Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (Oxford University Press: New York, 1947) and Theodor W. Adorno/Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Seabury Press: New York, 1974).

I would argue that it is precisely this dialectic which is the subterranean context of Lang's *Metropolis*. Vision as pleasure and desire has to be subdued and manipulated so that vision as technical and social control can emerge triumphant. On this level, the film pits the loving, nurturing gaze of Maria against the steely, controlled and controlling gaze of the Master of Metropolis. In the beginning Maria eludes his control since the catacombs are the only place in Metropolis remaining outside of the panoptic control system of the Tower; if only for that she must be punished and subdued. Beyond that, her "inner nature" is replaced by the machine. Ironically, however, the attempt to replace the real woman by the machine-woman fails, and Rotwang and Frederson have to face the return of the repressed. Once Maria has become a machine or, which is the other side of the process, the machine has appropriated Maria's external appearance, she again begins to elude her master's control. It seems that in whatever form woman cannot be controlled. True, the robot Maria does perform the task she has been programmed to do. In an inflammatory speech supported by sensual body language she seduces the male workers and leads them to the rampage in the machine rooms. In these sequences, the expressionist fear of a threatening technology which oppresses workers is displaced and reconstructed as the threat female sexuality poses to men and, ironically, to technology. Thus the machine-woman, who is no longer recognized as a machine, makes all men lose control: both the upper-class men who lust after her at the belly-dance party, and who, later on, run deliriously with her through the streets of Metropolis shouting "Let's watch the world going to the devil," and the workers in the catacombs whom she turns into a raging machine-destroying mob. Significantly the riot is joined by the workers' wives who are shown for the first time in the film — in a state of hysteria and frenzy. The mob scenes thus take on connotations of a raging femininity which represents *the* major threat not only to the great machines, but to male domination in general. The threat of technology has successfully been replaced by the threat of woman. But while the machines only threatened the men who worked them the unleashed force of female sexuality, represented by the vamp and the working-class women,¹⁷ endangers the whole system of Metropolis, uptown and downtown, masters and slaves, and especially the workers' children who were abandoned underground to the floods unleashed by the destruction of the central powerhouse.

17. In his thorough analysis of the Freikorps literature of the early Weimar Republic Klaus Theweleit has shown how in the presentation of proletarian women the themes of revolution and threatening sexuality are consistently interwoven. The way in which Lang places the working-class women in his film corroborates Theweleit's findings. Klaus Theweleit, *Männerphantasien: Frauen, Fluten, Körper, Geschichte*, vol. 1 (Verlag Roter Stern: Frankfurt am Main, 1977), esp. pp. 217 ff.

The Female Minotaur as Technology-out-of-control

Cliché has had it that sexually women are passive by nature and that the sexually active woman is abnormal, if not dangerous and destructive. The machine vamp in *Metropolis* of course embodies the unity of an active and destructive female sexuality and the destructive potential of technology. This pairing of the woman with the machine is in no way unique to Lang's film. Apart from the literary examples I cited earlier, it can be found in numerous 19th-century allegorical representations of technology and industry as woman.¹⁸ More interesting for my purposes here, however, is Jean Veber's early 20th-century painting entitled "Allégorie sur la machine dévoreuse des hommes."¹⁹ In the right half of the painting we see a gigantic flywheel which throws up and devours dozens of dwarf-like men. A large rod connected with the flywheel moves to and fro into a metal box on which a giant woman is sitting naked, with parted legs and smiling demonically. Clearly the painting is an allegory of sexual intercourse, of a destructive female sexuality unleashed upon men. It suggests that the woman has appropriated the phallic power and activity of the machine and that she now turns this power violently against men. It is easy to see that the allegory is indicative of male sexual anxieties, of the fear of an uncontrolled female potency, of the vagina dentata, of castration by woman. Whereas in this painting woman and machine are not identical, but stand in a relationship allegorizing a specific kind of female sexuality as imagined and feared by men, woman and machine are collapsed into one in the machine-vamp of *Metropolis*. Since the painting is sexually more explicit, it can help us unearth another major aspect of the film's subterranean content. What Eduard Fuchs, the famous art collector and art critic, said about Veber's allegorical painting in 1906, he could have said as well, with even more justification, of the machine-vamp in *Metropolis*: "Woman is the symbol of that terrifying, secret power of the machine which rolls over anything that comes under its wheels, smashes that which gets caught in its cranks, shafts, and belts, and destroys those who attempt to halt the turning of its wheels. And, vice versa, the machine, which coldly, cruelly and relentlessly sacrifices hecatombs of men as if they were nothing, is the symbol of the man-strangling Minotaur-like nature of woman."²⁰ A perfect summary of male mystifications of female sexuality as technology-out-of-control!

18. See Cäcilia Rentmeister, "Berufsverbot für die Musen," *Ästhetik und Kommunikation*, 25 (September 1976), 92-112.

19. "Allegory of the men-devouring machine." Veber's painting is discussed in Rentmeister's essay (see footnote 18) in relation to Georg Scholz' painting "Fleisch und Eisen" of 1923, a painting that can be attributed to the *Neue Sachlichkeit*; it is also discussed in Theweleit, p. 454.

20. Eduard Fuchs, *Die Frau in der Karikatur* (Munich, 1906), p. 262.

In light of Veber's painting and Fuchs' interpretation even earlier sequences of the film assume a different meaning. In her first appearance Maria, accompanied by the workers' children, seems to represent only the stereotypical innocent virgin-mother figure, devoid of sexuality. Such an interpretation is certainly in character, but it is nevertheless only one side of the story. It is significant, I think, that Freder's first gaze at Maria is heavily loaded with sexual connotations. Just before their encounter, Freder is playfully chasing a young woman back and forth around a fountain splashing water at her. Finally they collide in front of the fountain. Freder takes her in his arms, bends over her, and is about to kiss her when the doors open and Maria enters with the children. Freder releases the woman in his arms and in point of view shot stares raptured at Maria. This context of Maria's appearance as well as the hazed iris effect surrounding Maria as Freder gazes at her clearly indicate that Maria has instantaneously become an object of desire. To be sure, the passions she arouses in Freder are different from the playful sexuality suggested by the preceding sequence, but they are anything but asexual. The use of water imagery can give us another cue here. Just as the floods of the later sequences allegorize female frenzy (the proletarian women) and threatening female sexuality (the vamp), the fountain assumes sexual meaning as well. Except that here the water imagery suggests a controlled, channelled and non-threatening sexuality, the playful kind that is permitted in *Metropolis*. Similarly, the choreography of body movements in the fountain scene emphasizes geometry, symmetry and control, aspects which also inform the preceding track race sequence in the Masterman Stadium which was later cut from the film. Both athletics and the sexual games of the Eternal Gardens are presented as care-free, but controlled diversions of *Metropolis*' gilded youth. These scenes show us the upper-class equivalent of Lang's ornamental treatment of the workers in geometric, mechanically moving columns.²¹ Already here Maria clearly disrupts the status quo. In response to her appearance Freder's body movements and gestures assume a new quality. From this point he becomes all impulse and desire, charges blindly from place to place, and seems unable to keep his body under control. Even more importantly, it is in pursuit of Maria that Freder descends underground and ends up in the vast machine halls of *Metropolis*. Whether she has "led" him there or not, the narrative links Freder's first exposure to the great machines with his sexual desire, a link which becomes even more manifest in the explosion sequence. For all of the subsequent events in the machine room actually mirror Freder's internal situation. The temperature rises relentlessly above the danger point and the machines run out of human control. Several blasts throw workers off the scaffoldings. Steam whirls and bodies fly through the air. Then comes a

21. On the cultural and political implications of Lang's ornamental style in *Metropolis*, cf. Siegfried Kracauer, "The Mass Ornament," *New German Critique*, 5 (Spring 1975), 67-76.

sequence in which Freder, in a total state of shock, begins to hallucinate. In his vision, the aperture high up in the belly of the great machine, in which we can see revolving cranks, changes into a grotesque mask-like face with a gaping mouth equipped with two rows of teeth. A column of half-naked workers moves up the pyramid-like steps, and two priests standing on either side of the fiery and blinding abyss supervise several muscular slaves who hurl worker after worker against the gleaming cranks which keep rising and falling amid clouds of smoke and steam. Of course, the meaning of Freder's nightmarish hallucination is quite clear: technology as moloch demanding the sacrifice of human lives. But that is not all. If we assume that Freder in pursuit of Maria is still sexually aroused, and if we remember that his second hallucination in the film deals explicitly with sexuality (that of the machine-vamp Maria), we may want to see the imagery in this sequence as a first indication of the vagina dentata theme, of castration anxiety, of the male fear of uncontrolled female potency displaced to technology.

Such an interpretation has implications for the way in which we perceive the real Maria. Rather than keeping the "good," asexual virgin Maria categorically apart from the "evil" sexual vamp,²² we become aware of the dialectical relationship of these two stereotypes. On the level of sexual politics, the point of the film is precisely to subdue and to control this threatening and explosive female sexuality which is inherently and potentially there in any woman, even the virgin. It is in this context that the elaborate sequence portraying the laboratory creation of the machine-vamp is — contrary to Kracauer's claims — absolutely essential for a full understanding of the technology/sexuality link in the film. After Rotwang has brought Maria under his control, he proceeds to take her apart, to disassemble and to deconstruct her. In a complicated chemical and electrical process he filters her sexuality out of her and projects it onto the lifeless robot who then comes alive as the vamp Maria. The sexuality of the vamp is thus the sexuality of the real woman Maria transformed by a process of male projections onto the machine. After this draining experience, the real Maria is no longer the active enterprising woman of before, but assumes the role of a helpless mother figure who is totally dependent on male support. Thus in the flood sequences she seems paralyzed and has to wait for Freder to save the children, and in the end again she has to be saved from Rotwang's hands.

Just as Maria, under the male gaze, has been disassembled and doubly reconstructed as a docile sexless mother figure and as a potent destructive vamp who is then burnt at the stake, so Freder's desires have to be disentangled and controlled, and the sexual element purged. This happens mainly in the sequences following Freder's encounter with the false Maria in his father's arms. Freder suffers a physical and mental breakdown. During recovery in bed he hallucinates with terrified wide open eyes precisely that *mise-en-scène* of the vamp which Rotwang had set up on that same evening. Although this

²² See Robert A. Armour, *Fritz Lang* (Twayne Publishers: Boston, 1977), p. 29.

sequence can be read according to the Freudian account of the primal scene, the castration threat of the father and the Oedipal conflict,²³ such a reading remains too limited. The goal of the narrative here is not just to bring Freder back under the Law of the Father by resolving the Oedipal conflict; it is rather to associate all male sexual desire for women with the threat of castration. This becomes amply clear as Freder's hallucination ends with a vision of the cathedral sculptures of the Seven Deadly Sins. As the central figure of Death moves toward Freder/the camera/the spectator swinging his scythe, Freder screams in horror and sinks back into his pillows.

The fact that Freder has learned his lesson and has been healed from sexual desire shows when he reappears in the catacombs and attempts to expose the false Maria and to keep her from seducing the workers. Separating the false, sexual Maria from the real Maria in his mind means that he is now working actively against his own sexual desires. This point is allegorically emphasized by his successful struggle against the floods inundating the workers' quarters where he saves Maria and the children. By the end of the film, Maria is no longer an object of sexual desire for Freder. Sexuality is back under control just as technology has been purged of its destructive, evil, i.e., "sexual," element through the burning of the witch-machine.

It is, then, as if the expressionist fear of technology and male perceptions of a threatening female sexuality had been both exorcised and reaffirmed by this metaphoric witch-burning, which, as all witch burnings, guarantees the return of the repressed. It is as if the destructive potential of modern technology, which the expressionists rightfully feared, had to be displaced and projected onto the machine-woman so that it could be metaphorically purged. After the dangers of a mystified technology have been translated into the dangers an equally mystified female sexuality poses to men, the witch could be burnt at the stake and, by implication, technology could be purged of its threatening aspects. What remains is the serene view of technology as a harbinger of social progress. The transition from expressionism to the *Neue Sachlichkeit* is complete. The conflict of labor and capital — such was the belief of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* and such is the implicit message of the film — would be solved through technological progress. The notion that the hand has to mediate between the hands and the brain is nothing but a lingering residue of expressionism, an ideological veil which covers up the persisting domination of labor by capital and high technology, the persisting domination of woman by the male gaze and the reestablished repression of female and male sexuality. The final shots of the film with their visual separation of the workers from their masters and with the resumed ornamental treatment of human bodies in motion show that the hands and the brain are as separate as ever. Henry Ford's infamous categorization of humankind into the many hands and the few brains, as it was laid out in his immensely popular

23. That is the way Jenkins reads the sequence, "Lang: Fear and Desire," p. 86.

autobiography, reigns supreme. It is well-known how German fascism reconciled the hands and the brain, labor and capital. By then, Fritz Lang was already in exile.

