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## The Seductive Text of *Metropolis*

To say that human knowledge is always entangled with fiction does not imply an end of human response to nature. It places man in a country he creates partly with his own mind. In this country he is surrounded by brilliant, fantastic, wildly distorted images of himself. Is there a god behind the mask? There is no way of knowing. Hence the third moment of modern science, the authentically modern moment, the moment of reality as game.

—O. B. Hardison, Jr. (47)

A man, dressed a bit incongruously in a cutaway and a top hat and toting an umbrella, is exploring a cavern of the moon, when suddenly an aggressive selenite, a “moonman,” approaches. When the creature comes closer, the earthman strikes it with his umbrella and, in a puff of smoke, it vanishes. This almost magical disappearance typifies the sort of effects found throughout what is certainly the most famous of early science fiction films, Georges Méliès’s *Le Voyage dans la Lune* (1902). In other instances, the moon becomes a cheesy, smiling man-in-the-moon, the constellations in the sky assume human shape, and another umbrella, planted underground in the lunar soil, takes root and sprouts into a giant mushroom. For all of their ability to surprise and even amaze audiences, “special effects” like these—mainly stop-camera and lap dissolve techniques—today seem most interesting for their playfulness, their sheer delight in manipulating reality, their *gamesmanship*, as it were.

Méliès’s pioneering efforts in the field of science fiction, which include works like *La Lune a un Metre* (1898), *La Statue Animée* (1903),

and *A la Conquête du Pôle* (1912), offer us moonmen, space travel, monsters, futuristic conveyances, and statues that come to life. They abound in such “brilliant, fantastic, wildly distorted images”—of the human and all manner of other creatures. Yet more important than those images, it seems, are the various miraculous appearances, disappearances, and transformations Méliès managed to pull off, which stake out, as the cinema’s special territory, a concern with that emerging, highly modern attitude toward reality, what Hardison terms “reality as game.”

If Méliès’s contemporaries, the Lumière brothers, following in the spirit of such figures as Zola and Claude Bernard, conceded a priority to the slice of life, to that bit of reality which their *cinématographe* could carve out and hold up for their audience’s delectation, Méliès conceded *nothing*. For his conjuror’s spirit, nothing was impossible or inconceivable. Instead of using the camera in the scientific manner of the age, to observe and record events, he sought to alter life in accord with what his spare plots or simple whimsy might suggest. And he went that artificing spirit one better. A magician’s seeming ability to remove his own head, place it on a table, and then inflate it to absurd proportions illustrates his interest not only in creating a new reality but in probing the possibilities of fantastic reproduction: in exploring what sort of “games” the camera and its evolving techniques might allow one to play with the nature of both the world and its human inhabitants.

Yet in playing that game to the extent he did, Méliès also ensured the quaintness of his films. In trumpeting artifice, including the artifice of film itself in this way, his works seem to stand *in opposition to* reality, to the world we see around us. They are *adamantly* cinema. In moving beyond the surfaces of life, in exploring film’s various possibilities for artifice, then, Méliès not only discovered one of the cinema’s great attractions but also ran aground on one of its problems. For with the *potential* of artifice, the ability to shape a world and self in any fashion, inevitably comes the limit of artifice as well, the awareness that this is not really the world we know and inhabit, *just* film after all.

Still, that lure was enough and was widely exploited by a great many early film efforts, both within the science fiction genre and outside its immediate bounds. Thus, throughout the silent cinema we readily find films that depict the creation of humans and other beings, that visualize various sorts of transformations and replications, and that investigate the possibility of the automaton or robot.<sup>1</sup> While they all make capital from that capacity for artifice, the sober side of this “game” seldom seems very far away.

In the pure tales of human creation, we find very little of Méliès's playfulness, largely because the focus of the human artifice is less on the technological, on the scientific processes involved in the creation, than on its metaphysical implications. In this group we can number the first version of that classic tale of human creation, *Frankenstein* (1910), made by Edison's studio, as well as a thinly disguised rendering of the same plot in *Life without Soul* (1915). The German serial film *Homunculus* (1916) further explores this motif with its laboratory-created super being, whose malevolence is only stopped by the intercession of nature in the form of a bolt of lightning. In this same horrific vein are a number of films involving the creation of human beings from animals—creatures which, like the Frankenstein monster, almost invariably turn on their scientist creators. Among these are *The Wizard* (1927) and, most notably, Lon Chaney's *A Blind Bargain* (1922), which is the first film adaptation of H. G. Wells's famous tale *The Island of Dr. Moreau*.

A more ambiguous attitude surfaces in the great variety of silent-era films that depict various sorts of scientific transformations. On the one hand, we find pure horror films, works that again emphasize the human product of transformation and explore its implications. Among this type are at least seven versions of what may well be the most famous transformation tale, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (outstanding among them, John Barrymore's 1920 version), as well as a near cousin, F. W. Murnau's *Der Januskopf* (1920). But on the other hand, we can also note a great number of films that follow Méliès's lead, locating a playful potential in this material, as the human shifts to the background and the focus turns to the mechanisms of transformation themselves. Thus we have movies in which dogs turn into sausages and sausages into dogs (*The Sausage Machine* [1897], *Fun in the Butcher Shop* [1901], *The Dog Factory* [1904]); in which the ugly turn into the beautiful and the beautiful into the ugly (*Dr. Skinum* [1907]); in which an operation transforms criminals into honest citizens (*The Surgeon's Experiment* [1914]); in which machines transfer personalities from one individual to another with comic consequences (*The Lion's Breath* [1916]); and in which adults are returned to childhood (*The Rejuvenators* [1918]).<sup>2</sup> The focus in all of these works again is on the immediate human consequences of transformation, rather than on any science or technology that enables it. More interesting in this case, though, may be the ability of that transformation to by turns amuse and horrify viewers. That double potential may well point to our rather ambivalent attitude toward this "game" of artifice.

A similar ambivalence shows up in what is actually the most common development of the artifice motif in our early films, the robot story. In fact, given the number of films we know about—and probably many more we have no record of—it might well be argued that this subject enjoyed *at least* as much popularity in the silent cinema as in the literature of that period. The first efforts in this line came from Méliès's competitor, J. Stuart Blackton, who in 1907 produced *The Mechanical Statue and the Ingenious Servant* and *Work Made Easy*, a pair of half-reelers. These Vitagraph productions seem to have inspired competition from Essanay's *An Animated Doll* (1908), the Lubin company's *The Rubber Man* (1909), and a host of robot-themed films that followed, including *The Mechanical Husband* (1910); *The House of Mystery* (1911) with its mechanical policemen; Biograph's *Inventor's Secret* (1911), about the creation of a mechanical girl; *The Automatic House* (1915), which came with an automatic maid; *The Mechanical Man* (1915); Harry Houdini's serial *The Master Mystery* (1919), which has a robot criminal mastermind, eventually revealed by Houdini to be a human in disguise; and even a Ben Turpin comedy, *A Clever Dummy* (1917), in which the already improbably human Turpin disguises himself as a robot in order to be near the girl he loves.

In the easy adaptability of this image for comedy, melodrama, or even horror, we perhaps see the clearest reflection of those attractions and trepidations which, in the "machine age," attached to the various products of our new technologies. That response speaks of the powers that these technologies seemed to be unleashing. As Cecelia Tichi explains in *Shifting Gears*, in this period scientific principles and utilitarian values were beginning to dominate not only the worlds of commerce and production but even our thought processes and values, resulting in "a new machine-age consciousness" (18)—albeit one that was hardly untroubled by this new environment. Despite all of its promises of speed, efficiency, and productivity, despite too the great promise of change and mastery it seemed to carry, then, our machine technology just as often, Tichi notes, "came to represent uncontrolled, destabilizing power" (52). While the products of that technology—cars, washing machines, radios, and so on—were rapidly becoming marks of status or accomplishment, "machine symbols of anxiety and menace became prominent" (52) as well at this time.

One film, Fritz Lang's classic dystopian vision *Metropolis* (1926), probably best sums up the sort of doubleness we find in these early cinematic

images of human artifice. Certainly the most famous and, even today, the most widely available and most often seen of the silent-era robot films, it examines both the seductive lure of the technological and the anxieties that play just beneath the surface of that lure. As the following discussion will suggest, *Metropolis* seems especially aware of the fine line that our culture and our films have to walk in their relationship with the technological, of the complexities that, we were already beginning to recognize, are involved in this "game."

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Prior to being produced, the world was seduced. A strange precession, which today still weighs heavily on all reality.

—Baudrillard *Jean Baudrillard* 199)

Lang's *Metropolis* (1926) is a curious and in some ways troubling work. It seems to speak with two distinct voices. On the one hand, it talks about the consequences of a society given over to the forces of technology and production; but on the other, it finds much of its attraction in the vision of those forces, that is, in its seductive images of a futuristic, highly technologized society. In fact, today, as in Lang's time, the film is often seen and commented upon as much for its surface features, for its spellbinding images of the future, as for its indictment of the cultural forces those images depict. Consequently, the film at times seems almost at odds with itself. And yet, this very tension may finally prove to be the most revealing element of *Metropolis*—and an element quite in keeping with the long tradition of science fiction films which sound contrary attitudes toward the elements of science and technology that lend them an identity. In its cross thrusts—or double voice—it talks eloquently about the lures of artifice, about how technological power works on us, and about the way the science fiction film, even in its earliest days, could wield its influence over audiences.

Jean Baudrillard would probably not find *Metropolis* quite so problematic, since he sees throughout our world a diversion of intent, a self-contradiction, what he terms "seduction." He believes that modern life is dominated by "appearances," by alluring surfaces that constantly "conspire to combat meaning" (*Jean Baudrillard* 200). At first glance, those seductive images appear simple and satisfying; they imply that they are a manifest discourse—open, inviting, truthful. They encourage us to interrogate their "qualified" presence. Yet ultimately they resist our efforts to

penetrate their intriguing surfaces. What Baudrillard thus observes is a simultaneous promise and a shutting off of that promise which abound in the contemporary world, and which especially mark all human constructs. If we usually overlook this problem, what he calls "this violation of the symbolic order" (199), it is because, as he says, in all seduction "the manifest discourse, the most 'superficial' aspect of discourse . . . acts upon the underlying prohibition (conscious or unconscious) in order to nullify it and to substitute for it the charms and traps of appearances" (149).

Those "charms and traps of appearances," the images of a glittering and powerful technology, complete with the most compelling image of the robot yet seen in the movies, do dominate much of *Metropolis*, just as they have done the long tradition of science fiction films, from the time of Méliès to the latest *Star Trek* sequel. But unlike many of its generic brethren, *Metropolis* seems self-conscious about how these images can make us desire the very technological developments whose dangers it so clearly details. It is almost as if Lang, in order to keep his "special effects" from becoming too seductively "special," had decided to foreground seduction itself, especially through his central image of human artifice, to lay bare its workings.

As if prescient as well as self-conscious, Lang's film seems to take Baudrillard's sense of seduction almost literally, rendering it as "appearance," "the superficial," a kind of "manifest discourse," embodied in an alluring, futuristic city. It juxtaposes an effort to pierce through that surface—the protagonist Freder's attempt to discover what underlies and empowers the seductively comfortable world he inhabits—with several sequences that dramatize how a *seductive*—and ultimately destructive—*technological* power works. Those sequences include Freder's encounter with an underground worker and Maria's retelling of the Tower of Babel legend. But this pattern comes into clearest focus when it evokes the very image of doubleness: as it describes the creation of the robot Maria, an image of the entwining of the natural and the mechanical and the very embodiment of seduction here. In these sequences, *Metropolis* speaks reflexively about the contradictions, duplicities, and double intentions of its own discourse, as well as of the seductive power with which it and all science fiction films must contend.

In analyzing how German films of the post-World War I era reflected the national psyche, Siegfried Kracauer was, particularly in the case of *Metropolis*, struck by what he termed "the preponderance of surface

features." In the elaborate but mysterious equipment and materials used to create the robot, for example, he saw "a technical exactitude that is not at all required to further the action," but rather reflects an excessive "concern with ornamentation" (149). And there is ornamentation aplenty here: the images of the gigantic machinery that powers this futuristic city, the mammoth sports stadium in which its favored sons play, the lavish decor of their "pleasure garden," the scenes of nightlife and pleasures that their aboveground, fantastically constructed world offers. Excess marks every element of the film, and that excess is linked not simply to the monolithic, domineering world it describes but to its seductive lure and power—the technology that makes it all possible. Here is, after a fashion, the typical vision of every early science fiction narrative, the genre's formative ideology, if you will: an elaborate display of technology that promises human satisfaction, while it carefully cloaks the secrets of its operation, the source of its power.

To evoke the seductive aspect of this futuristic, technological world, Lang's film had to emphasize these surface features, for the futuristic's most basic lure is probably its appearance, an appearance that immediately signifies its otherness or difference from our world. In this context, we need only recall the antiseptic whiteness that dominates Kubrick's futuristic vision in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1969) or the dark, retrofitted world of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982). But while the overdetermined designs of those film worlds might almost be described as metaphoric, the fascination of *Metropolis*'s technological trappings lies not just in their "meaning"—in what they produce, such as the seductive robot that is unleashed here—but in the nearly inconceivable power and vitality they display. So from its first images the film establishes this seductive vision, this play of surface features, as the opening shots of its advanced culture dissolve into a montage of pistons, engines, and generators—images of power that quickly characterize this world and establish its appeal.

Of course, we could easily see this city as itself a kind of technological being, as a dynamic, living, but mechanical creature, the fitting offspring of a mechanical age. Its heart and muscles are the engines and pistons we have seen, its veins and arteries the long highways and conduits that teem with traffic, its head the great tower from which *Metropolis*'s leader, Jon Fredersen, oversees its operations, and its language the enigmatic numbers and symbols that dominate the giant teletype in his office. However, all that we *need* to know about it seems readily appar-

ent, arrayed for us to see. It is a seductively powerful creature, a definitive Other that asks for no interpretation and readily dictates how one should live in this thoroughly technologized world.

This play of surface features or "ornamentation" is hardly unusual in Lang's cinema. As Raymond Bellour has noted, "both in his images and in the implications of his scripts, the focus of Lang's *mise en scène* is so often vision itself" ("On Fritz Lang" 28)—the things we see and how we see them. For this reason, his films often seem by turns both "remarkably veiled and disconcertingly open" (28). What this shifting, even paradoxical character hints, though, is just how aware his films are of the already and inevitably "seduced" nature of the world they depict. In *Metropolis* that awareness helps to qualify those alluring images of technology and the future by linking them to a concern with seduction itself, with our susceptibility to such entrancing surface features. The film thus appears by turns "veiled" or "open," partly because that is the nature of seduction, its ability to *suggest* satisfactions and pleasures just beneath an alluring surface, but also because that is what *Metropolis* and its robotic creation are ultimately most "about": our need to examine the forces that shape our world's—and indeed our films'—surface attractions, and their power, like that of all our technological offspring, to deflect such inquiry, to remain coyly "veiled."

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An effort to open up or see beneath the world's seductions is, in fact, the central action here. For after *Metropolis* establishes the power and attractiveness of its surface life, it challenges those lures through the enigmatic appearance of the woman Maria in the city's pleasure garden, where she piques the curiosity of young Freder, the son of *Metropolis*'s master. As a result, he literally tries to penetrate his world's seductions, leaving the pleasure garden to descend into the machine rooms that lie deep beneath the city's surface. There the machinery and technology on which his aboveground culture depends reveal their hidden or latent text, for in his imagination he suddenly sees the machines revealed as a controlling being, transformed into the terrible god Moloch, who demands human sacrifice, consumes the workers.

The larger implication of that vision appears when Freder later returns to the underworld, impelled by a new desire, as he confesses, "to see what my brothers looked like." In a kind of metaphoric unveiling, he there comes face to face with an alter ego, an Other, a worker rendered

as an extension of the technology if not artifice: someone who tends a clocklike machine as if he were a part of it. Beginning a doubling pattern that will recur in the various seductions here, Freder changes places with the worker and effectively switches identities, giving him his clothes and money, while assuming the worker's nearly anonymous outfit and identifying number.<sup>3</sup> This doubling is particularly significant for it reveals the disturbing shape of otherness here—the human suffering that makes the machines and the machine-fostered society go—even as it points to a potential link between the doubles, a link further explored with the figure of the robot. The privileged who live aboveground are ultimately only flimsily insulated from the downtrodden who live below, all equally potential victims of this modern, voracious, technological god.

The key to this almost unwitting victimage and the need for such an effort at penetration appear in the three sequences *about* seduction which, in close order, follow Freder's attempt to pierce through Metropolis's secrets. The sequence in which Freder takes the worker's place, for example, not only displays the horrors of being chained to a mechanism, reduced to a function of a machine; it also illustrates the seductive power that helps keep the classes separated. When seen in contrast to the workers' horrors, this seductive pattern emphasizes how easy it is to overlook or forget about the conditions that can spring from our craft-iness.

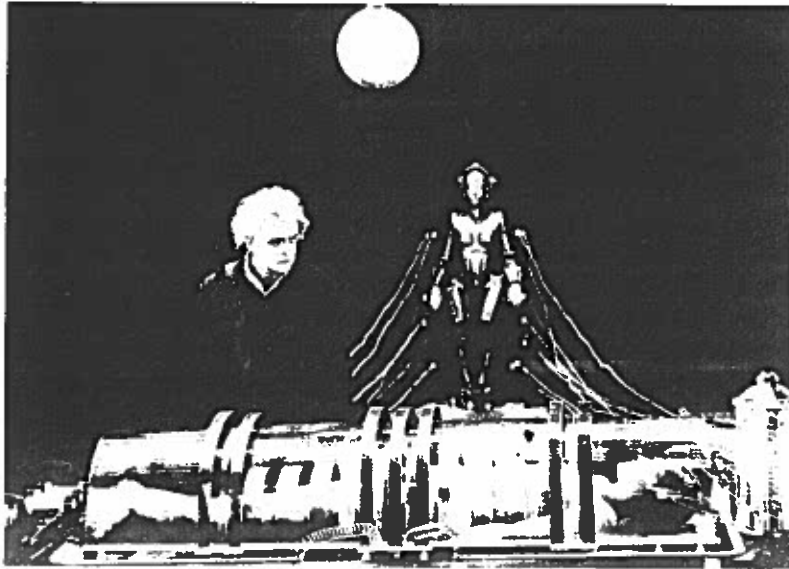
In the original release version of *Metropolis*,<sup>4</sup> we follow the worker, Freder's double, into the bright surface world of nightclubs and intoxicating pleasures, where, like one of Plato's cave inhabitants suddenly set free, he is bewildered, even mesmerized by what he sees. This response, combined with the allure of that glittering world and its many attractions, eventually works its own bondage on the supposedly "freed" worker, just as his servitude below ground seemed to do. Although entrusted with a message to Freder's friend Josephat, the worker is sidetracked by the Yoshiwara brothel and under its spell forgets his mission. It is a forgetfulness that looks toward a nearly calamitous obliviousness later on when the workers, under the robot Maria's seductive spell, destroy the machines that preserve their underground city and leave their children to die as their homes flood.

Another instance of seduction, this time presented more didactically, occurs when Maria recounts the Tower of Babel legend to the workers. Her version of the biblical tale, with its emphasis on a conflict between the ruling and working classes, obviously parallels the situation in Metrop-

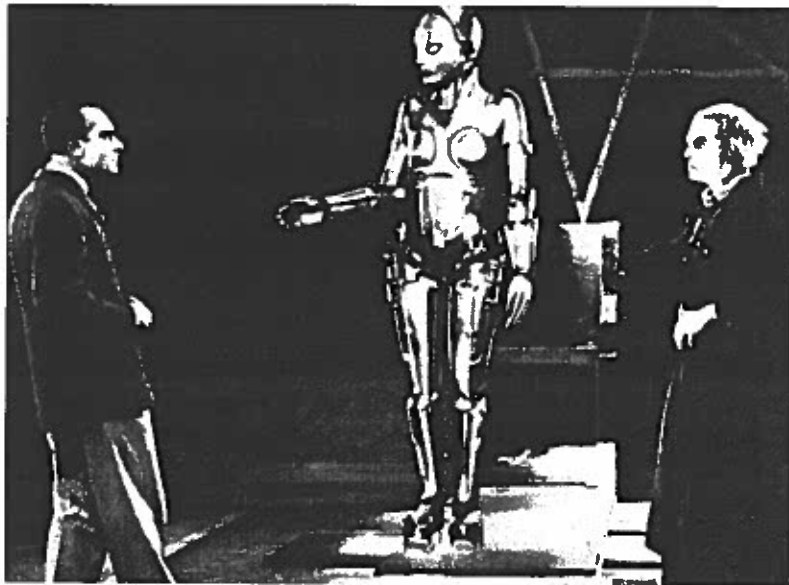
olis, but more importantly, it reveals how a seductive lure underlies that conflict and sketches the danger implicit in that seduction. Impelled by a kind of imitative desire, Babel's masters wish to build a tower reaching up to the heavens and to inscribe on it, "Great is the world and its creator. And great is man." The last phrase, of course, effectively counters the first, transforming the structure from a monument in praise of god to one that asserts humanity's own godlike creativity—and aspirations. Initially charmed by the very notion of greatness or power and then by the tower itself, the image of their aspirations, Babel's leaders move to replace god with their own, human image, to render humanity as artificial god.

However, a series of shots quickly details the destructive power that lurks in such desires. The image of the tower that has so seduced Babel's rulers dissolves into a small model—a derisively trivial image—which in turn introduces a montage showing the suffering of the workers, their eventual revolt, and finally the tower—and implicitly Babel as well—in ruins, with the motto about humankind's "greatness" mockingly superimposed. This brief montage juxtaposes our image as the creator, as the Ur-technologist, with a destructive division that results when we try to bind others to our seductive desires. Lured by the prospect of their achievement, of a monument ultimately to their own power as godlike creators, the tower's designers overlook its latent message, and that seductive idea eventually destroys them. The sequence thus warns against seduction, against the lure of an image that promises—after the fashion of all seductive images, even of *Metropolis*'s own vision of technological wonders—to make us more than we might be: more powerful, more fulfilled, other than we are.

However, the centerpiece of this seductive pattern, as well as the film's most compelling image, is the robot Maria. As the scientist Rotwang unveils his latest creation, a mechanical being, he describes it simply as "a machine in the image of man, that never tires or makes a mistake." Because of these traits, he offers it to Jon Fredersen as a prototype of "the workers of the future," declaring, "Now we have no further use for living workers." In that assertion, of course, we can find foreshadowed the great fear of displacement and replacement that still clings to the image of the industrial robot today. But that assertion hides a more fundamentally disturbing notion here, since it implies that Rotwang has made his creature in the same spirit as the tower of Babel, miming the creator and grasping at his power.



Stealing a human form for the robot in *Metropolis*.



*Metropolis*: The city's leader strikes a deal with a technological devil.

Predictably, this "perfect copy" of the human quickly reveals its own seductive—and destructive—potential. As Fredersen recognizes, the robot will let him do more than simply replace the workers, free them from their slavery. Through it, he can extend his power over them, turn them into obedient, nearly mechanical extensions of this technological world—roboticize them. By making the robot over in the image of their beloved Maria, he can use it "to sow discord among" the workers "and destroy their confidence in Maria," seducing them away from their dangerous allegiance to her and the spirit of humanity she preaches. With a spell-binding array of visual effects that already suggests the seductive power being unleashed here, Rotwang gives his robot Maria's identity, her appearance; then he and Fredersen fittingly decide to test their creation—to see "whether people believe the robot is a creature of flesh and blood," as Rotwang puts it—by activating its seductive abilities in a most basic way. Essentially, they want to determine whether people can see beneath that surface, question the meaning behind Maria's newly eroticized appearance, or if they will simply respond to an elemental stimulus, the "veiled" attraction "she" offers.

They test this seductive power by displaying the robot before the city's wealthy young men at the Yoshiwara brothel. Rising through the circular cover of a giant urn—as if from a huge eye—the mechanical Maria seems the archetype of all seductive images, a surprising, enigmatic, and alluring figure that essentially fills the viewer's eye. She then performs a kind of striptease dance that, as a montage of leering looks points up, makes her the focus of every eye. It is a dance that illustrates precisely how seduction works. For in it, she strips away various layers of covering—wrap, veil, fan—as if to reveal the stark truth of her nature, her near naked body, and to invite inspection. But this dance is what Baudrillard might term a "misdirection," for while the stripping away hints at more to be seen—or to experience—it only masks the ultimate revelation, the truth of the robot's mechanical, Other nature, and eventually, of an Otherness that haunts our human nature as well. Of course, even as that showing of the self obscures the robot's real nature, it does emphasize how little we ever manage to see beneath the seductive surfaces of our world, how easily artifice becomes reality itself for us.

Appropriately, the creed that this robot preaches to the workers functions much like her dance, offering only surfaces. On one level, it rejects any meaning beyond the superficial, beyond the play of desire; and on another, it denies the value of their underground world and sends them

hurrying to the surface of Metropolis. The robot's message is one of despair, destruction, and forgetfulness, as she plays upon her seductive lure to stir them to revolt and to "destroy the machines" they serve. In place of their regime of blind drudgery, she offers one in which desire blindly drives them. In the grip of that unleashed desire, they abandon their netherworld and rush headlong to the city above. But in keeping with the paradoxical nature of these seductive forces, the workers find no freedom in destroying the enslaving machinery, only a destruction *by* that freedom, a fatality in that Otherness, a treachery in the robotic. For the mechanisms that enslave them also hold back the floodwaters from their underground city and from the children they have left behind. In their Luddite passion and mad rush to the surface, the workers, like all other victims of seduction here, simply forget about their own "depths" and release a destructive Otherness that promises, much as the robot does, to do away with their very kind.

Perhaps the most important revelation is, in fact, how that destructive seduction rebounds on those who wield it and seem to control its operation, promising their destruction, much as the Tower of Babel did for its architects. As Baudrillard reminds us, there is ultimately "no active or passive in seduction . . . it plays on both sides of the border" (*Jean Baudrillard* 160). So while Rotwang in his godlike ambition can create "a machine in the image of man," a worker potentially better than human workers, he soon proves susceptible to the same seduction his "craft" has unleashed. For the features of Maria, which he gives to his robot, waken memories of his lost love Hel and impel a madness or forgetfulness that recalls the workers' own, as he imagines she has returned to life. That delusion prompts him to pursue the real Maria and eventually leads to his death, when he falls from atop the cathedral where he corners her.

Fredersen too nearly "falls" because of his deal with Rotwang and with the robotic promise of a perfect, enslaved work force.<sup>5</sup> In his case, he almost loses both his son and his position, as his plan "to sow discord" among the workers so he can better control them leads to their destructive rampage against the machines his city depends on and nearly results in Freder's death, first when he tries to save the workers' children from their flooding city, and then as he fights with Rotwang to save Maria. What the plights of both the scientist and the leader point up is that the forces they have unleashed are less controlled than controlling; from the play of seductive surface features, from the lure of artifice, no one here seems immune.

The film climaxes on very much this note. The people seize the robot Maria and burn her at the stake as a kind of witch. And that ancient manner of exorcism—a cultural regression or recoil from this futuristic world and its promises—reveals the disparity between the seductive surface and underlying reality, as the people watch horrified while the robot's false human veneer burns away, exposing the gleaming mechanism and mocking mechanical countenance underneath. It is an effective image—of a technological power mocking the human for being so easily seduced by its attractive packaging, its seemingly human features.

However, this scene is not the narrative's coda, and what follows contributes to much of the critical dissatisfaction that often surfaces in discussions of *Metropolis*. The film ends with the workers' foreman and Fredersen shaking hands, in a kind of strained reconciliation between the "hands" and the "head," mediated by Freder's intercession as the "heart." If that resolution seems a bit forced and unsatisfying—and even Lang admits some discontent, attributing it to his wife, the film's scenarist, Thea von Harbou<sup>6</sup>—it is because the conclusion pays little attention to the power and real source of the seductions at work here. Even if this culture's various classes have come to a dialogue, found a common tongue, as it were, this futuristic Babel seems built on a fundamentally weak foundation.

In this conclusion *Metropolis* implies that the universal seductions it has unveiled, seductions from the time of Babel and into the future, and across all levels of this technological society, from the workers to the masters, only spring from a lack, that of a spirit of compassion and cooperation. But this scheme is a bit too neat, a solution that basically ignores the problem of seduction and the way it has taken root in the technological foundation of their world, even worked its way into the human. In fact, the conclusion effectively translates to a narrative level the stylistic problem we have earlier noted, wherein the film's seductive images of the future seem at odds with its dystopian thrust. The technological surface of the world these people have shaped—and that clearly shapes them—has not really changed, nor has its allure. Instead of removing the veil from those seductive forces, the people have simply lifted it and then let it fall back. Here they retreat from the problems of the present to the symbolism of the past, represented by a metaphoric redeemer—young Freder—and the crumbling, even menacing image of the ancient cathedral, wherein we earlier see the image of the Grim Reaper suddenly come to life. The fundamental ideology of this world,

one which practically demands that part of the population be turned into artifice, that the human be dis-membered—rendered as hands, heart, and so on—remains firmly in place.

To state the issue most clearly, we might return to the image of the robot. Does its alluring power come from a lack of compassion or cooperation? Would it, stripped of its “flesh” and displayed to everyone from the start in all its gleaming mechanical beauty, have proved any less seductive? It is, after all, the stark metal robot—or more accurately, what the robot *represents*, a technological power, a power to manipulate and *create* others, even to replace them—that seduces both Rotwang and Fredersen. It brings together these two old rivals for the hand of another woman—Hel—and impels them to act seductively as well, as they conspire to lure the workers into their self-destructive actions. The robot here becomes a metaphor for the seductive play of technological power, showing us how mesmerizing its images are and how easily it operates. As the workers form into a wedgelike mass—clearly one more bit of “ornamentation”—and march rhythmically, uniformly, even mechanically up the cathedral steps at the end, that influence seems far from exorcised.<sup>7</sup> Promised better treatment, they appear ready to return below the surface, once more to form the repressed, latent discourse of this world, part of its foundation of artifice.

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David Porush in his book on cybernetics and modern fiction, *The Soft Machine*, describes a paradoxical motif that recurs throughout recent writing about our technological developments and that may speak to *Metropolis*'s resolution. “At the very same moment that we feel ourselves to be acting freely in the world,” he says, “we are also creating structures and codes so powerfully convincing that they dominate the ways we see” (82). Of what do they convince us? Like the seductive robot Maria, they suggest that what we see is precisely what we get, that the alluring surface—the bright, glittering, metallic skin of the robot, the surfaces of our machinery, and the efficient display of power in our technology—is value itself, that its meaning is open before us, ready to be interrogated. Even more, it is the notion that this power, this allure, is our own, an attractive part of ourselves that we have just overlooked and might easily tap. So we are urged to embrace these values and to see ourselves and our world a bit differently than we previously might have. However, that different vantage, that robotic point of view, never reveals

or recognizes the real Otherness here, the forgetful and even destructive self that is both prey to and a source of seduction. Rather, it focuses our attention on surfaces, appearances, ornamentation, and effectively obscures what underlies those surfaces.

What *Metropolis* achieves, particularly through its nearly prototypic robot, is a revelation of the dark design that can underlie such surface effects, a seductive play of power that, while ages old, manages to haunt our modern mechanisms. And if that power threatens almost pleurably to enslave us, it is still a threat in which—in our forgetful, superficial, and indeed *human* way—we can easily conspire. The robot Maria's seductive gyrations and simplistic call for forgetfulness point up how we often cannot or will not look beyond surfaces, beyond the manipulations of our artifice or media—or in what may have been Lang's case, the fascinations of a film's science fiction trappings.

For all of its openness, then, and even as it seems to speak most clearly about the future, *Metropolis* too must seem a bit “veiled,” as if also susceptible to the “charms” of appearances, the attractions of its futuristic vision, as if the exercise of that seductive power were simply built into its own artifice. In fact, Baudrillard hints such a double vision may be unavoidable, as he explains how discourse always risks a kind of self-seduction: “inevitably every discourse is revealed in its own appearance, and is hence subject to the stakes imposed by seduction, and consequently to *its own failure as discourse*. Perhaps every discourse is secretly tempted by this failure and by having its objectives put into question, changing its truth effects into surface effects which act like a mirror absorbing and engulfing meaning” (*Jean Baudrillard* 150). Such are, however, “the stakes imposed by seduction” (150), the gamble in every effort to expose the powers that play in our world. A technological art like film may simply find the “stakes” a bit higher, especially when it turns its attentions to science fiction with its specific iconography. For as it tries to lift the veil on the seductive images of the technological, film inevitably opens a new and potentially disturbing perspective on the powers that produce and shape *it* as a technologically based art. And that perspective is an easy one to shy away from, particularly when your very stock-in-trade is the alluring, technologically generated image.

*Metropolis*, certainly more than any of our silent science fiction films, takes that risk, foregrounds the seductions of a world of artifice—one that promises to release us from so many other traps and enslavements. The result is a work whose strengths finally spring from the same source

as its weaknesses, whose allure is at once more than and yet the same as its mesmerizing imagery, whose level of artifice recalls yet also transcends its central robot figure. Not simply a dystopian vision, *Metropolis* analyzes the seductive lures that propel our technology and impel our embrace of it. But to examine those forces it must first lay them open, array them for all to see, and so risk invoking the same seductive power it cautions against. If at times, in its conclusion or in our own fascination with the robot Maria and the futuristic city that gives her birth, the "veil" seems to drop back into place and *Metropolis* appears itself seduced into a fascinated exploration of surface features, that shift should just remind us of the power of that artifice—a power with which Lang's and subsequent science fiction films have had to contend.

• NOTES •

An earlier version of this chapter appeared in *South Atlantic Review* 55.4 (1990): 49–60 and is reprinted with changes by permission of the South Atlantic Modern Language Association.

1. We should note that Méliès was himself quite familiar with the figure of the robot or automaton. Such figures were common in nineteenth-century magic shows, and the Théâtre Robert-Houdin, which Méliès operated, exhibited as acts several such figures. As Erik Barnouw chronicles, one robot, "called Psycho, could play whist; a lady robot called Zoe drew profiles of spectators" (14).

2. For much of the background on early science fiction films, especially for plot summaries and credits, I am indebted to A. W. Strickland and Forrest J. Ackerman's *Reference Guide to American Science Fiction Films*, vol. 1, and Carlos Clarens's *Illustrated History of the Horror Film*.

3. The double or simulacrum is, for Baudrillard, fundamental to the activity of seduction. As he notes, "the double" typically "creates the effect of seduction," since all of our grasping, all of our desire, is finally not so much a reaching for something else, as a kind of trompe-l'oeil effect leads us to think, but an embracing of the self's other side (*Jean Baudrillard* 156).

4. Much of this sequence is approximated by stills, title cards, and brief bits of footage in the recently restored version of *Metropolis*. In this version we do not see what happens to the worker in the upper world, but we do sense the intoxicating effect that this bright and glittering environment has on him. Entrusted with a message by Freder, the worker is so mesmerized by this world that he forgets his mission and apparently ends up in the fre-

quently glimpsed Yoshiwara, the neon-lit brothel where the robot Maria is later introduced to the upper-world society of Metropolis.

5. Earlier, we see Rotwang hailing his creation of the robot by lifting his hand skyward and noting that it has been "worth the loss of a hand to have created the workers of the future." When Fredersen instructs Rotwang to fashion his robot in the shape of Maria and set it loose among the workers, he hesitantly shakes Rotwang's black-gloved and, we assume, artificial hand to seal their pact. It seems an explicit deal with the double, the artificial, the technological.

6. In an interview, Lang indicated that he "didn't like" the finished film, partly because he "didn't think . . . a social question could be solved with something as simple as" that final mediation between the "brain," "hand," and "heart" (Johnson 162).

7. This conclusion hints of a similar problem often noted about an earlier work in the same German Expressionist tradition as *Metropolis*, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919). Originally slated to direct *Caligari*, Lang supposedly suggested that the film employ an expressionist decor to hint of its narrator's madness. However, the expressionist styling extends beyond the long flashback that forms the bulk of the narrative to the framing story as well, and that overlap has the effect of imparting a sense of disorder or madness to the supposedly normal, sane world too, and of troubling our desire to sort out its elements in a neat fashion. See Paul Jensen's discussion of Lang's early career in *The Cinema of Fritz Lang*.