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***Metropolis*, Blood and Soil: the Heart of a Heartless World**

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Abstract: Fritz Lang's (1927) *Metropolis* has been subject to innumerable would-be allegorical interpretations. The present paper offers an analysis of the film's structure in relation to Lévi-Strauss's account of myth, where myth provides an imaginary solution to a real contradiction. Adopting a formalist approach, the paper avoids viewing the film as a simple reflection of Weimar culture or anticipation of a National Socialist future, allowing an assessment of the antimonies the narrative negotiates to steer the analysis. The film's ostensibly central contradiction – defined in terms of class conflict and its mediation – is taken as a point of departure, considering the role of the 'heart' in mediating between the 'head' and the 'hands' in terms of a gendered discourse centred on the opposition between nature (figured as feminine) and culture (masculine). This is pursued in relation to technology and artificial life; the film's psychoanalytic resonances; and the religious overtones accompanying its Oedipal aspect. Addressing the film's problematization of the Oedipal narrative arising from the absent mother, the paper highlights *Metropolis's* previously unacknowledged debt to the Parsifal myth, characterized by Lévi-Strauss as an 'inverse Oedipus'. The film's double structure, superimposing elements of Oedipus and Parsifal, sheds light on its ambivalent reception, which – as the product of one of the most creative and convulsive periods of twentieth-century history – is framed in terms of the distinction between neurosis and psychosis. Having focused squarely on the film's mythical dimension, the paper closes with the possibility of an 'Anti-Oedipal' reading and points towards a fuller allegorical interpretation.

Keywords: cinematic city; Fritz Lang; *Metropolis*; myth; Weimar culture

Unreal City.

T. S. Eliot

The problem to be resolved is that of the 'waste land'.

Claude Lévi-Strauss

In the concluding sentences of *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin (1977 [1925], 235) states that 'In the ruins of great buildings the idea of the plan speaks more impressively than in lesser buildings, however well preserved they are; and for this reason the German *Trauerspiel* [literally, mourning-play] merits interpretation. In the spirit of allegory it is conceived from the outset as a ruin, a fragment.' Benjamin's earliest work – written as his *Habilitationsschrift* but withdrawn for reasons that might be summed up by retrospectively acknowledging that it was far ahead of its time – sought to rediscover the principles of allegory immanent to Baroque drama, rescuing it from its characterization as a degraded form, falling short of the aesthetic heights of classical tragedy. Benjamin's attentiveness to the historical conditions of the *Trauerspiel*, his consequent appreciation of antinomy over the Romantic valorization of totality, and hence his revalorization of allegory over the symbolic, paved the way – via the important conduit of de Man (1983 [1969]) – to an upsurge of would-be allegorical readings of all manner of texts, capitalizing on a resonance with poststructuralist theories of meaning. Fritz Lang's iconic film, *Metropolis* (1927), is no exception to this tendency (Gunning 2000). Whilst it is true that *Metropolis* is particularly well suited to an allegorical reading, and that the grand vision provided by the film may speak more impressively of the plan to which modernity amounted than do many cities themselves, the present paper suspends such an ambition in order to propose a more

modest reading. Amidst the innumerable interpretations the film has inspired, there are still gaps and lacunae that demand attention, if the bolder aim of an allegorical reading is avoid portraying *Metropolis* as a mere reflection of its time and (against the grain of allegory) to slot it conveniently into a totalizing conception of the history of modernity. In other words, allegorical readings frequently fall short of their goal. What follows is, then, a preliminary attempt to deal with a number of aspects of the film, remaining sensitised to the difficulties posed by an allegorical reading and – for now – deferring its possibility.

Amongst the wealth of work on the cinematic city, *Metropolis* counts as a classic, insofar as it ‘provokes ever new interpretations’ (Elsaesser 2000, 42). A more ambivalent appraisal might nonetheless caution that ‘*Metropolis* has never had a good press’ (Huyssen 1986, 65). A cynic, meanwhile, might charge the voluminous literature the film has inspired with endlessly rehearsing the same ideas, constantly circling the film’s contradictions without fear of resolution. The plot of *Metropolis* itself concerns the resolution of one ostensibly central contradiction, defined in class terms. Importantly, however, class antagonism ultimately succumbs to the bathos of ‘mediation’, rather than yielding a genuinely dialectical ‘historical reconciliation’. The film’s cardinal dictum – ‘THE MEDIATOR BETWEEN HEAD AND HANDS MUST BE THE HEART!’ – amounts, as Kracauer (1947, 163) observed, to a ‘policy of appeasement’, which, by the end of the film, not only preserves the status quo – leaving the workers in the same subordinate position relative to the Master of Metropolis, Joh Fredersen – but permits the latter to tighten his hold over them: ‘He allows the heart to speak – a heart accessible to his insinuations’. For Kracauer, it is but a short step to the propaganda of Goebbels. That intercession should trump revolution, that the violent clash of the cold-hearted and the hot-headed should submit to a smug and sinister

sentimentality, has had an overriding bearing on the film's critical reception. Yet its leitmotif simultaneously confirms *Metropolis's* mythic quality, for myth and mediation go hand in hand. Lang, it is worth recalling, retrospectively deemed *Metropolis* 'a fairy tale' (cited in Bogdanovich 1967, 124).

The 'purpose of myth', Lévi-Strauss (1963 [1958], 229) proposed, 'is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction (an impossible achievement if, as it happens, the contradiction is real)'. Myth may thus be regarded as offering an *imaginary* resolution to a real contradiction. The imaginary, and the double-dealing it orchestrates, will occupy us considerably in due course. It is, in Deleuze's (2004 [1972], 172) words, 'defined by games of mirroring, of duplication, of reversed identification and projection, always in the mode of the double'. Unsurprisingly, a sense of double vision suffuses *Metropolis*. For now, let us note its overarching manifestation in the Janus-faced form of the modern myth. Redolent of 'reactionary modernism' (Herf 1984), *Metropolis* amounts to an aetiological myth masquerading as a teleological one. Purportedly a vision of the future, it obliquely construes a past by which that future is or ought to be bound. It thereby reverses the temporal orientation of myth in its classical form, which 'always refers to events alleged to have taken place long ago', whilst nonetheless retaining a 'timeless' quality (Lévi-Strauss 1963 [1958], 209). The epigram to von Harbou's novel, *Metropolis* (1963 [1926], n. p.), tacitly concedes its backward gaze, albeit towards an ineffable past of indeterminate location: 'This book is not of today or of the future. It tells of no place'. As Tulloch (1976) has ably demonstrated, the film effectively dramatizes the fate of the German soul under siege from the onslaught of modern technology – reflecting the preoccupation of a beleaguered 'mandarin' class, fighting a vain rear-guard action against an encroaching modernity in no further need of

arbiters of the nation's spiritual values (Ringer 1969). There is, nonetheless, something awry in regarding *Metropolis* as a mirror, capable merely of reflecting the underlying tensions of the Weimar Republic and/or unconsciously anticipating the nadir of reactionary modernism looming on the national horizon. Tulloch's otherwise remarkable contribution exhibits something of this unfortunate tendency. Overcoming it requires going back to basics.

Lévi-Strauss (1963 [1958], 229) maintained that myth 'grows spiral-wise until the intellectual impulse which has produced it is exhausted', stressing that whilst 'its *growth* is a continuous process ... its *structure* remains discontinuous'. The contention to be pursued here is that the structure of *Metropolis* has, some valiant efforts notwithstanding, never been satisfactorily delineated. That it has thus far resisted even the most direct attempts to grasp its internal logic arises from the seemingly irresistible temptation to hold up *Metropolis* as a mirror. The alternative must be to focus unswervingly on the formal properties of the film, adhering to Barthes' (1972 [1957], 112) contention 'that a little formalism turns one away from History, but that a lot brings one back to it'. Rather than seeking the reflection of a momentous historical conjunction in *Metropolis*, the approach adopted here addresses the film's formal structure first, and only then considers why the structural properties it deploys should have come to manifest themselves in this particular way, at this particular time, in this specific location. The success of this endeavour may be assessed only by its demonstrable accomplishment.

One could, of course, maintain that such an approach represents an ill-starred endeavour from the outset. It has been suggested, for instance, that with the restoration of a more complete version of *Metropolis*, the sense of internal incoherence purportedly responsible

for prompting certain high-profile symptomatic readings in the past – most notably Kracauer’s – is dramatically diminished (Smith 2005). Whilst this raises a pertinent point, the kinds of contradictions, oppositions, and antinomies on which the film’s narrative inexorably turns represent more than the inconsistencies of an overwrought plot. One could, in fact, put forward the counterargument that a perfectly seamless narrative would grant yet greater conviction to the mythic quality of the film, since this is precisely what myth is primed to achieve. Yet the fact remains that no text succeeds in containing the excess it seeks to occlude. That the film’s narrative integrity might be somehow imperfect is, moreover, inconsequential, for in an important sense the film works in whatever form it is viewed. Lévi-Strauss proposed that myth lies at the opposite pole to poetry on a putative spectrum of linguistic modes of expression. Whereas no element of a poem may be altered except to its overall detriment, myth, in contradistinction, is characterized above all by its resilience: by its indifference to the addition, subtraction or alteration of any given element. ‘Its substance does not lie in its style, its original music, or its syntax, but in the *story* which it tells’ (Lévi-Strauss (1963 [1958], 210). Whether Giorgio Moroder or Gottfried Huppertz provides the score; however convincing or otherwise particular plotlines may be; the story that *Metropolis* recounts inheres precisely in its contradictions and their imaginary resolution: ‘mythical thought always progresses from the awareness of oppositions toward their resolution’, claims Lévi-Strauss (1963 [1958], 224).

Metropolis represents something of a house of cards. Its multiple contradictions stack up so as to lend one another a precarious stability. The fragile construction that results reflects the remarkable ‘combination of receptivity and confusion’ that Lang’s script-writer, Thea von Harbou, channelled into the story – being ‘sensitive to all the undercurrents of the time’

(Kracauer 1947, 162). Our own fortune in finding the 'inner workings' of the German soul thus caught on celluloid is nonetheless compromised by the baroque nature of the resultant edifice, at constant risk of collapsing into a hopeless imbroglio. To deconstruct it effectively, any number of themes must be read in turn – like tarot cards (Calvino 1977 [1973]) – divining the particular properties of each; acquiescing to the similarities they share (which may, on occasion, collapse in on one another). The patchwork of crossed destinies thereby revealed effectively traces the lineaments of the film's structure. *Metropolis* has been tackled repeatedly, almost to the point of demoralization. Dealing with the film anew risks the appearance of merely reshuffling established ideas. The stakes may be raised only by the promise of a new interpretation: one that ultimately sees *Metropolis* aligned with a myth that, surprisingly, has gone unnoticed in the wealth of literature serving to underwrite its canonical status as a classic.

One final prefatory point demands attention: the foregoing equation of myth with the imaginary, where the *symbolic* might have been expected (Silverstone 1976). Fortuitously, this also raises the question of allegory. Although the precise attribution is lost in translation, Baudrillard (1993 [1976], 188) cites Lévi-Strauss to the effect that 'the function of the symbolic universe is to resolve on the ideal plane what is experienced as contradictory on the real plane'. Originally a Germanist, and familiar with Benjamin's writings, Baudrillard (1993 [1976], 188) enters the objection that 'the symbolic appears as a kind of ideal compensation function, mediating between the *separation* of the real and ideal'. This, he contends, entails that 'the symbolic is ... reduced to the imaginary' (Baudrillard 1993 [1976], 188). For Baudrillard (2001 [1999], 96), the symbolic pertains precisely to the *non-opposition* of terms, whereas oppositions necessarily invoke the

imaginary: they involve ‘seeing the one as the mirror-image of the other’ whereas terms ‘like masculine and feminine are asymmetric: they are not the mirrors, nor the complements, nor the opposites of each other’. This exemplification in terms of gender is apposite. The fact that, in *Metropolis*, it is the *heart* that mediates between the head (master, capital) and the hands (slave, labour), displaces the film’s apparently central contradiction – staged in terms of class conflict – onto gender, in an appeal to what is sometimes dubiously referred to as ‘emotional intelligence’ (frequently gendered as feminine; typically as maternal). The resonance appears to be with Goethe’s ‘eternal feminine’ (*Ewig-Weibliche*) (Rutsky 1993), refracted through von Harbou’s notoriously roving artistic license: the Faustian pact of modernity, running out of control, calls forth a timeless truth from the bowels of the earth (the ancient catacombs beneath the city) in the shape of Maria – at once virginal, maternal, and sibylline (Figure 1). Maria’s presence both marks and stands in for the absent mother, Hel, who died giving birth to Fredersen’s only son, Freder.

Goethe’s eternal feminine and Baudrillard’s association of non-opposition with the feminine appear uncannily close: both explicitly appeal to notions of the symbolic. Yet this apparent resonance plainly overlooks Romanticism’s delusive notion of the symbol, introduced in Goethe’s attempt to differentiate it from allegory. The ‘valorization of symbol at the expense of allegory’ is, in de Man’s gloss on Gadamer’s (1976 [1960]) assessment, coincident with Romanticism’s adherence to ‘an aesthetics that refuses to distinguish between experience and the representation of this experience’ (de Man 1983 [1969], 188). Whereas allegory supposedly relied on convention, conveying a strictly circumscribed meaning derived from the manipulation of a pre-existing repertoire of ‘inauthentic’ signs,

the symbol was, in the Romantic vision, privileged as partaking of the totality it represents, permitting the translation of an experience born of finitude into an eternal truth. It was Romanticism's self-mystification in proposing the possibility of transcendent meanings that necessitated the rescue of allegory mounted by Benjamin (1977 [1925]). It is, however, worth noting, with Lukács (1978 [1963], 86), that 'Benjamin is concerned only to establish aesthetic (or trans-aesthetic) parity for allegory'. In contrast to the symbol, allegory, rather than postulating the identity of the representation with the represented, 'designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference' (de Man 1983 [1969], 207). Whilst *Metropolis* has repeatedly provoked assertions of its allegorical nature – for example, '*Metropolis* is the allegory of the future as the triumph of the machine' (Gunning 2000, 55) – too often, what is proposed as allegory exhibits the unfortunate tendency of seeing *Metropolis* as a simple reflection of Weimar culture.

Turning directly to the film, let us begin with its ostensible focus on class conflict: on the cold, ruthless rationality of capital and the rumblings of revolution sparked by a stark class divide, itself predicated on an uncompromising division of labour. The functional specialization of industrial capitalism receives explicit allegorical treatment in the film's distinction between the 'head' and the 'hands', drawing on what Gunning casually describes as 'one of the oldest in the history of allegory, the city-state as a human body' (Gunning 2000, 57). Comparisons between the city and the *soul* are indeed ancient (Strauss 1964), yet are somewhat anachronistic in relation to *Metropolis*. Gunning's subsequent reference to Spengler is more pertinent, although Spengler's approach was as much analogical as allegorical. The analogy between human societies and living organisms characterized a

whole raft of nineteenth-century thought, much of it later to be afforded the pejorative label of social Darwinism. A point crucial to the treatment of class in *Metropolis*, however, is that its deployment of an organicist analogy is explicitly presented as an allegory within the diegesis of the film – in Maria’s retelling of the story of the Tower of Babel. What has been insufficiently stressed to date is not simply the divergence of Maria’s version from the usual Biblical interpretation but the significance this departure spells. In effect, the allegory *itself* serves an allegorical purpose – and an allegorical use of allegory necessarily reflects upon the meaning of meaning. Some time needs to be taken in establishing this.

Rather than humanity being subjected to a confusion of languages in divine retribution for the hubris expressed by the building of the tower (the attempt to reach heaven representing humanity’s insolent desire to place itself on a par with the divine), the spin put on the story in *Metropolis* is that the tower’s construction was, in itself, sufficient to prompt the breakdown of communication. The common goal dissolves in a divergence of meanings born of the opposed experiences issuing from the very division of labour imposed to achieve that common goal in the first place. Let us underscore the difference this marks. In the Biblical story, the profusion of languages, and consequent incapacity to achieve common understanding, is imposed from on high, in punishment for the presumptuous ambition the tower represents. In Maria’s rendering, the towering ambition of humanity achieves the same result – the absence of common understanding – entirely of its own accord. The unintended confusion of meanings is, in the absence of God (or, perhaps, the presence of the *Deus absconditus*), wholly self-generated. Accordingly, where the conscious intent of Maria’s story concerns the need for clear communication – for a mediator to secure a renewed vision for humanity amidst the convulsions of the alienated city – the rewritten

parable secretes precisely the opposite meaning. A double disjunction is operative here: first, diegetically, between the enounced – the plea for the clarity of meaning deemed necessary for social harmony – and the enunciation – the fact that it is delivered allegorically (insofar as the enounced is couched in terms of the need for *mediation*, the enunciation ironically enacts that need in the sense that allegory itself performs such a mediating role); and, second, extradiegetically, in the fact that the enounced consists of a rewritten version of the Tower of Babel (thus ramifying its meaning), and that the enunciation is itself redoubled in the *mise en abyme* of the embedded allegory. Serving as an allegory of allegory, the appeal for clarity of meaning is betrayed in the very act of its affirmation. The gendered origin of this oracular pronouncement deserves emphasis.

The phallic image of the tower as a metaphor for human striving is, through the organicist vision of the city, projected onto the vertical dimension of the city's class structure and its architectural expression (reciprocated in the 'conscious architecturalization of [the] film' (Ward 2001, 142)), as well as its spatial manifestation – the New Tower of Babel standing proud at the centre of the city (Figure 2). Rather than a simple division between a utopian upper city and the dystopian city of the workers below ground, a number of schematic levels may be distinguished. The upper city is itself divided between the panoptic space of control (the absolute apex of the city and the domain of the father, Fredersen) and the spaces given over to pleasure, the diversions of gilded youth (the Club of Sons, the stadium, the Eternal Gardens where we first encounter the son, Freder). The workers 'live underground, below the halls where the machines are located' (Jensen 1969, 59), where their lives are synonymous with work. The underground city marks a further contrast with the subterranean depths of the catacombs that lie beneath. This vertical arrangement far

from exhausts the city's spatial structure, however. The contrast between work and pleasure, workers and leisured class, is also marked horizontally, in the distinction between the workers' city, with its constant, back-breaking toil, and the unabashed hedonism of the exotic flesh-pots of the Yoshiwara district. The common feature of this dimension – the body, whether producing or consuming – marks a direct contrast with the Gothic cathedral, presiding over an increasingly neglected spiritual realm. The cathedral itself stands opposite (and opposed) to the New Tower of Babel, against which towering structure its stature now appears diminutive, highlighting the contrast between the brave new world of Metropolis and a dwindling tradition. This latter pole is itself further divided, in the distinction marked by the cathedral (the site of ritualized relations between the living and the dead) and Rotwang's cottage (an uncannily, timeless structure, predating the city, and the scene of modern-day necromancy). Both these links to the past connect spatially with the ancient catacombs via a network of secret tunnels, concealed entrances, hidden (and sometimes barred) exits. Despite its labyrinthine structure, the dominant verticality of *Metropolis's* architectural vision has most vividly captured the imagination, frequently invoking reference to Lang's well-known anecdote linking it to the New York skyline. As a palimpsest, however, Metropolis remains distinctly European, perhaps distinctly Germanic. Its vertical levels, too, are somewhat alien to the American city, reminiscent of the levels of Wagner's *Ring*. In this they seem to embrace a characteristic intended, as Levin (1998, 97) notes with respect to Lang's *Nibelungen* films, 'to out-wit (or better, to out-culture) Hollywood by exploiting the Germans' purportedly superior cultural tradition and, through it, their privileged access to the universal'.

The spatial complexity of *Metropolis* evidently manifests the multiple oppositions constituting the film's narrative. Its infamously contrived ending – the handshake between Fredersen and the worker's foreman, Grot, mediated by Freder on the steps of the cathedral – finally confirms that, for all its seeming centrality, class represents the epiphenomenal expression of a deeper disturbance. It is not simply the social order that is awry. Nature itself is out of joint. In von Harbou's novel, *Metropolis* is built over a natural spring, which has to be constantly kept in check: this is the source of the floodwaters that threaten the city when the pumps are destroyed and nature takes its revenge. To this extent, *Metropolis* provides a remarkable series of reflections on modernity's negotiation of the relations between nature and culture, which underlies the film's potency.

Writing from within the heart of modernity, Simmel (1950 [1903], 420) commented 'that city life has transformed the struggle with nature for livelihood into an inter-human struggle for gain, which here is not granted by nature but by other men'. *Metropolis* presents us with this same image in reverse, such that class antagonism – humanity divided against itself – becomes merely the symptom of a profound perturbation of the natural order. The film's one-word title announces as much in explicitly gendered terms: *Metropolis*, the mother-city (from the Greek – *μήτηρ*, *mētēr*), is violated (no less) by the ascendancy of the Master of *Metropolis*. The archetypal unnatural environment of the big city has long been seen as manifesting a stark opposition between culture and nature; gendered, respectively, as masculine and feminine. Yet in *Metropolis* this immediately gives ground to its socially mediated counterpart: it is not nature per se but an organic sense of community, founded on tradition (Tönnies' *Gemeinschaft*), that forms the implicit contrast to *Metropolis*'s mechanical, fragmented, atomized, self-alienated society (*Gesellschaft*). This contrast, as

Donskis (in Bauman and Donskis 2013, 174) notes, reflects an older distinction between culture and civilization, where 'civilization is the desiccation of creativity and the silent death of culture', as it was for Spengler. Although the meaning of 'culture' spontaneously changes polarity with respect to its supplementary dimension, the distinction itself remains intact, offering an intimation of what might ultimately be at stake in *Metropolis*. For now, however, the alignment between the opposition of nature and culture and that of the organic community and its rational, mechanized double is evident. The significance of this distinction is most readily apparent in its personification in the figure of the robot: Maria's mechanical double. Nonetheless, this merely condenses a more fundamental aspect of *Metropolis*: the destinies of its protagonists, the city itself included, are structured around the absent mother, Hel. (In parenthesis, one might note that there can be no greater irony than the effacement of the scenes depicting Fredersen's and Rotwang's rivalry for Hel's affections in the cuts made for the American release, which all but erased Hel's looming absent presence (Patalas 1986).)

The unnatural nature of the city, engendered by this maternal absence, is figured in two distinct, if intimately related, ways: first, in relation to technology; and second, in psychoanalytic terms. The supremacy of paternal authority in *Metropolis* calls to mind Barthes' (1975 [1973], 47) affirmation of the link between narrative pleasure and the father, which Barthes curiously expresses in negative, speculative terms: 'If there is no longer a Father, why tell stories? Doesn't every narrative lead back to Oedipus? Isn't storytelling always a way of searching for one's origin, speaking one's conflicts with the Law?' That *Metropolis* is dominated by the presence of an overbearing father would seem to affirm that the film does indeed retell the tale of Oedipus, confirming Barthes' speculation. This,

however, remains to be seen. Before shifting to the psychoanalytic register and assessing *Metropolis's* Oedipal credentials, let us take the first theme first, and focus on the technology that permits Metropolis itself to operate as one vast machine. The functional specialization and circulation (of bodies, power, water, etc.) granting the city its mechanistic quality simultaneously lend it its holistic, organismic dynamism, affording Metropolis as a whole the status of an artificial life-form (simultaneously assuring its lasting legacy on the science-fiction genre). The idea of realizing artificial life – the horror this oxymoron made flesh inspires – underlies the pervasive vision of technology at work throughout *Metropolis*: a case of ‘paroxysm taken for dynamism’, as Eisner (1969, 15) beautifully puts it. Technology promotes functional specialization, which in turn permits the rapid modernization responsible for harnessing ‘the energy of enterprising master-men that make cities to grow out of the ground and alter the picture of the landscape’ (Spengler 1926, 505). Technology simultaneously enslaves human beings: machines do not serve humanity; humanity is slave to the machine. Dead labour feeds off living labour. Freder witnesses industrial accident as a sacrifice to Moloch, the machine-god. ‘The machine works and forces the man to cooperate. The entire Culture reaches a degree of activity such that the earth trembles under it’ (Spengler 1926, 503). *Metropolis's* Expressionist stylization sees ‘impersonal, hunched, servile, spiritless, slavish beings’ stalk the city, ‘dressed in costumes of no known historical period. The stylization is extreme during the change of shift when the two columns meet, marching with rhythmic, jerky steps, and when the solid block of workers is heaped into the lifts, heads bowed, completely lacking individual existence’ (Eisner 1969, 225). The multiple resonances of this scene are remarkable.

The mechanized, robotic movement of the workers recalls what Agamben (2000, 51) sees as a 'generalized catastrophe of the sphere of gestures', first made visible by Tourette, whose eponymous syndrome comprises 'an amazing proliferation of tics, spasmodic jerks, and mannerisms'. What Kern (1983, 117) refers to as 'the mechanization, jerkiness, and rush of modern times' resonates not only with the cinematic apparatus but also with the 'human motor' that came to dominate the time-and-motion studies of Taylorist scientific management. The differential speeds of the two columns of workers – pre- and post-shift – emphasize speed and fatigue as twin aspects of modernity; highlighting a pervasive fear that 'material progress' was being 'undermined by the unreasonable demands that it made on the body and spirit' (Rabinbach 1992, 20). Moreover, the workers packed into the paternoster lift recall Marx's characterization of capitalism's rendering of heterogeneous, concrete human labour into an homogeneous residue; its transformation of muscle, sinew, bone, hand, heart, and eye into one gelatinous mass of abstract labour (the English translation of *Capital* uses inappropriately anodyne technical terms, such as 'unsubstantial reality' and 'congelation' where Marx used 'phantom-like presence' and 'gelatinous mass of indistinguishable labour' (Sutherland 2011)). The uniform caps on the perpetually bowed heads of the 'hired hands', whether moving en masse as a single block or slavishly responding to the rhythm of the machines, signal more than a simple dejection born of alienation: 'The centre of this artificial and complicated realm of the Machine is the organizer and manager. The mind, not the hand, holds it together' (Spengler 1926, 504–5). As the worker increasingly takes on the inanimate qualities of the machine, the life of the worker's mind becomes redundant – and, with it, any possibility of proletarian class consciousness. The workers are reduced to the status of mere automatons.

Meanwhile, in Rotwang's cottage, the reverse operation is underway: the machine is sparked into life amidst a rising climax of pulsating rhythmic energy, culminating in a bodily exchange of libido. In the shape of the robot, the machine takes on human form, its uncanny, menacing animation embodying in microcosm the artificial life writ large in the city. As man becomes machine, machine becomes man: or, more pointedly, *woman*. Initially intended as a surrogate mother, a replacement for Hel, it is Maria whose form is ultimately subject to mechanical reproduction (a point to be revisited shortly). Significantly, the altered status of mind implicit in the reciprocal transformation of animate and inanimate redounds onto the hand. Once the privileged organ of *homo faber's* species-being, uniquely capable of accomplishing the transformation of nature, the hand loses its former prestige as humanity loses its human touch. Rotwang's missing hand, sacrificed in the creation of the robot and replaced with a (phallic) gloved prosthesis, condenses all of this. This is surely enough to cast the film's implausible final handshake in a jaded light, confirming Kracauer's contention that the closing scene paves the way to Fredersen further tightening his grip on the workers.

Notwithstanding the importance of its technological *mise-en-scène* – equally evident in the 'brain' of Metropolis, the headquarters of Fredersen's enterprise and control centre of the city's nervous system – the fact that we have already encroached onto the second expression of Metropolis's unnatural nature demands a shift in focus. In effect, the portrayal of technology as a form of artificial life is a displaced expression of the sense in which all human life is artificial: subject to 'artificial rules of alliance' (Lévi-Strauss 1969 [1947], 595) founded on the subjugation of nature. For humans to become human, what is biologically possible must become subject to cultural prohibition: humans are the species for whom it is natural to be unnatural. It is the prohibition of incest that classically represents the

constitutive act of culture – removing us from the realm of necessity inscribed in nature and transplanting us into the sphere of cultural selection. In this regard, the incest taboo targets a particularly ‘conspicuous meeting-point of nature and culture: nature imposes the necessity of alliance, without defining its exact shape; culture determines its modality’ (Bauman 1999 [1973], 97). Henceforth, in Lacan’s (1977a [1953], 66) colourful phrase, the ‘primordial Law ... regulating marriage ties superimposes the kingdom of culture on that of a nature abandoned to the law of mating’. It is unsurprising that this primordial law should define a privileged domain for thinking about nature and culture, its imposition simultaneously instating the possibility of its transgression. It is equally unsurprising that *Metropolis* should abound with Freudian themes – signalling more than their contemporary currency and (hence) attractiveness both to von Harbou’s magpie disposition and Lang’s cultural sensibilities. Although the Oedipal trappings of the film are legion, the frequently peddled idea that *Metropolis* plays out a complex Oedipal drama is more contentious than most readings assume. Certainly, everything proceeds in the name of the father, so let us pick up the thread from here.

Metropolis unmistakably enacts a family drama, an Oedipal conflict between father and son – albeit one inflated to world-historical proportions, incorporating the revolutionary movement of history. The absence of the mother complicates the workings of the Oedipus complex when a *dual* attempt to substitute her becomes cross-contaminated, the incestuous consequences spilling over onto the terrain of class struggle. All this is suffused with apothotic overtones borrowed from the Christian narrative, the Oedipal guilt of the obedient son finally transforming a revolutionary narrative into a redemptive fiction. Separate treatment is reserved for this latter element, despite their integral fashioning in

the film. Nonetheless we may immediately note, with Brown (1959, 118), that 'The essence of the Oedipal complex is the project of becoming God – in Spinoza's formula, *causa sui*'. Redirecting an orphaned desire occasioned by the symbolic threat of castration, the resolution of the Oedipus complex would see the son emerge as 'the father of himself' (Freud), a self-made man. This is far from the case in *Metropolis*, however, where Freder remains subservient to Fredersen: regressing to an infantilized state, emasculated, and prone to masturbatory fantasies. Consequently, there can be no possibility of a fairy-tale (or Hollywood) happy ending: no possibility of projecting an imaginary reciprocal completion between a real man and a fantasy woman onto an idealized heterosexual union; no question of staging of the possibility of sexual rapport in a transcendent space beyond the film's final scene (Lapsely and Westlake 1992). Freder's and Maria's destinies are overdetermined by the actions of the father. The son's Oedipal yearnings to substitute the desire of the mother is blocked and diverted into the sphere of class struggle when the robot, devised to serve as a technological surrogate for the absent mother, instead materializes as Maria's uncanny double (the only direct instance of a doppelgänger in a film suffused with the figure of the double). It is this conflicted pattern of substitutions that forms the decisive moment for the outcome of the narrative, ultimately confirming the patriarchal dominance that Kracauer sees in the film's conclusion: 'On the surface it seems that Freder has converted his father; in reality, the industrialist has outwitted his son' (Kracauer 1947, 163). A range of issues need to be disentangled in order to clarify this.

Deleuze, commenting on the dual nature of the imaginary, notes that 'the real father is one, or wants to be according to his law; but the image of the father is always double in itself, cleaved according to a law of the dual or duel. It is projected onto two persons at least, one

assuming the role of the play-father, the father-buffoon, and the other, the role of the working and ideal father' (Deleuze 2004 [1972], 172). This characteristic split of the imaginary father – exemplified in works as diverse as Shakespeare's *Henry IV Part I* (Falstaff as the ultimate father-buffoon) and *Star Wars* (dir. George Lucas 1977) – is more than apparent in the case of Fredersen and Rotwang, linked by their erstwhile rivalry for Hel's affections (Figure 3). The robot is the joint product of this split father: Rotwang's obsession with Hel dictates that he will create the technology to replicate her; Fredersen convinces him to use this technology to duplicate Maria, the object of the son's desire, in an attempt to manipulate the passions inspired by her proselytizing, thus precipitating a level of social unrest that might legitimize yet further repression. The association of the double with the uncanny (Rank 1971 [1925]) will prove crucial to everything that follows. Maria appears as both real and unreal. For Jentsch (1995 [1906]), the primary source of the uncanny in Hoffman's *The Sandman* is the violation of the distinction between animate and inanimate embodied in the figure of the automaton, Olympia (a precedent and likely model for the robot Maria). In both cases, the explicit gendering of artificial life, overtly sexualized and seductive in the case of Maria's double, aligns the feminine with artifice: with the capacity to simulate (Riviere 1929; Spivak 1983; Lungstrum 1997).

Maria's double allows *Metropolis* to screen the 'double image' imposed on women by men. Of men, Freud (1957a [1912], 183) wrote, 'Where they love they do not desire, and where they desire they cannot love'. This conflict between the affective and the sensual engenders a split between woman as idealized and overvalued on the one hand, and as disparaged and deprecated on the other: as either sacred or profane; Madonna or whore. The 'old Italian saying' in *The Bride Wore Black* (dir. François Truffaut 1967) to which Easthope (1999, 78)

draws attention amply indicates the origin of the conflict: 'All women are whores except my mother who is a saint'. Technology in *Metropolis*, as Huyssen (1986, 73) remarks, is figured in parallel terms as 'either neutral and obedient or as inherently threatening and out of control'. The uncanny relates precisely to such a sense of threat: the threat of mortality. For Freud (1955a [1919], 245), the uncanny evokes 'something which is secretly familiar [*heimlich-heimisch*], which has undergone repression and then returned from it'. Specifically, the 'primary narcissism which dominates the mind of the child' sees repressed thoughts projected onto the primitive image of a double: 'But when this stage has been surmounted, the "double" reverses its aspect. From having been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death' (Freud (1955a [1919], 235). The uncanny effect evoked by artificial life derives not only from the effacement of the distinction between animate and inanimate but from the related distinctions between life and death; mortality and immortality: the question of life after death. Death itself comes to life in the figure of the Grim Reaper stalking Freder's hallucinatory nightmare. Gunning notes that the Gothic figure's emblematic hour-glass and scythe derive from the Greek god of time: 'Kronos in Hesiod's *Theogony* castrates his father Uranos with a sickle given him by his mother' (Gunning 2000, 75). In the explicitly sexualized figure of the robot, mortal fear is also expressed as castration anxiety, which is immediately displaced onto the eye, precisely conforming to Freud's essay. The frenzied crescendo of male *Schaulust* (voyeuristic pleasure or scopophilia) aroused by the erotic dance at Yoshiwara, performed by Maria's robotic incarnation as phallic woman, resolves itself into a montage of disembodied eyes, expressing the castrating gaze of the Medusa. 'The terror of Medusa is ... a terror of castration that is linked to the sight of something', says Freud (1955b [1922]), specifically proposing the mother's genitals (Webber 2000).

It is in relation to this scene that a key moment in the determination of the narrative resolution occurs, in an encounter engineered by Rotwang: namely, the son's seeming discovery of Maria in his father's arms (Murphy 2007). The existence of Maria's robotic double is as yet unknown to Freder and is consequently misrecognized as the object of his desire: the flesh-and-blood Maria. A well-established tradition of writing on *Metropolis* envisions this occurrence, which provokes a series of hallucinatory visions in Freder, as an instance of the primal scene: the traumatic witnessing of the sex act by the child (Dadoun 1986). Walker (2011, 6) is surely correct, however, in pointing up the shortcomings of this reading – maintaining that 'the scene and its aftermath represent one of the very few dramatizations in the cinema of a much rarer, but even more potent fear: that the patriarch has the power and authority to take possession of the son's woman'. The upshot, in Walker's (2011, 6) assessment, is that 'the son (the hero) is lastingly traumatised. Psychically, he is castrated'. Walker overstates the rarity of what is involved: an evocation of the omnipotent father of the 'primal horde' described in Freud's (1957b [1913]) just-so story, *Totem and Taboo*. The father is outside the law because – in a scenario familiar from Westerns and vigilante films – he *is* the law. Lacan points out that Freud's 'cock-and-bull story, the murder of the father of the primal horde ... is exactly the contrary' of Oedipus (Lacan 2007 [1970], 114). In Oedipus, the murder of the father permits sexual relations with the mother. In *Totem and Taboo*, 'not only does the murder of the father not open the path to *jouissance* that the presence of the father was supposed to prohibit but it, in fact, strengthens the prohibition' (Lacan 1992 [1960], 176). In effect, *Totem and Taboo* demonstrates what Oedipus attempts to disguise: that *jouissance* is not just forbidden but impossible. Oedipus, Lacan pronounces, was a dream of Freud's. Oedipal desire effectively

expresses the perspective of the neurotic, refusing to relinquish the belief that absolute plenitude is possible. Describing *Totem and Taboo* as 'perhaps the only myth the modern age was capable of', Lacan (1992 [1960], 176–7) notes that 'The myth of the murder of the father is the myth for a time for which God is dead' – adding that 'if for us God is dead, it is because he always has been dead He has never been the father except in the mythology of the son ... in that of the commandment that commands that he, the father, be loved'.

With Freder in the role of saviour – the mediator prophesied by Maria –, the religious overtones of *Metropolis* become palpable: the 'heart' is the sacred heart of Christian iconography. Yet despite the film's overt narrative – Freder, bewitched by Maria's message of universal brotherhood, descends from on high of his own volition, violating his father's wishes –, the film's outcome, the entrenchment of the status quo, would not have differed *had* Fredersen sent his only son to do his bidding. It is noteworthy that, in Lacan's sardonic remarks on *Totem and Taboo*, we learn that 'brotherhood first and foremost, is founded on segregation' (Lacan 2007 [1970], 114; cf. Derrida 1997 [1994]). In the film, the Christian parallels come thick and fast, attempting to secure a redemptive message that is persistently undermined. Freder descends from his privileged world, changing places (and clothes, to outwit the surveillance of Slim) with a mere mortal – Worker 11811 (Georgy), who counts as his 'psychic double' (Smith 2005, 20) – to become a son of man and no longer his father's son. Georgy represents a Judas figure, betraying Freder's charity in order to indulge in the carnal delights of Yoshiwara, paid for out of money he finds in Freder's clothes; though subsequently saving Freder from the mob. Freder's immediate fate in the underworld is to suffer crucifixion on the hands of the Paternoster machine's giant dial – sacrificed to the relentless, soul-destroying pace instituted by the hell of mechanization

(Figure 4). A subtle role-reversal is in play in the trajectories of Georgy and Freder: where Georgy is first saved and then commits an act of betrayal, only subsequently to rescue Freder, Freder, spurred on by saving Josaphat (following the latter's dismissal from Fredersen's employ), initially betrays his father, only to subsequently become the saviour: rescuing the workers' children from the floodwaters released by the workers' own destruction of the 'Heart machine' – thereby rescuing his father's standing and preserving the law. Maria, condensing John the Baptist and virgin mother into a single figure, preaches reconciliation rather than rebellion, prophesying the coming mediator. However, it is via Fredersen's manipulative intervention (mobilizing a false prophet of revolution in the form of Maria's robotic double) that reconciliation ultimately takes place – and is able to assume the pernicious form it does. The virginal–maternal side of the 'double image' of Maria is the flip side of Freder's symbolic castration, decisively determining that there can be no sexual relation. Whilst the full repercussions remain to be seen, the overarching implication is clear: just as Christ remains the ultimate obedient son – 'Father ... not my will, but thine be done' (*Luke 22: 42*) – so too does Freder (Figure 5).

The film's redemptive message, founded on mediation and dramatized in the final handshake on the cathedral steps, professes faith in a spiritual solution to worldly miseries and necessarily betrays its own principle – reproducing the very conditions responsible for generating it in the first place (Figure 6). In other words, religion acts as a *pharmakon*: both poison and cure. In Marx's (1975 [1844], 244) words, '*Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people*'. A related word recalls both the technological

wizardry of Fredersen's Faustian city and the prominently displayed pentangle – mistakenly described as the Seal of Solomon in von Harbou's novel – at the point when Rotwang conjures up Maria's golem-like double. 'The word in question is *pharmakos* (wizard, magician, poisoner)', which Derrida (1981 [1972], 133) explicates by noting that 'The character of the *pharmakos* has been compared to a scapegoat. The ... expulsion of evil, its exclusion out of the body (and out) of the city', was once enacted in rituals of purification. *Metropolis* might be seen in just this light: having seen off both a revolution and Rotwang, the restoration of the status quo at the end of the film entails that whatever has been banished remains to contaminate the city. The repressed is destined to return.

The structure of *myth*, in Bauman's (1999 [1973], 59) pithy description, expresses the rules that may 'generate a language serving effectively the task of ordering the universe'. Having laid out some key aspects of the film (and inevitably passing over many more in the process), it is possible to outline the structure of *Metropolis* and the reasons for the continuing fascination it exerts, since these indeed attempt to order the cultural universe. The essential point to underscore, with Barthes (1972), is that myth serves to *naturalize* cultural differences. Myth amounts to culture seeking an alibi in a nature it has left behind.

In Oedipus, as Lévi-Strauss (1963 [1958]) observes, the murder of the father and sexual relations with the mother respectively 'underrate' and 'overrate' blood relations, demonstrating an absence of love and respect, and an overly intimate desire. The very possibility of such evaluations suggests that what is possible in one domain – the realm of necessity, nature – may be prohibited in a different domain – culture. In Oedipus, the symmetry of these two departures from the norm is replicated in what initially appear as

unrelated mythemes (structural units of myth); manifested, for instance, by Oedipus killing the sphinx and (present in some versions) his limp or inability to stand upright. In opposition to sexual reproduction (where one is born from two: man and woman), the other two mythemes, Lévi-Strauss suggests, relate to the earth as sole matrix or model for the origin of life – in the manner that a plant apparently springs straight from the earth, its autochthonous origin dependent on deriving sustenance from the virgin soil. Interpreting the functions of these seemingly unrelated elements in parallel to the two functions concerning the underrating and overrating of blood-ties, Lévi-Strauss proposes that they refer, respectively, to the *denial* of the autochthonous origin of man (the sphinx is ‘a monster unwilling to permit men to live’ (Lévi-Strauss 1963 [1958], 215)) and, given the commonness of the trait of standing upright after emerging from the earth in mythology, the *persistence* of a belief in the autochthonous origin of man (a belief that endures in deep-rooted cultural assertions of self-sufficient relations with nature – such as one might detect in the ideology of *Blud und Boden*, for instance). Given that knowledge of sexual reproduction is incompatible with belief in autochthonous origins, Lévi-Strauss suggests that these contrary beliefs may co-exist, in parallel, *through* myth: ‘The inability to connect two kinds of relationship is overcome (or rather replaced) by the assertion that contradictory relationships are identical inasmuch as they are both self-contradictory in a similar way’ (Lévi-Strauss 1963 [1958], 216). In the particular case of Oedipus, it ‘provides a kind of logical tool which relates the original problem – born from one or born from two? – to the derivative problem – born from different or born from same?’ (Lévi-Strauss 1963 [1958], 216). Adhering to the principle that all versions of the myth are precisely such – that since myth offers an *imaginary* resolution of a real contradiction, the structure of myth is destined to inhere in its own eternally differentiated self-perpetuation, such that culture

itself persists *through* change –, Lévi-Strauss (1963 [1958], 217) notes that, ‘Although the Freudian problem has ceased to be that of autochthony *versus* bisexual reproduction, it is still the problem of understanding how *one* can be born from *two*: How is it that we do not only have one procreator, but a mother plus a father?’ (‘The margin could be wider’, Baudrillard (1993 [1976], 198) wryly observes: ‘why not zero or an infinity of sexes?’)

In *Metropolis*, the Freudian question of one being born from two haunts the narrative, in the form of the absent mother and consequent imperious presence of the father. Joh Fredersen, his name echoing Jehovah, would be a sovereign, self-made man, sufficient unto himself; his dominion extending over all he surveys. His domain suffers the fate it does in direct consequence. The attempt to restore the balance of nature issues from the earth, figured as feminine and maternal. Maria’s plea for harmony and unity (which too readily mirrors Fredersen’s dream of perfect mastery) arises from the chthonic depths of the city. Her double, the robotic impostor, performs the precise opposite function, playing the same monstrous role as the sphinx: refusing men (and women and children) permission to live. The film’s continuous effort of doubling suggests a fundamental imbalance at constant pains to equilibrate itself. The fact that *Metropolis* resets everything to zero by its close – returning to a retrenched default position – condenses onto the blockage that halts Freder’s Oedipal trajectory. At this point, Barthes’ speculation that all narratives retell Oedipus encounters an important limit, for here another myth – the story of Percival, the knight who redeems the world by renouncing sexual desire – redoubles the narrative structure of the film. The basis of Wagner’s *Parsifal*, Percival’s shrouded origins (cf. Brown 1909; 1910; Nitze 1946) lie in ‘the old myths refashioned in the Grail cycle, in which the action depends on the hero’s timidity in front of the magic vessel, of which he dare not ask “what it is used for”’

(Lévi-Strauss 1976 [1973], 23). That Percival is defined by ‘questions without answers or questions that are not asked, the virginity of the hero, an earth without fertility, the “wasteland” of the Grail’ (Lévi-Strauss 1987 [1984], 110) resonates so clearly with *Metropolis* that it is remarkable that it has not, to my knowledge, previously drawn comment. Since the film unmistakably appeals to Oedipus as well, the twin nature of the myths will shortly command (and repay) close attention.

Pausing initially to reflect on Percival, the eponymous hero – whose father is lame, and whose mother mistakes him for a mute on account of his naïve, uncommunicative nature – is, significantly, unaware of his own name. Assuming the role of knight, and having been warned against the liberal use of words that might expose his naïvety, Percival fails to enquire as to the nature of either the Holy Grail or the Bleeding Lance he encounters at a distant castle. The latter is responsible for inflicting a wound that renders the Fisher King impotent and, by the same dolorous stroke, affects the fertility of the entire kingdom. Merely posing the question would have sufficed to heal the king and to restore fertility to the land, but this is not to be. ‘Percival learns that he should have posed these questions, and that he has consequently failed to establish communication, at the moment when he guesses his own name, which is to say, when he succeeds for the first time in establishing communication with himself’ (Lévi-Strauss 1987 [1984], 107).

Positing a homology between ‘sociobiological statements’ and ‘grammatical statements’, Lévi-Strauss notes that the problem of communication in Percival is the inverse of that in Oedipus, where solving the riddle of the sphinx means providing an answer to ‘*a question to which it is postulated that there will be no answer*’ (Lévi-Strauss 1976 [1973], 22). In solving

the riddle, Oedipus dispels an eternal winter, initiating an exorbitant overabundance in nature: Oedipus articulates 'excessive communication..., rankness and the explosion of natural cycles' (Lévi-Strauss 1987 [1984], 110). All this is clearly condensed in the act of incest: 'Like the riddle solved, incest brings together terms meant to remain separate: the son is joined with the mother ... *in the same way the answer succeeds, against all expectations, in rejoining its question*' (Lévi-Strauss 1976 [1973], 23). Percival, however, represents 'an inverted Oedipus', characterized by '*an answer for which there was no question*' – and an endless summer that nonetheless remains devoid of fecundity (Lévi-Strauss 1976 [1973], 23, 22). The twin themes of this inverted homologous structure – 'between chastity and the "the answer without question"' and 'between an incestuous union and "the question without answer"' (Lévi-Strauss 1976 [1973], 23) – are superimposed in *Metropolis*.

Proceeding to uncover the implications of this formalist analysis finally brings us back to history. It also promises to shed light on the irredeemably polarized responses that *Metropolis* has provoked, since it is clear that the structurally entwined myths launch a simultaneous appeal in two opposing directions, exciting two radically divergent dispositions. Whilst it may be too simple to align 'questions without answers' with doubt, and 'answers without questions' with certainty, it is useful to posit a polarization defined in such terms. For Szasz (1973, 92), 'Doubt is to certainty as neurosis is to psychosis. The neurotic is in doubt and has fears about persons and things; the psychotic has convictions and makes claims about them. In short, the neurotic has problems, the psychotic has solutions' – one might say 'final solutions'. Oedipus, as previously noted, represents the perspective of the neurotic: 'neurotic symptoms, and all other manifestations of the

unconscious, such as fantasy, represent in some degree or other a flight or alienation from a reality which is found unbearable' (Brown 1959, 9). Given that, in Brown's (1959, 10) words, 'man's ... capacity for neurosis is merely the obverse of his capacity for cultural development', it is ultimately unsurprising that *Metropolis* and the Expressionist film wave more generally should have emerged amidst the enormous productivity of a traumatized Weimar culture (Kaes 2009). Yet something more disturbing is also at work, a fact more than hinted at in the implausible sentimentality of the film's appeal to the heart, which merely expresses the neurotic fantasy of the possibility of absolute plenitude: that everything can come good in the end.

Beyond its neurotic façade, *Metropolis* projects the kind of delusional fantasy that the mass psychosis of Nazism would subsequently and tragically seek to impose on reality. In Lacan's formulation, the structure of psychosis relates to the foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father: the failure of the subject to undergo the symbolic castration entailed by identification with a signifier, which would permit it to accept, on loan, a position within the symbolic, thereby redirecting it from nature, being, and *jouissance* into culture, meaning, and the law. The foreclosure of the paternal function that would otherwise stabilize relations with the world, presided over by the phallus as 'the signifier intended to designate as a whole the effects of the signified' (Lacan 1977b [1958], 258), creates a hole in the symbolic that is papered over by the imaginary (specifically, in the substitution of the imaginary father for the Name-of-the-Father), such that the real reappears in the symbolic as hallucination (Lacan 1977c [1958]). It is not difficult to see in Percival's inability to know his own name or to communicate with others – or in Freder's infantile regression, hallucinatory visions, and religious delusions worthy of Schreber – the hallmarks of psychosis.

Insofar as *Metropolis* has, from the off, plunged us into the *mise en abyme* of the meaning of meaning, we should nonetheless note the traps of such an analysis – signalled in Baudrillard’s hostility to the way in which Lévi-Strauss’s conception of myth reduces the symbolic to the imaginary. If the symbolic is not merely a mediator between the imaginary and the real but, as Baudrillard (1993 [1976], 133) contends, that which puts an end to a ‘disjunctive code and to separated terms’, *Metropolis* would invite an altogether different reading: one that might, from the outset, sense that ‘Oedipus depends on ... nationalistic, religious, racist sentiment, and not the reverse’; and that ‘it is not the father who is projected onto the boss, but the boss who is applied to the father’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1983 [1972], 104). As Weidauer (2003, 195) suggests, ‘the German fear of tyrants as reflected or constructed in ... films’ of the Weimar era ‘does not relate to a fear of tyranny as a political system, but to a fear of political systems that allow such monsters to thrive, in other words, laissez-faire Western democracies’. ‘Evil as such, which [is] cherished as an enduring profundity, exists only in allegory, is nothing other than allegory, and means something different from what it is’, as Benjamin (1977 [1925], 233) presciently wrote: ‘It means precisely the non-existence of what it presents. ... There is no evil in the world. It arises in man himself’. The extent to which such propositions threaten to undermine the foregoing analysis can only affirm the need to revisit the badlands of *Metropolis* repeatedly. Given the priority afforded here to myth, it is perhaps to the sense of incompleteness proper to allegory that one must finally return. Unreel city...

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Figure Captions

Fig. 1 Virginal, maternal, sibylline: Maria preaches in the catacombs

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Fig. 2 The New Tower of Babel

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Fig. 3 Fredersen and Rotwang: the two faces of the father

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Fig. 4 Freder crucified

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Fig. 5 Oedipus awry: imperious father and obedient son

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Fig. 6 Freder as mediator

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