AN INSTANCE OF ESOTERIC IMAGINATION: FRITZ LANG'S METROPOLIS (1927)

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Abstract: A pioneer of the science-fiction genre, Fritz Lang's Metropolis (1927) has fascinated and puzzled critics and audiences alike. Although the futuristic skyscrapers of Metropolis seem to belong more to the science-fiction tradition, the film is overloaded with symbolic and religious meanings. While the Christian symbolism has been noted and analysed by various reviewers and scholars, its esoteric side has been neglected, maybe as it was often conflated with the religious. However, esotericism is associated with the main idea of the movie, mediation. The esoteric mediates between religion and science, pointing to the birth of modern science from Renaissance Cabbalism, Hermeticism and Neoplatonism.

Keywords: science-fiction, Western esotericism, mediation

1.Introduction: the mystery of *Metropolis*

A pioneer of the science-fiction genre and one of the first movies to feature a robot, Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) has fascinated and puzzled critics and audiences alike. Most critics and commentators have emphasized the stunning grandeur of its visual scenes, while downplaying the role that plot plays in the overall success of the movie. While some noted that this may be due to the aesthetics of German expressionism, which neglected the dramatic element in favour of an over-stylizing of visual representation, others followed Lang himself, who years after the production of the movie admitted that he nurtured an ambiguous feeling towards *Metropolis* and thought that it was "silly and stupid" (qtd. in Minden and Bachmann 3). The whole debate around the movie centered on a clash that few failed to apprehend, between the visual representation and the plot, and the interesting fact is that this clash has been interpreted in various ways: while for the most aesthetically-minded critics the naiveté of the plot was a disappointment (including for Lang himself), for those who tried to see it as an overt social critique in the vein of Orwell's *1984*, the framing of the plot (the movie begins and ends with what looks like a strange pronouncement: "The mediator between the head and the hands must be the heart!") was viewed as a failed criticism of social injustice[1]. Following the film screenplay which depicted Rotwang's laboratory as "half a quack's kitchen from the year 1500 and half experimental laboratory of a man from the year 2000" (*Metropolis*), Richard Scheib noted that "*Metropolis* seems caught between these two strands of thought – the fearful occlusion of the Mediaeval Gothic and on the other hand the bold optimism of the New Germany reaching towards marvels of technology.", which made it "an oddly schizophrenic film."(Scheib, "*Metropolis*") Scheib was on the right path: the conflict between the apparent childishness of the plot and the futuristic urban scenery where most of the plot develops is replicated, towards the resolution of the plot, even at a visual level: the raw expressionist lighting that emphasizes the pure geometry of the city also falls on the cathedral steps, its high, towering lines and the gargoyles that witness the final fight between good and evil, between Freder and Rotwang. However, the stark contrast between these two strands of

[1] The first (longer) version of *Metropolis* opened with the motto of Thea von Harbou's novel, which stated explicitly that "This film is not of today or the future. It tells of no place. It serves no tendency, party, or class. It has a moral that grows on the understanding: 'The mediator between brain and muscle must be the heart.'" (3)

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thought that Scheib points out is nowhere more striking that in the scene where the false Maria, the evil robot, is burned at the stake. There, the stake (a symbol of the Inquisition, witch-trials, and the persecution of scientists like Galileo and Bruno) is built by the angry workers out of the machines they have destroyed – and the false Maria loses her human appearance and resumes robot shape following her burning at the stake. How is the viewer going to make sense of this clash between icons of technological modernity and the religious symbolism of the plot? The fascination that Lang's movie has exerted over generations lies exactly in the 'impossibility' of merging an essentially religious narrative with subjects like machines, robots, technological progress, which are part and parcel of the scientific imagination.

2.The plot

The script for *Metropolis* was written by Thea von Harbou, a German writer and Lang's wife at the time. After Lang (who came from a Jewish family) immigrated into the United States, his dissatisfaction with the plot was expressed in several interviews, where he remarked that von Harbou's idea was childish. In retrospect, as von Harbou became more and more involved with the Nazi rule, we cannot be sure that his comments were totally unbiased. What is sure is that Lang's brilliant visual imagination and his skillful play with shadows, smoke, and steam, allied with von Harbou's bizarre religious symbolism managed to give birth to an avant-garde masterpiece. To turn to the plot: Freder, the son of Joh Fredersen (the mastermind behind the construction of Metropolis and its ruler) is awaken to the reality of the underworld of the Workers' city and their slavery by Maria, a young girl who comes to the "Club of the Sons" surrounded by the workers' poor children and introduces them to the rich heirs as "your brothers". Freder's awakening reminds one the legend of Buddha[2]: imprisoned in an illusory garden of pleasures, surrounded by Oriental dancers eager to satisfy his desires. Freder is pushed into the search for the real by Maria, a prophetess from the Underworld of workers, who had promised them a mediator. Thus, the legend of Buddha merges with Christian messianism. Freder, by falling in love with Maria, acknowledges his role as Messiah and replicates incarnation by going down to the underworld and taking the place of Georg (or 11811) at the clock machine[3]. Joh Fredersen, remindful rather of the angry Jehovah of the Old Testament, appears ready to sacrifice his son, yet not out of divine love for the fallen humankind. He regards his son's disobedience as a challenge to his dictatorial power and entrusts Rotwang, the mad scientist, who has 'reanimated' Hel (his love and Freder's mother) in the likeness of a female robot, with the task of subverting Maria's authority over the workers. Rotwang 'magically' transfers Maria's physical appearance onto the robot, yet his plan is to get even with Fredersen, who had stolen Hel's love from him, by destroying his son. The fake Maria incites the workers to revolt, and in the turmoil that follows the destruction of the Heart Machine and the Workers' city, Freder and Maria are almost killed. After the raging workers find out that Maria saved their children and Rotwang falls down from the cathedral, their fury abates and eventually Freder, counseled by Maria, brings peace between his father and the workers, fulfilling his role as Messiah. The final scene is a precise illustration of the 'epigram' that opens and closes the film, with Grot (the guardian of the Heart Machine and the workers' representative and Joh Fredersen holding hands through Freder, while Maria's words still linger in the viewer's mind: "Head and hands want to join together, but they don't

[2] Freder's ally against his father's despotism is called Josaphat (Joh Fredersen's secretary), like the hero of a Christianized version of the story of Siddhartha Gautama, "Barlaam and Josaphat".

[3] The same argument is made by Rutsky in *High Techne*: "Overlaid on the triad of "head, heart and hands" is the all too obvious Christian symbology of the Son as the intercessor between God the Father and humanity. Indeed, Freder is quite explicitly presented as a Christ figure: he descends to the workers' level and takes the place of an exhausted worker (Georg, no. 11811), where he suffers and is "crucified" on the control dial of the "Pater Noster" machine, crying out to his father for relief. (50)

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have the heart to do it…oh, Mediator, show them the way!" (*Metropolis*). It is the insistent simplicity of this message, its framing and direct expression that make it look like propaganda. It is so lacking in subtlety that it offends the viewer's imagination. And yet this message is the key to the understanding of a film which for decades has captured the audience's imagination without revealing the secret of its 'creation'.

3.The idea of mediation

Metropolis is one of those works of art which are better understood in retrospect, not because a theory that can explain their 'functioning' is missing, but because of certain ideological twists which obscure the hidden workings of the film. In many ways, *Metropolis* is over-laden with symbolism; layer after layer of symbols and significations pointing in all directions: social (technological modernity versus religious salvation/perdition, the complexities of capitalist society, exploiters against the exploited), ontological (the creator relating to his creation: the Pygmalion theme echoed in Rotwang and the female robot, Fredersen and his city/machines), moral (good versus evil, justice versus injustice), epistemological (truth/reality versus illusion), etc. Like the Gothic cathedral it features and the Tower of Babel whose story Maria narrates to the workers, *Metropolis* aspires towards the infinite, incorporating a multitude of myths and motifs, cross-cultural or purely German: Jewish and Christian Biblical myths, Oriental stories, the Pygmalion/Frankenstein/Golem myth, modern stock characters like the mad scientist and the robot, the dictator, even a subtle reference to the legend of the Pied Piper of Hamelin (Maria's saving the children from the flooded city as a reversal of the Pied Piper story). Since it is difficult for an audience to make sense of all these clashing stories, the simplistic plot with its crude framing, far from appearing infantile, aids in offering the viewer a sense of what it is all about: mediation. In an obvious manner, the head and the hands stand for Fredersen and the workers, yet in a more general sense, head and hands represent the idea of opposition itself, and opposition cannot exist without mediation. The necessity of mediation appears as a result of the deep and wide abyss between the social classes: the leisurely 'Sons' who spend their time playing sports and enjoying the pleasurable dances of the women in the 'Garden' and the workers who spend their days tending to the machines, so much so that they come to resemble the machines they are setting in motion. The idea of mediation, which the film puts across so bluntly in what regards the problem of class also functions on another, hidden, level – that of the discourse of the science-religion encounter.

For the contemporary imagination, science and religion are at the opposite poles of knowledge: the first is based on observation and experiment, while the second starts from belief. At first sight, there can be no common ground between these two important, yet highly distinct enterprises of the human spirit. This is why a movie like *Metropolis*, which centers on the idea of mediation, can offer valuable insights into the cultural history of both science and religion. In order to mediate between scientific and religious discourses, *Metropolis* makes us of what I would like to call the esoteric imagination.

4.What is esotericism?

As a relatively recent field of study, esotericism is still looking for a unified theory of the esoteric. While the domain of the esoteric is large enough, maybe even too extensive, a definition could be of great help in restricting and clarifying the area of studies that comes under the heading of 'esotericism'. Wouter Hanegraaff, Professor of Hermetic Philosophy at the University of Amsterdam and the first president of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism, proposed a definition of esotericism as 'rejected knowledge' (qtd. in Goodrick-Clarke 10), which sparked an intense debate. More precisely, different scholars argued that the definition of 'rejected knowledge' takes into account only one side of

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esotericism, that of its being a product of a specific social and cultural history, and focuses excessively on marginality and deviance. Antoine Faivre, emeritus professor of the history of mystical and esoteric currents at the Sorbonne, insisted that esotericism was more a form of spirituality and identified six fundamental characteristics belonging to it, four intrinsic (correspondences, living nature, imagination and mediations, the experience of transmutation) and two secondary (the practice of concordance and transmission). (qtd. in Goodrick-Clarke 9-10) In short, Western esotericism tended to develop a particular cosmology and metaphysics that connected the manifest world to the divine through intermediary beings. The foundational thesis was "As above, so below", postulating a chain of correspondences between the celestial and the mundane worlds, and seeing the physical world as replete with the signs of the divine. The presence of God was written all over the Book of Nature, and so the esoteric imagination was concerned with deciphering and interpreting these signs, which lead to the accumulation of an esoteric, hidden knowledge. This knowledge empowered and transformed its holder, giving him power over nature through a kind of natural magic. In his study on the *Western Esoteric Traditions* Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke argues that the belief that man is perfectible and holds within his reach the possibility of becoming like God (which Hermetic philosophy brought into Western esotericism) gave rise to a kind of epistemological optimism that facilitated the scientific revolution and scientific progress in Europe. The epistemological optimism connected with esotericism was postulated by yet another scholar, Andreas Kilcher, professor of literature and cultural studies at the ETH Zürich, who noted in his "Seven Epistemological Theses on Esotericism" that "Esotericism is guided by a supreme optimism and universalism concerning knowledge" (143) Kilcher also concluded that "esotericism cannot be objectively defined, but is the fluid product of discourses and interpretations" and returned to Hanegraaff's understanding of esotericism as an epistemological phenomenon, although not as 'rejected knowledge', noting that it "is an integral part of the European history of knowledge" and that it "can therefore be described from the perspectives of history, sociology and theory of science".

5.Esoteric elements in *Metropolis*

The esoteric idea of the macrocosm replicated in the microcosm, of the hierarchy of worlds, the celestial and the elemental world united through the intermediation of angels and angelic beings is visible first and foremost in the division of Metropolis into three parts: the Brain (where the office of Joh Fredersen is located), the Eternal Gardens (a kind of intermediary heaven, where the 'Sons' live) and the lowest, the Workers' City. All intellectual activity (design, planning, and administration) is relegated to the central headquarters, the Pleasure Garden functions as a limbo for sensual enjoyment, while the Workers who activate the machines are condemned to a life of toil, devoid both of sensual pleasure and intellectual play. The film opens with a gruesome scene, where one can see the workers who have finished their shift shuffling along rhythmically like a huge centipede-machine, being carried down into the depths of the earth by an elevator, while another elevator is bringing up the next load of workers. There is no other escape from this life of mechanical dehumanizing work than to gather together, after their shift is finished, following the indications of a secret map, in an underground grotto (reminiscent of the first Christian catacomb churches) where Maria the prophetess gives her speeches. She evokes the legend of the Tower of Babel as a kind of symbolic equivalent of their own situation, and offers hope by promising them a mediator who will bring freedom. Maria's ending commentary, written above the ruins of the Tower of Babel on one of the intertitle cards "Gross is die Welt und ihr Schöpfer! Und gross is der Mensch!"[4] (*Metropolis*) is an allusion to the humanist esoteric credo and to Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, which, as Goodrick remarks, celebrates "the

[4] "Great is the world and its Creator! And great is Man!" (my translation)

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newfound independence and confidence of the Renaissance man" and "marks a sea-change between the mediaeval mind and the modern mind, the tremendous growth in man's sense of autonomy and dignity which had grown up with humanism." (45) It was exactly this newly found faith in Man and his capabilities that paved the way for the development of science[5], first of the Naturphilosophie and afterwards of modern science, as a kind of liberation from the religious mind-control of the mediaeval church. In *Metropolis,* these words acquire a certain irony – since in the technological society of the future it is science that enslaves the mind of man, turning him into a machine. Although generally regarded as a masterpiece of early science-fiction, *Metropolis* is far more complex: if it is science-fiction, it goes against the requirements of its genre and develops a critical perspective on the science that it depicts. The humanist credo is appropriated by a religious visionary like Maria and used as fictional criticism, in a fictional 'possible' future, against a historical situation which was likely to produce such a bleak future. In the fictional highly technological world of Metropolis, religion appears as the only hope for freedom, thus reversing the actual historical development.

The mechanization of human life does not stop here: trying to resume control over the workers who have secret meetings in a catacomb church, Joh Fredersen visits Rotwang, the inventor, who lives "in a house overlooked by centuries" in the middle of Metropolis. From the futuristic scenes of geometrical sky-scrapers, suspended motorways and towering office buildings, the camera switches to a sort of small house of an irregular shape, such as one can see in mediaeval German burgs, the underground of which contains a baroque laboratory endowed with Tesla coils and towering switch panels as well as a profusion of alchemist equipment (alembics, retorts) and Masonic compasses. Rotwang is a magus, an occultist whose interests do not lie in the alchemy of life, but in that of the machine. He has created the new Machine-Man, a robot woman in the likeness of Hel, his and Fredersen's great love and Freder's mother. The robot is first seen sitting on a chair underneath another important esoteric symbol: the pentagram. A well-known and widely used symbol in occult and magic ceremonies, the symbolism of the pentagram, as Matila Ghyka noted[6], was based on the recurrence of 5 and 5 multiples in the structure of living organisms (18-9), thus being associated with life (four points of the stars represented the elements: earth, air, fire and water and one stood for the spirit that gave life to the elements) and with everything human[7]. Renaissance esotericists considered the pentagram a symbol of the microcosm of the human body. In the Jewish Cabbalistic tradition, the pentagram represented the upper Sephiroth on the tree of life, made up of indivisible numbers representing purely spiritual values. As a consequence of all these interrelated traditions, modern Western esotericists like Eliphas Levi[8] made a distinction between the 'point up' and 'point down pentagram', arguing that the 'point down' pentagram (now widely used as a Satanic symbol) was evil as it represented the victory of matter over spirit. It is interesting to note that the pentagram presiding over the Machine Man, or the robot-woman, in Metropolis, is a point down pentagram. It would not be far-fetched to assume that von Harbou was familiar with the writings of Eliphas Levi or other modern Western esotericists. If we read Levi's description of the meaning of the 'point up'

[5] Goodrick-Clarke cites Frances Yates and argues that Renaissance Cabbalism, Hermeticism and Neoplatonism furnished the necessary philosophical groundings of the scientific revolution as well as providing a suitable frame of mind for the practices that gave birth to it: observation and experimentation. (45-6)

[6] Ghyka wrote that "we shall not be surprised to see the preponderence of pentagonal symmetry in living organisms" (18).

[7] Greek mathematician and philosopher Pythagoras associated number 5 with man, because of the fivefold division of the body. The Pythagoreans associated the pentacle with Hygeia, the goddess of healing as her name was an anagram in Greek for the four elements and the element of spirit.

[8] Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke considers Levi a representative of the modern Western esoteric tradition, "whose popular illustrated works reintroduced ritual magic, Hermeticism and the Renaissance scholar magi to educated audiences" (195) and who did not "reject scientific progress or modernity", trying to integrate positivistic science and technology "with a universal vision of the cosmos" (196).

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and 'point down' pentagram, the creation of the Machine-Man become infused with esoteric meaning:

> [the pentagram] is the sign of intellectual omnipotence and autocracy. It is the Star of the Magi; it is the sign of the Word made flesh; and, according to the direction of its points, this absolute magical symbol represents order or confusion, the Divine Lamb of Ormuz and St. John, or the accursed goat of Mendes. It is initiation or profanation; it is Lucifer or Vesper, the star of morning or evening. It is Mary or Lilith, victory or death, day or night.
>
> The Pentagram with two points in the ascendant represents Satan as the goat of the Sabbath; when one point is in the ascendant, it is the sign of the Saviour. The Pentagram is the figure of the human body, having the four limbs and a single point representing the head. A human figure head downwards naturally represents a demon that is, intellectual subversion, disorder or madness. (237)

Thus, the point-down pentagram presiding over the robot-woman may be a hidden indication that the Machine-Man is a demon – in esoteric parlance, Lilith, the opposite of Maria, whose appearance she assumes following the technological 'magic spell' performed on her by Rotwang in his laboratory. The Pentagram, with its significance of the will who controls the elements, is also a symbol of the Magus: Rotwang, who lost his hand (another symbol of the magic five) in trying to give life to the robot, is a master of the dark and occult arts, a sorcerer in the tradition of Faust and Victor Frankenstein: the entrance door to his ancient looking hut is marked with another pentagram. What becomes unsettling is that the creation of life does not spring from an alchemical process that reproduces or invokes the laws of living nature. Life produced by technology becomes interpretable as a dark event, a triumph of pure inanimate matter over the will and the spirit: the opposite of the alchemical transmutation, through which lowest matter was capable of acquiring spirit and intelligence. If we look at *Metropolis* as a modern parable of creation, the movie offers one of the first warnings about the dark side of technological progress. 5, the number that regulates the development of living structures, and whose symbol, the pentagram, represents the triumph of spirit over the four elements of nature, is employed to emphasize the contrary in the point-down pentagram and in Rotwang's glove-clad prosthetic hand. In Maria's sermon sequence, the exhausted slaves who run away from the Tower of Babel gush through the gates of Babylon in five huge divisions. When Freder, appalled by his vision of the machine as a Moloch devouring the workers alive enters their working place for the first time, he passes through a gate above which the Roman figure V stands written. And then, when he cries out, in a symbolic Christ-like[9] fashion, "Father! Father! ... Will ten hours never end?" the clock strikes 5, the time his shift (and ordeal) ends. It is also significant that the worker whom he replaces and saves is named 11811, a number made up of five figures that can be read forwards and backwards in the same way, like the famous magical palindromes[10].

6. The esoteric as mediation

The significance of number 5 is not easy to explain – in the pentagram it is obviously associated with the occult sciences and magic – an association deriving mainly from a modern reinterpretation of esotericism (Eliphas Levi), while its recurrence in different sequences of the movie connected with Freder is somehow linked to his role as a mediator and savior, and thus to the pentagram's use in early Christianity to refer to Jesus. The omnipresence of 5s can also be attributed to the film's main idea of mediation: the number 5, standing in the middle

[9] Here the meaning of 5 may be related to the early Christian meaning of the pentagram, which stood for Jesus Christ and his five wounds.

[10] The most famous palindrome is the square palindrome "Sator arepo tenet opera rotas", widely used in folk magic, which also figures at the center of the table of correspondences in Eliphas Levi's *The Key of the Mysteries*. Each word is made up of five letters and the whole sequence can be read either from left to right or right to left.

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of the number sequence from 1 to 10 would naturally suggest it. Thus the movie does not only resort to employing esoteric elements, but it also creates its own (esoteric) interpretation of the number 5. Esotericism and mediation become synonymous, and thus the gap between the overt religious symbolism and the images of technological progress disappears. The history of the esoteric is the history of translating religion into science. A movie like *Metropolis* makes visible the invisible connection between religion and science, a connection that has been denied and contested ever since the advent of scientific modernity. It is no wonder that hardcore science-fiction writers like H.G. Wells were extremely critical of the movie. In his famous New York Times review of *Metropolis*, Wells stated that "every possible foolishness, cliché, platitude and muddlement about mechanical progress in general . . . originality: there is none, independent thought none . . . I do not think there is a single idea, a single instant of artistic creation"("Mr. Well Reviews" 94). Among the few more receptive minds to the 'esotericism' of *Metropolis* was the critic Sigfried Krakauer, who, back in 1966, wrote that "*Metropolis* was rich in subterranean content that, like contraband, had crossed the border of consciousness without being questioned" (168).

7. Conclusion

The pentagram and the significance of number 5 are the esoteric elements that traverse *Metropolis*. Although the futuristic skyscrapers of Metropolis seem to belong more to the science-fiction tradition, the film is saturated with symbolic and religious meanings. While the Christian symbolism has been noted and analysed by various scholars and commentators of the movie, its esoteric side has been neglected, maybe as it was often conflated with the religious. Yet esotericism is associated with the main idea of the movie, mediation. The esoteric mediates between religion and science, pointing to the birth of modern science from Renaissance Cabbalism, Hermeticism and Neoplatonism.

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