

Dark Futures and Female Androids: Revisiting Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) as an Allegory for the Dangers of Technology

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Abstract

The trope of the female android has existed for centuries across different forms of media. Female androids often serve as allegorical vessels for exploring contemporary social concerns surrounding humanity, evolving technologies, and gender politics. The False Maria in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) is an excellent example of this. *Metropolis* was produced during a unique era in German history, one fraught with new anxieties and changing perceptions of authority and technology. With the female android, Lang seeks to show audiences that modern technology possesses the ability to control humans in previously impossible ways, as machines of old devour the flesh of men, but new technology consumes their minds. Examining *Metropolis*'s female android in the context of post-WWI Germany is essential to understanding its significance. The shift in the way that technology is portrayed reflects Weimar-era Germany's sharp disillusion with technology and humanity's ability to wield it responsibly.

1. Introduction

Electricity. Light. Life. Madness, induced by the act of creation, gleams in the eye of the inventor as he moves mechanically through his workspace, pulling levers and flipping switches. With the final turn of a knob, energy arcs through the air, and his creation surges to life (Fig. 1). Slowly, the metallic humanoid form morphs into a beautiful young woman. This dramatic scene is the first time that we are introduced to the female android in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), and as the narrative unfolds, we quickly see that the crazed inventor has harnessed a power that he does not yet fully understand.

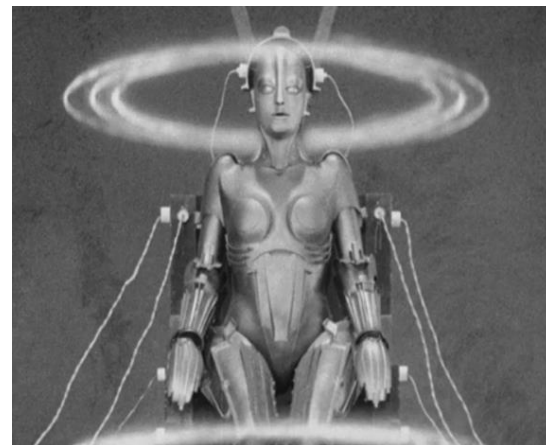


Figure 1. A still from *Metropolis* depicting the android being imbued with life.

Metropolis, adapted from Thea von Harbou's 1925 novel of the same name, is a German expressionist science-fiction film directed by Fritz Lang. Set in a futuristic dystopia where the wealthy elite live in towering skyscrapers while oppressed workers toil

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underground, the story follows Freder (Gustav Fröhlich), the privileged son of the city's technocratic ruler, Joh Fredersen (Alfred Abel), who becomes aware of the workers' suffering through Maria (Brigitte Helm), the saintlike caretaker of the children of the underworld. Joh Fredersen, fearing a worker's rebellion, conspires with the mad scientist Rotwang (Rudolf Klein-Rogge) to create a robotic *doppelgänger* of Maria in order to spur the workers into violent revolt so that he can crush them once and for all. Disguised as an exotic dancer, the android turns its charm to the men of the upper class, driving them into a state of lustful mania before moving on to the workers in the catacombs beneath the city. As planned, it inspires them to rebel against Fredersen and the machines. The orchestrated uprising leads to a massive flood that threatens to destroy the city. The film climaxes with the False Maria being burned at the stake, revealing her mechanical form. Through the ruin wrought by the female android, the director presents technology as a force that, when wielded irresponsibly, can destabilize society. This recurring trope of the female android embodying the dangers of technological advancement is not unique to *Metropolis*.

The character trope of the female android is found in many forms of science fiction media, from Rachel in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) to Major in Mamoru Oshii's *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) to Olimpia in E.T.A. Hoffmann's 1816 short story "The Sandman" (*Der Sandmann*). These artificially created beings, designed to resemble human women, often allegorize deeper social concerns and contemporary issues. Female androids explore themes of gender, identity, autonomy, and humanity and invite audiences to ponder their more abstract fears. Eric Wilson writes in his 2006 book *The Melancholy Android* that, "...the androids haunting the edifices of the imagination serve as

especially luminous unveilings of hidden psychologies concerning the machine" (3). Wilson's theory that androids reveal hidden anxieties about technology lends credence to my interpretation of the female android in *Metropolis* as an embodiment of Weimar-era fears about mechanization and control.

This essay will explore how the power of the female android figure has many implications for the role of technology in Weimar society's future. Specifically, I will examine how Fritz Lang uses the female android to allegorize the power that weaponized technology poses to humanity. Through discourse analysis, I will explain the allegory by building upon a foundation of existing scholarship on androids—specifically female androids—and their roles in cautionary science fiction narratives. Additionally, I will examine *Metropolis* through a critical lens to understand how its representation of the female android and its message reflect a period of intense social and cultural change for Germany. I argue that Lang's *Maschinenmensch* (German for machine-man) stays true to the established tropes of the female android and is a physical manifestation of Weimar Germany's anxieties surrounding gender politics, national identity, and the broader implications of industrial progress. The power of the female android figure has many implications for the role of technology in Weimar society's future.

2. The Dangers of the Machine

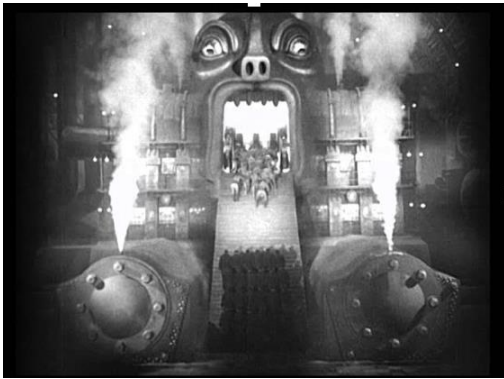


Figure 2. A still from *Metropolis* showing the awful power of Moloch the Machine-God.

Freder, having crept into the depths of the worker city, cries out in terror at the sight of a machine explosion that kills or injures dozens of laborers. Suddenly, the gargantuan machine opens to reveal the hideous face of Moloch, the machine god. Shirtless men in chains are dragged up a set of stairs into its metallic, gaping mouth. The men at the front of the horde are thrown into its jaws by emotionless servants of the beast. They fight back against their captors to no avail. Behind them, a group of uniformed workers march up the stairs. They need no chains to pull them into the maw (Fig. 2). Moloch's hunger is ceaseless, and a never-ending stream of lugubrious men can only do so much to sate it. This hallucinatory scene appears early in the film, and, with it, the director is implying that humanity is now complicit in its enslavement to the machine. The shirtless men in chains invoke visions of the great civilizations of the past—Egypt, Greece, the Maya—as they are dragged to their deaths. The modern men go willingly. Using the female android, Lang seeks to tell us why.

Over the course of the film's impressive two-and-a-half-hour runtime, we, the audience, bear witness to a vision of unchecked technological power. The machines in *Metropolis* have the power to bewitch and enslave, leaving

humanity at their mercy. Tom Gunning suggests in his book *The Films of Fritz Lang* that humanity's relationship with machines, as depicted in *Metropolis*, is intended to serve as a warning "of the future as triumph of the machine" (Gunning 2000, 55). Thus, the machines in *Metropolis*, and by extension the movie itself, are a vision of Weimar Germany's future if its current trajectory continues. World War I, the "War to End All Wars," showed the world the awful strength of modern mechanized warfare, with millions killed by high-powered artillery, poisonous gases, and air raid bombs. As Thomas Elsaesser writes in his book *Metropolis*, horror at such widespread slaughter and destruction "powerfully obsessed literature and the arts after the First World War," leading to the German Expressionist movement that defined Weimar-era cinema (Elsaesser 2000, 48). This obsession with death on such a massive scale is reflected and embodied by the female android in *Metropolis*. Elsaesser posits that the machines we are shown in *Metropolis* that "ingest, devour and excrete human beings" are allegories for the "total war machine" that saw the slaughter of so many Germans during World War I (Elsaesser 2000, 48). The idea of the devouring machine is shown explicitly in the scene with Moloch, which is described above, but when we look more closely at the rest of *Metropolis*, we can deduce that the danger of technology is often much more subtle. Technology's true power lies not in its ability to devour human beings, but to control them. Fritz Lang uses the female android figure to show that technology has the ability to consume both body and mind.

In the film, the *Maschinenmensch* is shown to be capable of manipulating human minds on a massive scale. Created by the mad inventor Rotwang and ordered by Joh Fredersen "to visit those in the depths, in order to destroy the work of the woman in whose image [she was] created," the

female android masterfully sows division among the laborers in the worker city and incites a destructive rebellion. The director's decision to use a female android as his allegory, rather than a more traditionally masculine machine as we see with the god Moloch, shows viewers that advanced technology's strength is more subversive than the brutish engines of old. Jerold J. Abrams calls the female android a fusion in "The Dialect of Enlightenment in *Metropolis*," writing, "...the Machine Woman is to be part ancient, mythological evil and part futuristic technology" (Abrams and Sanders 2008, 167). *Metropolis*'s female android allegorizes the specific dangers of modern technology—technology that does not overpower through physical force but through manipulation and illusion. The film warns of technology's capacity to consume both body and mind, but it also exposes its more insidious role as an instrument of control wielded by the ruling elite.

3. The Machine as a Tool of the Ruling Elite

Frenzied workers reach for the hand of their beloved Maria, who has seemingly abandoned all semblance of pacifism as she shouts, "Who is the living food for the machines in Metropolis?!...Who lubricates the machine joints with their own blood?!...Who feeds the machines with their own flesh...?! Let the machines starve, you fools! Let them die-!!" Kill them- the machines-!!" The laborers watch her hungrily, hanging on to every word (Fig. 3). As planned, the workers obey the False Maria, ignoring the warning cries of their foreman as they tear the Heart Machine apart. The destruction of the Heart Machine triggers a massive flood in the city, threatening the workers' homes and families. The False Maria has performed exactly as designed.



Figure 3. A still from *Metropolis* illustrating the power that the False Maria holds over the minds of the workers.

Machines and technology are depicted as the enemy of the working man throughout *Metropolis*. The scene described above is perhaps the most illustrative of the power the android wields—the power to drive men mad, beckoning them into the maw of the machine. Joh Fredersen harnesses this power to regain control over an impending worker uprising, thereby reasserting the technocratic upper class's domination of the underworld workers. With the *Maschinenmensch*, Lang takes his argument for the danger of the war machine a step further by arguing that the hazards of technology lie not in its autonomous power but in the intention of who controls it. Scott Bukatman argues a similar point in "Disobedient Machines: Animation and Autonomy," writing, "Synthetic creation narratives are about, among other things, the harnessing of power—perhaps inappropriate power—a power that dazzles and seduces" (Bukatman 2011, 129-30). The *Maschinenmensch* certainly carries the power to dazzle and seduce, and its power is abused by both Rotwang and Joh Fredersen. In *The Melancholy Android*, Eric Wilson describes the *Maschinenmensch* not as an automaton, but as a "subtle tool to quell vitality," with the use of the word 'tool' further evidencing the idea that the False Maria is merely another puppet under the control of the surface elite.

(Wilson 2006, 117). In the end, it is Frederersen and Rotwang's competing desires for control that lead to a disastrous reckoning.

The female android's ability to sow division among the classes culminates in widespread devastation. The flood triggered by the ruin of the Heart Machine is the ultimate consequence of this unchecked power. By portraying the upper class as removed from the devastation in the worker city, Lang critiques the social elite's ability to incite chaos while remaining untouched by its consequences. Ann Drummond examines the historical context of this criticism in her dissertation essay titled *Metropolis: An Historical and Political Analysis*, writing:

By the outbreak of the First World War, Germany was second only to the USA in terms of industrial production...For the academic intelligentsia, many traditional values were eroded, and in particular, their economic predominance receded with the rise of wealthy entrepreneurs and bankers. The result was the emergence of a second phase of romanticism in German culture, which was not a definable movement, but rather a strong current of romantic anticapitalism in academic and philosophical circles, as well as among individual writers and artists. (Drummond, 76)

The growing divide between classes in Weimar Germany is exaggerated in Lang's *Metropolis*, perhaps intended to serve as another warning of the dangers of disunity in the face of national turmoil. Drummond continues, noting that the German expressionist movement was part of a larger earlier 20th-century romantic movement: "Like other contemporary avant-garde movements such as Futurism and Surrealism, it represented a critique of bourgeois society from within the ranks of the middle classes and was a curious blend of both reactionary and progressive elements." (Drummond 1987, 78). As Drummond

observes, criticisms of the European ruling elites were not uncommon in media released during this time. These new artistic tendencies illustrate a further stratification of European social classes in the aftermath of the global conflict. David B. Clarke explains in "*Metropolis, Blood and Soil: The Heart of a Heartless World*" that this postwar European class stratification manifests itself throughout *Metropolis*, writing "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," (Clarke 2015, 826). However, despite *Metropolis's* "reactionary and progressive" portrayals of the class dichotomy, we quickly see that all characters have a common weakness: the mesmeric power of the female android (Drummond 1987, 78).

4. The Machine as the Enemy of Unity



Figure 4. A still from *Metropolis* showing the False Maria's performance at the Yoshiwara nightclub.



Figure 5. A still from *Metropolis* that illustrates the False Maria's ability to bend the masses to its will.

Soon after the female android is released to do the biddings of Rotwang and Joh Fredersen, an ominous intertitle appears, reading "The Eternal Gardens lie abandoned...but night after night in Yoshiwara..." (*Metropolis* 1927). On the stage of one of the city's luxurious nightclubs, the *Maschinenmensch* puts hundreds under its spell through its gyrating dances and skillful control of the enthralled crowds. Later, in the depths of a network of subterranean tunnels, the android gives its passionate sermon, urging its audience toward rebellion against the machines that consume them.

Throughout the movie, the machine-woman embodies technology's hold on the minds of men, and this is most explicit in the scenes described above. While the android was created to manipulate the men of the underworld, it proves to be just as adept at controlling the upper-class citizens of Metropolis. We see this in a shot in the nightclub scene, in which dozens of outstretched hands reach out from their tuxedo sleeves to touch the False Maria (Fig. 4). This shot is echoed later by a sequence wherein the underworld laborers reach for the machine-woman as it whips them into a rebellious frenzy (Fig. 5). These moments in the film underscore Lang's argument that technology has the power to control all classes,

even those that are so often free from consequence.

In the final scene of the film, Grot, the foreman of the underworld workers, and Joh Fredersen, the ruler of Metropolis, join hands. Their reconciliation is facilitated by Joh's son, Freder. No technology is present in this shot, implying that Lang's vision for the future of our society is one that emphasizes the value of human connection over industry. Thea von Harbou, author of the novel that inspired *Metropolis* (and Fritz Lang's wife), named the machine-woman Futura, which translates from Latin to English as 'the future' (Elsaesser 2000, 12). However, when Lang and von Harbou adapted *Metropolis* (1925) for the screen, the android was simply referred to as the *Maschinenmensch*. This subtle change in *Metropolis* (1927) suggests a shift in Lang and von Harbou's vision for the future of the human race. By offering a glimpse of the dystopian future Lang sees humanity barreling toward and saying, "It doesn't have to be this way," the film suggests to its audience that it is within their power to steer their collective trajectory towards positive change for all. In "The Imagination of Disaster," Susan Sontag writes that "Science-technology-is conceived of as the great unifier. Thus, the science fiction films also project a utopian fantasy" (Sontag 1965, 47). It may be difficult to understand how this sentiment relates to *Metropolis* when the film relies so heavily on the villainy of the machine to further its narrative. In order to understand its role in uniting the citizens of Metropolis, we must examine the role the defeat of the female android plays in the resolution of the story.

Technology in *Metropolis* is an obstacle that prevents the film's characters from uniting in the name of the common good; the machines of the underworld force the workers into endless labor, the *Maschinenmensch* deceives and manipulates both the upper and lower classes, and

the destruction of the Heart Machine nearly drowns the workers' children, showing that technology repeatedly drives conflict and division. At the climax of the film, when the workers realize they have been deceived, they tie the False Maria to a stake and set her ablaze. As she burns, her robotic body is revealed, and the *Maschinenmensch* is destroyed. Sontag suggests in "The Imagination of Disaster" that science fiction offers reassurance by framing contemporary anxieties as solvable crises (Sontag 1965, 42). Thus, adhering to the convention of its genre, the final scene of *Metropolis* resolves the crisis of the female android and offers audiences some hope in the face of despair. This hope is meaningful, even if it is just a fantasy.

5. Conclusion

As we have established, the female android in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* allegorizes Weimar Germany's evolving fears regarding the power of technology. The film explores the role of technology as a tool of the technocratic elite that is weaponized against the working class, as well as its potential to manipulate and enslave all classes. However, by dismantling the female android at the climax of the film, Lang presents a solution to this crisis of the machine. *Metropolis's* conclusion offers a ray of hope to its audiences with its closing intertitle that reads "The mediator between head and hands must be the heart!" Therefore, as Sontag writes, technology (or at the very least its destruction) is the great unifier (Sontag 1965, 47). The final intertitle of *Metropolis* represents a plea for utopic harmony, wherein Lang implores his audience to reconcile their differences in the name of building a better future for themselves and their children. *Metropolis's* conclusion reemphasizes that Weimar Germany must reject blind allegiance to technology and those who wield it for control.

Only by embracing empathy and unity can Germany hope to escape the dystopian trajectory that Lang envisioned. The film's poignant closing message underscores the importance of human connection, reasserting Lang's message that humanity must free itself from the machine (Fig. 6).

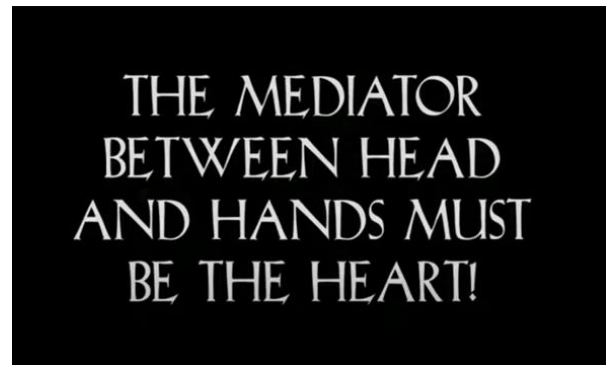


Fig. 6, the final intertitle of *Metropolis*

Looking at *Metropolis* from our contemporary moment can offer a basis for discussions surrounding other works of science fiction as they relate to ideas about class and technology. *Metropolis* is rapidly approaching its centennial anniversary, but the film continues to provide valuable commentary on the human condition and inspire questions about the implications of technology in society. The underlying messages of *Metropolis*—that technology represents a very real threat to social progress and that all members of society, regardless of class, are vulnerable to exploitation by it—remain extraordinarily relevant in the digital age. With the rapid development of artificial intelligence, questions about the dangers of unchecked technological power persist. It is important that we continue to revisit *Metropolis* and other cautionary tales from areas we may dismiss as bygone, especially if we never heeded their warnings in the first place.

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