Thea von Harbou and Fritz Lang Imagine *Metropolis*

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OCTOBER 1924: FRITZ LANG ALLEGEDLY ENVISIONS THE FUTURE

In the autumn of 1924, Fritz Lang, a German Expressionist filmmaker, embarked on a tour of the United States. UFA, Lang's home studio had charged him with two stated objectives. As the talented director who bought Die Nibelungen to the big screen, Lang introduced his latest epic to American audiences and would encounter Hollywood's most influential producers, artists, and talented technical innovators in hopes of learning the latest production techniques that were rapidly emerging in the world's cinematic capital. (McGilligan, 1997, 104) Because of his alien status, Fritz Lang was compelled to remain aboard the SS Deutschland until a US visa could be arranged. As Lang's ship lay anchored in the New York harbor, the 34-year-old director was awestruck by the striking vertical Manhattan skyline, its electrically powered illumination, ambient sounds, and redolent aromas. According to Fritz Lang's personal reminiscences, his inspiration for the visual realizations of the future motion picture that would become *Metropolis*, invaded his senses that evening. (Bogdanovich, 1967, 6) Fritz Lang's account emphasizing that his initial inspiration for *Metropolis* was the direct result of having been awestruck by Manhattan's glimmering nocturnal skyline has become legendary, but is not, in fact, completely accurate.

Thea von Harbou, Fritz Lang's wife, enjoyed a reputation as a prolific author of literature that drew on German folklore, legends, and fairy tales. von Harbou established a practice of releasing her novels simultaneously with the motion picture based on the book. As early as April 1924, Lang and von Harbou were at work on the novel that would be the basis for *Metropolis*. When Lang and von Harbou visited Vienna, the July 4, 1924, edition of Illustrierties Wiener Extrablatt reported that the couple would enjoy a working vacation in the Alps near Salzburg. Finishing the screenplay for their new collaboration, *Metropolis*, was the stated goal (McGilligan, 1997, 109). Even before UFA sent Fritz Lang and colleague, producer, and fellow director Erich Pommer to Hollywood in October, Thea von Harbou had completed the *Metropolis* storyline replete with the scenes that would become familiar to future viewers. Thea von Harbou created descriptions of the utopian upper world built by slaves who populated a netherworld of advanced industrialization maintained by miserable laborers. The story's heroine, Maria, a would-be savior-turned-martyr is a character straight out of Teutonic mythology (Ibid., 110).

Film scholars appreciate *Metropolis* on any number of levels as the film nears its centenary year, but in its initial release, Thea von Harbou's screenplay was criticized for its sentimentality (Bachmann, 1996, 3). British science fiction genre pioneer, H. G. Wells, extensively reviewed *Metropolis* for *The New York Times Magazine*, and provided ample evidence of numerous previous works, including his own, from which von Harbou lifted characterizations, situations, settings, motifs, and themes without attribution (Wells, 1927, 4, 22). Dubbed "The Countess of Kitsch," Thea von Harbou never apologized for her composition formula of haphazardly combining national nostalgia, regional mythology, and popular conventions into best-selling novels and financially successful motion pictures (Keiner, 1984). Given a screenplay that was rife with trivialities and unoriginal by every measure, the makers of *Metropolis* faced the formidable task of elevating the production's impact by dint of the possibilities spectacular visuals presented. In the face of this seemingly overwhelming liability, Fritz Lang found an opportunity to display his genius.

Following Lang's return from the United States, *Film-Kurier*, a popular German trade publication, printed essays the director wrote detailing his American adventures in stunning terms (Lang, 1924, n. p.). Although Fritz Lang was generous in his praise of New York's visual assets, pulsating pace, and aesthetically pleasing architecture, the director left unwritten palpable evidence that darker, unpleasant influences were in force beneath the city's surface. The director's awareness of anxiety, desperation, avarice, and extralegal activities leavened his enthusiasm for the aspects Lang deemed to be exhilarating. The ambivalence Lang noticed also influenced his film sense as *Metropolis* came into sharper focus (Bachmann, 1996, 5). In retrospect, Fritz Lang's reaction to the vistas of New York City represent less of a sudden, monumental inspiration based on an unanticipated first impression, than the realization of Thea von Harbou's narrative which had been on his mind for months. New York's night skyline provided Fritz Lang with a model reflecting the setting of von Harbou's novel, but certainly

not an image that inspired a future screenplay because *Metropolis* was already effectively completed.

SPRING 1925: IMAGINING THE FANTASTIC

More than 40 years after *Metropolis* premiered, Fritz Lang recalled the challenges involved in transforming Thea von Harbou's novel to the big screen. The director spoke in grandiose terms of presenting a conflict between "modern science" and "occultism" with an "evil magician" as the agent responsible for the resulting chaos. (Bogdanovich, 1967, 124) A conflict, central to von Harbou's original story, between the technologically advanced robots and a subterranean proletariat condemned to service the machinery remained in the final script. Critic Hans Siemsen concluded, incorrectly, that the conflict was "official Germany in its entirety as we know it and experience it first-hand every day" (Siemsen, 1927, 949). Stripped of so many significant science fiction and supernatural elements that would have distinguished *Metropolis*, the surviving plot reflected the reasons Thea von Harbou was derisively called "Lady Kitschener"(Keiner, 1984). Lang indicated that many of his ideas proved to be impractical, that proposed elements of science fiction were abandoned, and that without the "courage" to retain magical aspects, that the script lost enough compelling components that the resulting film had a patchwork quality (Bogdanovich, 1967, 124.) Nevertheless, Fritz Lang and Thea von Harbou took their imperfect script to their UFA colleagues with every expectation that a talented cast and skillful technicians would deliver a sensational production.

In the early Spring of 1925, Fritz Lang boasted to The New York Times that his forthcoming production of *Metropolis* would be Europe's most expensive, feature a cast of thousands, require constructing enormous sets, and create special effects that would eclipse any that were previously devised. Lang's swagger was neither hyperbole nor exaggeration. Behind the headlines, UFA executives braced themselves for the anticipated, but, nonetheless, staggering impacts. Producer Erich Pommer never expected that *Metropolis* would be profitable, and his most ardent hope was that the film might eventually break even at the box office. The most realistic goal was to release a blockbuster that would impress Hollywood's moguls and gain a toehold for UFA in American markets. Fritz Lang's prediction that *Metropolis* would be the costliest motion picture to date proved prescient; the production would nearly bankrupt UFA and result in Erich Pommer's abrupt dismissal from the company (McGilligan, 1997, p. 110).

UFA's production team, although thoroughly professional, was not free from the frictions of interpersonal conflict. Fritz Lang always had clear ideas about what he wanted viewers to see on the screen and was not overly appreciative of the length to which his colleagues routinely went to realize the director's visions. Cameraman Carl Hoffman had expertly brought Lang's concepts to the screen in previous projects but was unavailable to lens *Metropolis*. Fortunately, producer Erich Pommer successfully exerted his considerable tact and influence to coax a sometimes-reluctant ensemble to acquiesce in working with Fritz Lang. "Papa" Karl Freund, already a legend in European cinema, was cajoled into joining the production team despite his personal enmity toward director Lang. Freund's grudge stemmed from his suspicion that Fritz Lang was directly responsible for the director's first wife's death that was officially ruled a suicide. Pommer promised Freund that the cinematographer would have limited interactions with Lang if he deigned to take the assignment. And, because Freund never shrank from an artistic challenge, he knew *Metropolis* would be a sensation and was under contract to UFA, he accepted. Erich Pommer was also compelled to persuade Aenne Willkomm, a former fashion designer who rapidly ascended UFA's organizational chart to become head of the costume department, to accept the monumental task of creating thousands of outfits for *Metropolis*. One especially talented technician, Eugen Shufftan, was delighted to work on the new production. "The Shufftan Process," originally developed for, but unemployed in Gulliver's Travels, was a groundbreaking optical effect that allowed live foreground action as well as miniature background scenery to be compositely captured on film (Ibid. 111.)

Preproduction meetings were routinely scheduled for late afternoons in the apartment von Harbou and Lang shared. Participants learned early on that the hosts would provide a midevening meal, but that work sessions could extend into the small hours of the night. In addition to the author and director, camera operator Freund, and costumer Willkomm, set designers Erich Kettelhut, Otto Hunte, and Karl Vollbrecht attended the preparation conferences that began late in 1924. (Ibid., 55, 83, 94, 110-111.)

Throughout the Winter of 1924-1925, the *Metropolis* production team was almost constantly collaborating to translate the visions inspired by the New York City skyline to sets, scenery, and a shooting script. Inevitably, some of the concepts, motifs, and narratives described in Thea von Harbou's novel were abandoned due to cultural concerns over how Weimar moviegoers would receive them. Late in his career, Fritz Lang lamented his lack of courage in deciding to omit the more fantastic elements of *Metropolis*. Lang saw von Harbou's story as a clash between modern science and medieval magic. The battle between stratified societal elements, an increasingly blurred line that separates humanity and robotic machines, and inequities that leads to class warfare were

deemphasized to the point that what remained was the sentimental storyline for which Thea von Harbou's novel was most severely criticized (Bogdanovich, 1967, 124).

A serialized version of *Metropolis* was appearing in Illustrierties Blatt while the film was in production. Producer Erich Pommer's early form of multilevel marketing paid dividends with other releases, and this practice helped make Thea von Harbou one of the most famous popular German authors. Published by August Scherl, *Metropolis*, as an unabridged novel, was scheduled to coincide with the motion picture's premiere. (Kreimeier, 1995, 88, 105.) Fritz Lang's own December 1924 article in *Film-Kurier* described his ambitious visions of the city's skyline without regard for the technical challenges realizing the vistas posed to his design team. Although Lang's ideas always required trials, modifications, and adjustments, Thea von Harbou's scripts were straightforward stories heavily influenced by popular German literary predecessors. Despite von Harbou's reliance on well-worn motifs and settings, the creative team was focused on making *Metropolis* as ultramodern as Die Nibelungen had been traditional. Germany of the 1920's featured artistic foment, competing schools of thought, and a constant influx of suddenly new and always conflicting styles and movements. Fritz Lang's creative staff openly engaged exponents of Surrealist, Bauhaus, Expressionist, Dada, and even Fantasist votaries in creating the futuristic city. Elements of most contemporary art forms are in evidence in the *Metropolis* photoplay. Fritz Lang's German biographer, Heide Schonemann, acknowledged the film's avant-garde nature by observing, "The beauty and the horror of the machine world would excite many artists" (Schonemann, 1992). In his memoirs, Erich Kettelhut described the seemingly interminable discussions related to set design. Although Kettelhut wanted to present "The Tower of Babel," one of the futuristic city's central images, as a round building that rose to a pinnacle, colleague Otto Hunte's design was more traditional. Cinematographers Karl Freund and Gunther Rittau advocated for Kettelhut's design. However, Fritz Lang, who had studied art and painting as a young man, showed colleagues his own renderings that resembled Hunte's "Tower." Following a protracted, sometimes heated argument Kettelhut, Freund, and Rittau lost the debate. As design compromises progressed, the Lang/von Harbou proposals increasingly prevailed. Team members began to realize, with no small sense of resentment, that the decisions regarding scene, shots, and sets had been made in advance. Fritz Lang's finicky attention to detail caused consternation among creative staff members who were suddenly relieved when producer Erich Pommer entreated his director to move forward with casting. With Lang's attentions diverted, Eugen Shufftan and Karl Freund could begin work on filming the opening scenes of *Metropolis* unencumbered (McGilligan, 1997, 112.).

310 DAYS, SIXTY NIGHTS, AND 5,000,000+ REICHSMARKS LATER…

When Fritz Lang boasted that *Metropolis* would be a production on a colossal scale, the ledger proved him to be correct. After Fritz Lang left his technicians began transforming the written descriptions of the upper and nether worlds to the screen, he began assessing the available acting talent to cast an ensemble that would portray the various roles. One of Lang's notable practices as a director was to bring new faces to the screen. In the leading role of Maria, Brigitte Helm, an unknown actress with no previous motion picture credits, was, seemingly a "find" of Lang's. Not yet twenty years of age, Miss Helm was guaranteed prominence, if not stardom, by dint of headlining a production as momentous as *Metropolis*. But, at the time of her casting, she had no inkling of the pressures Lang would impose, the rigors she would endure, or impossibly high standards the director would expect, and exact from her in the coming year. Industry insiders would joke that Fritz Lang's penchant for "discovering" new talent that resulted in "a virgin star" being featured in every production. If Brigitte Helm became known as "The Virgin of Babelsburg," her castmates represented UFA's repertory company of actors who regularly appeared in Fritz Lang's motion pictures (Ibid, 114).

Special effects, that included filming the fabulous transportation modes that operated in the futuristic city, utilizing the Shufftan Process to portray live action against enlargements of complex miniatures, and the on-camera endowment of life in the robot Maria, were not always immediately successful. Through persistent trial and error, flaws were patiently overcome. Those triumphs required patience, good humor, and formidable expenditures of resources. Fritz Lang's directorial style was to drive his company relentlessly, and the actors were not alone when it came to meeting great expectations. In addition to the technical advancements that elevated *Metropolis*'s visual impact, Fritz Lang's architects fabricated some monumental sets both internal and external. With *Metropolis*, Lang's behind-the-scenes colleagues presented an amalgamation of cinematic techniques that had never been seen previously. Fritz Lang's sojourn in Hollywood gave him first-hand exposure to developing technologies appertaining to stop-action filming as well as combining live action shots with miniatures. Fortunately for Lang and his associates, UFA's long tradition of presenting supernatural stories disposed studio leaders to accept the excesses involved in bringing *Metropolis*'s visuals to fruition (Minden and Bachmann, 2000, 16-17).

UFA's technicians brought all their considerable talent to bear as scenes from Thea von Harbou's screenplay were transformed into the photoplay. Although the enormous sets, skillful miniatures, matte shots, forced perspectives, and imaginative uses of the Shufftan Process would impress audiences and critics alike, Fritz Lang's staff created stunning illusions by cleverly utilizing much more commonplace materials. Other scenes, such as depicting the various modes of transportation in the great city in motion was the result of painstakingly capturing stop-action footage that was exposed a few frames at a time. Gunther Rittau described the tedious task involved when creating the illusion of vehicles transversing roadways. A technician would move vehicles a few centimeters, and a camera operator would roll the camera ahead a few frames. The routine was repeated thousands of times over the course of an entire week to produce forty meters of film that would run for less-than ten seconds when projected on a screen. Erich Kettelhut indicated that only the most persevering of technicians were able to convincingly provide such special effects (Rittau, 1927, 6).

Of all the astonishing scenes Fritz Lang and company brought to the screen in creating *Metropolis*, transforming the mechanical robot into the "False Maria" remains the film's most sensational sequence. Cinematographer Gunther Rittau devised the use of a black velvet silhouette in the exact shape of the robot Maria that would allow the use of illuminated light rings that would appear to surround the apparently seated figure. Fashioned from a food grade wrapping material known in Europe as "Stullen-papier," the light rings appear to brightly glow. Two rings were photographed in each take. The process, when repeated six times, would produce the effect of twelve light rings imbuing the "False Maria" with life. When Brigitte Helm herself was photographed via a final superimposition in the place of the velvet silhouette, the image of the robot being brought to life by dint of the twelve light rings was stunningly realized on-screen (Giesen, 2008, 39.)

Like Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein, Fritz Lang was interested in creating visual impact. In collaboration with Karl Freund, Lang used the camera in unorthodox ways. By suspending the camera and allowing it to swing like a pendulum, viewers could sense the reverberations of a cataclysmic explosion. Using superimposition, a character's discomfort and anxiety could be effectively conveyed. Karl Freund understood visual expressions of terror's power, and how that dynamic would elevate a scene's influence on viewers. Freund would apply these lessons in Hollywood a few years later in Universal horror movies including *Dracula* and *The Mummy*, which he also directed.

At the time of its release, *Metropolis* was the most expensive German film. Fritz Lang's perfectionism impelled him to film multiple retakes of complicated scenes without significant regard for his actors' comfort or safety. These practices led critics to characterize the director as "fanatical." Although Fritz Lang's notoriety accompanied him throughout his long career, his style was hardly unique among UFA's directorial corps. F.W. Murnau, E.A. DuPont, and Arthur von Gerlach, all Erich Pommer's directors, also conducted themselves in a manner strikingly similar to Fritz Lang in terms of excessive ego, stretching human and economic limits, and commitment to the highest standards of cinematic expression. Nevertheless, it was Fritz Lang, no doubt buttressed by the spectacle that is *Metropolis*, that placed him above that august group of filmmaking legends, as a notoriously importunate artist. Erich Pommer stood as UFA's most accomplished and successful producer, no small thanks to the fact that *Metropolis* symbolized the studio's standing as Weimar Germany's most influential social and cultural exponent (Kreimeier, 1995, 188).

Fritz Lang had no illusions that the *Metropolis* shooting script reflected fewer of the fantastic elements described in Thea von Harbou's novel than he would have preferred. In retrospect, the director expressed ruefulness when he considered abandoned plot elements, truncated characterizations, and insurmountable challenges his technical team faced to transform some of the action from the page to the screen. In an interview with American filmmaker Peter Bogdanovich, Fritz Lang lamented the fact that once the promised magic of *Metropolis* had been discarded, the story seemed to be less cohesive and more a pastiche of scenes. Although Fritz Lang regretted that he could not realize all the fabulous potential found in von Harbou's novel, he was able to retain the kernels of inspiration that he could use in later projects. For example, Lang originally wanted the hero to escape the chaotic city by flying off to the galaxy. Although that climactic conclusion was not to be seen in *Metropolis*, Thea von Harbou retained the idea as the basis for 1929's Woman in the Moon that her husband would successfully direct (Bogdanovich, 1967, 125).

"A DURABLE GABARDINE SUIT"

There may be a fine line between a ritual and a superstition. Just prior to the commencement of shooting a new motion picture, Fritz Lang would visit Knize's, a Viennese bespoke men's clothing establishment that had a shop in Berlin's and be fitted for a what *Metropolis* cast member Gustav Frohlich described as, "A durable gabardine suit." Frohlich, one of Fritz Lang's favorite actors, was a keen observer when it came to his boss's habits. The director would not wear the custom-made suit to the studio but change into it before he went on-set. Lang would wear the same wardrobe while working and leave the suit to be brushed and hung in his office when shoot-

ing was finished for the day. When *Metropolis* finally wrapped, Fritz Lang gifted the well-worn suit of clothes to Gustav Puttcher, his obsequious assistant. Lang would observe this practice after every production (McGilligan, 1997, 128).

Although a tailor-made outfit was Puttcher's official reward for his steadfast service, the suit was also symbolic for the director. Every "durable gabardine suit" represented an extension of Fritz Lang himself like a layer of armor worn for the duration of a given production. When the film was completed, Lang sloughed off the garments like a layer of skin as if to indicate that the battle was won, and he was free to take on another challenge. Lang's work suit also served as a costume that anointed him to play the megalomaniacal "meister" of the director's chair while it was worn, and allowed a return, for better and worse, to his true personality when it was removed.

AFTERWORD

Thea von Harbou and Fritz Lang ended their successful professional and marital relationships as Germany's Nation Socialist Political Party ascended to prominence in the mid-1930's.

So respected was Lang's work that Nazi Party officials invited the legendary director to lead UFA studios. Fritz Lang declined the invitation by pawning his wife's jewels and absconding to the United States via Paris. Once in Hollywood, Fritz Lang cemented his legacy as a great filmmaker by directing 22 feature motion pictures. In 1963, Lang appeared as himself in Jacques Cocteau's *Contempt*, his final film. Across the next decade, Fritz Lang burnished his legacy and reputation through a series of articles and interviews until his death in 1976 at the age of 85 years (Ibid. 473-415).

Thea von Harbou elected to remain in Germany as the shaky political landscape of the Weimar Republic gave way to the Third Reich. von Harbou successfully wrote and directed 22 "State Films" in her new capacity as a Nazi Party member. Thea von Harbou continued to advocate for women's and workers' rights under the new regime. Steadfast to her country until the Second World War's conclusion, Thea von Harbou was subsequently imprisoned by the British and forced to be a "rubble woman" scavenging in the ruins of Berlin. In declining health, von Harbou continued to write until complications related to high blood pressure claimed her life at the age of 65 in 1954 (Ibid, pp. 413-414).

Critics may have derided *Metropolis* for its sentimental plot elements, but none had anything but praise for the audacity of the prodigious collaborations that inspired the production's special effects and technical achievements. Across the past century, audiences have been, and continue to be, astounded by the motion picture's powerful impact.

Although the spectacle that is *Metropolis* will continue to be viewed, discussed, and appreciated by cinema aficionados the world over, the genesis of the film's ingenuity was conceived during languid, cozy Berlin afternoons in the fertile imaginations of Fritz Lang and Thea von Harbou.

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