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Technology as Witchcraft

Fear and Desire: A Female Robot in Fritz Lang's Metropolis

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In spite of critical judgments, texts of popular culture are often vehicles of socially significant meanings which, because of mass distribution and the nature of the production aiming to select and present universally shared stereotypes, may be the strongest and the most articulate reflections of opinions prevailing in the society. This seems especially true about high-budget entertainment films – on the one hand, formally standardised and homogenised by producers and, on the other hand, willingly squeezed into conventions of particular genres by film-makers themselves.

The rules of film genres appear even stronger than the pressure to make films profitable as they are based on universal familiarity and acceptance of well-worn representational conventions. Uniting both creative artists and the cinematic audience around implicitly accepted values and unobjectionable ways of interpreting reality, these rules seem to operate as vehicles of cultural models which have been fixed by the media. Like modern equivalents of archaic myths, they create narrations that impose order on the world of a modern human being, building a desired image out of stereotypical constructions of narrative events, conventionalised decorations, costumes and props.

Naturally, the image of the world created in such a way is hardly ever comprehensive enough to unify the society as a whole into a cinematic audience. Usually, films belonging to particular genres meet clearly distinguished needs of considerable social groups or aggregates, clearly different from one another because of features fundamental to their identities. The clearest division in the cinematographic production is that between male and female audience and their differing interests and needs (no matter whether this is because of the psychological makeup or cultural gender construction).

One of genres typically regarded as 'masculine' is science-fiction film. According to S. Chibnall "like the Western, war and gangster stories, science fiction developed as a male genre" (Chibnall, 1999: 57). This claim is justified not only by the attractive sense of danger enjoyed by viewers of SF films but primarily by a specifically defined manner of treating science and technology. According to historians of the genre, "with its focus sometimes on science and technology as 'toys for the boys' and its relationship to genres such as horror and the western, the appeal of science fiction might be considered chiefly to be masculine" (King and Krzywinska, 2000: 37).

As a 'masculine' film genre, science-fiction also becomes inevitably involved in expressing a masculine way of perceiving sexuality. By this, technology and femininity become juxtaposed in a stereotypically masculinised perception of values, a collision of the world of controlled gadgets with unbridled, incomprehensible otherness of women. In SF films, female sexuality is usually an object of desire and erotic fantasies of male audience, separated from fulfilment by a barrier of strangeness that emanates from sexually attractive female characters: aliens from outer space, cyborgs, robots.

There appears a tension between desire and fear of the desired one. In his essay *Alien Women. The Politics of Sexual Difference in British* SF *Pulp Cinema*, S. Chibnall notes that "a significant number of films combine female monstrosity and otherness with male erotic spectatorship. These 'sexy alien' movies clearly mix fear of female sexuality with excitement about its possibilities (Chibnall, 1999: 58). On the other hand, it is "indeed the relationship between man and machine rather than between man and woman" (Chibnall, 1999: 57) that defines the major theme of SF texts and delimits the domain of male power which men would like to extend from submissively obedient machines to the sexuality of the female body. For this reason, it seems, "feminist critiques

of technology revealed the associations between masculinity and technology as perpetuating men's domination over women" (Toffoletti, 2007: 162).

To restore a proper perspective, however, it should be noted that, first of all, "SF films have provided the popular imagination with some of its most compelling visions of both the possibilities and the dangers of a future increasingly dominated by advanced technologies" (Booker, 2006: 266). By this, as M.K. Booker thinks of American science-fiction films, "such films, despite being widely regarded as mere entertainments, have often provided serious and thoughtful explorations of important contemporary social and political issues (Booker, 2006: 266), which, when noticed, show more clearly contemporary phenomena from a perspective of technological progress of our culture.

Technology, then, as a practical effect of science following from rationalism, sets the basic scope of themes for science-fiction works, giving a special character to the worlds presented there. At the same time, "the flexibility to speak both positively and negatively about science and technology is one of the genre's most telling characteristics" (JTelotte, 2009: 42).

In 1927, science-fiction as a film genre did not exist yet. It was to be brought to the world, entering the modern Machine Age and putting viewers in front of a mirror to show the image, both critical and full of anxiety, of a man operating machines. And it was then – I would boldly claim – that, instantaneously, there appeared a fully perfect and complete science-fiction film of a canonical status before the eyes of confused viewers, at first failing to comprehend the new cinematic language and its narrative confronting humanism and technology.

This peculiar genre founding film is *Metropolis* by Fritz Lang from 1927, introducing two highly important themes in the further development of science fiction cinema: a monstrous city and a robot. The analysis below focuses on the motive of a "mechanical human being" and an ambivalent attitude of fear and desire felt by viewers, afraid of chaos and delighted by controlling nature. That ambivalence concerns the attitude to technology characteristic mainly of the time of the film's premiere, due to the mechanization of work that changed, at the beginning of the 20th century, everyday life of urban residents, introducing the sense of new quality of the human relation to its cultural environment into consciousness of the masses.

The aim of the present analysis is to try to capture and examine *in statu nascendi* the ambivalent attitude to technology and its future development as a fundamental quality of a science-fiction film as a genre, extending from a collision of a human body with a machine to a confrontation of humanistic ideas with a rational utopia of modernity. This is an attempt to assist at the birth of film narration about a "mechanical human being" as a hybrid image of dilemmas following from technologization of human life.

When in 1927 *Metropolis* came out on the screens of the world from Berlin to New York, the interest of viewers was aroused by an advertising campaign for the most expensive film product for years, a super-show on a grand scale. The press shocked the viewers by emphasizing the gigantic size of the project: 750 professional actors and actresses in smaller parts, crowds of 25 thousand men, 11 thousand women and 750 children, 50 cars produced specially for the film (*Metropolis Magazine*, 1927: 24). For only one scene of building the tower of Babel, 1 thousand male extras had their heads shaven, but even that was too few for the monumental scale of the production, so the group of extras was filmed six times in order to achieve the right effect with multiplied photographs (*Metropolis Magazine*, 1927: 22). In a review from the premiere

of the American version of the film, H. G. Wells notes that "the public is given to understand that it has been produced at enormous cost" (Wells, 2004: 5), only to comment sarcastically: "Six million marks! The waste of it!" (Wells, 2004: 12).

However, unfortunately for the producers of *Metropolis*, the director's spectacular vision and the lavishness of the production did not translate into a triumphant march of the film through cinemas of the world. The film received a cool reception in Europe and America, which was reflected in unfavourable, to put it mildly, reviews on both sides of the Atlantic. As noticed by A. Huyssen, "Fritz Lang's famous and infamous extravaganza *Metropolis* has never had a good press" (Huyssen, 1981–1982: 221). The visual extraordinariness of the film was appreciated and even admired (though certainly not by everyone), but the presented story and meanings conveyed by it were accused of being excessively simplified in showing cultural dilemmas of industrialization at the beginning of the 20th century; what is worse, the film was accused of having an incoherent plot, shallow characters and conveying naïve messages.

Particularly strong, even scathing, criticism came from H. G. Wells, the authority on science fiction at the time, even if only literary one. The author of *The Time Machine* (1895), *The War of the Worlds* (1898) and *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899) accused the UFA film-makers of, first of all, the failure to understand relations in the society between technology and production, and the fear of machines, which, instead of being effective tools in the hands of qualified employees became in the German film the cause of human humiliation and slavery (Wells, 2004: 11).

A humanoid robot is an ingenious invention by Rotwang, a character in *Metropolis* more or less deliberately corresponding to the stereotype of a "mad scientist". The humanoid machine is not called a robot in the film (even without that name, its similarity to Karel Čapek's idea from his play *R.U.R.* from 1920 seems obvious, at least to H. G. Wells) – the constructor calls it *Maschinenmensch*, "the Machine-Man", which is "the man of the future".

The physical similarity of the metal construct to the human body in *Metropolis* does not exhaust the relation of identity between a human and a machine: Rotwang, at the request of the ruler of Metropolis, Joh Fredersen (John Masterman in the version for the English-language market – such a significant change to the city ruler's name in the Berlin version was made by the film distributors) gives the robot an appearance undistinguishable from an ordinary mortal ("*Erdgeborenen*"). It is the appearance of a worker called Maria, the beloved of Freder, Fredersen's son. The transformation is effected in a scene, full of visual special effects, of "electric transmission" of the body shape and facial features of the woman imprisoned by Rotwang in a metal body of the robot; with the "birth" of the mechanical beauty accompanied by flashes of lightning of powerful electric discharges, and the body forming itself in human image and likeness begins to throb with a blaze of the growing heart and blood-carrying arteries around it, surrounded by a spectral halo of bright rings.

In the cinematic fairy-tale about a process of transforming the mechanical human being into a living woman, electric transformation changes itself into an alchemical transmutation, science becomes magic, and the rationality of knowledge is replaced by mysticism of revelation. Furiously, H. G. Wells ridicules the naïve mythologizing of science and technology in the magic image of Rotwang's practices: "Then comes the crowning imbecility of the film – the conversion of the Robot into likeness of Mary". (Wells, 2004: 6), derisively sensing in the inventor's laboratory a trace of Mephistopheles, more

easy to detect than the modernism of devices generating electric discharges which on a closer inspection turn out to be flashes of lightning of a stormy Walpurgisnacht (Walpurgis Night), which in a Germany folklore is the name of the night from 30 April to 1 May, when witches hold a large celebration on the Brocken mountain.

By the surprising connection of technology with a woman's body – "Why indeed does robot, the *Maschinenmensch* created by the inventor-magician Rotwang and intended to replace the human workers, appear with the body features of a woman?" (Huyssen, 1981–1982: 224) – and a union of incomprehensible and terrifying diabolical powers of Rotwang's machines with an archetypal image of femininity as an elemental manifestation of chaotic and anti-technological powers of nature, an abnormal creature is born – the false Maria, a female robot, born from men's control of nature and matter, equally alive as a dead denial of their power.

This is because Rotwang's creature turns against – not its constructor – but Fredersen and its patriarchal control of Metropolis. The robot fulfils a task given, though in secret, by Rotwang, who wanted a revenge on Fredersen and wanted to bring the city ruler's downfall; however, the robot escapes from control altogether and leads residents of the new Babylon from carnival debauchery in the entertainment district of Yoshiwara to a chaos on the verge of doom in the city without electricity from destroyed machines. As A. Ćwikiel notes, in Rotwang's secret laboratory, there is a meeting of "virgin and robot, nature and technology" (Ćwikiel, 2003: 77).

When the false Maria is captured by a furious crowd of workers – who first believed in the robot's humanity and persuaded by it destroyed the main machine of Metropolis, unconsciously dooming their own children in the underground of the city without electricity and flooded by water – people start shouting "Burn the witch – To the stake with her!!!".

This does not seem to be merely an accidental term of abuse expressing extreme emotions of an infuriated crowd of slaves of Metropolis. First, the existence of a robot undistinguishable from a human being denies the distinction into the living and the dead, living beings and inanimate objects, clear at the level of mythical structures. The false Maria as a violation of one of the most sacred cultural boundary between life and death, evokes a sense of religious awe in the face of final existential truths. In the circle of Christian tradition, this boundary is protected by taboo even stronger than a sin – diabolism, threatened with a destructive contact with the essence of evil.

Furthermore, it should be noted that reconstructed versions of the film from 2001 and 2010, restoring *Metropolis* to the shape produced by Fritz Lang and premiered in Berlin,[1] revealed to viewers the origin of the femininity of the "mechanical human being" incorporated in a complicated melodramatic plot. It turns out that Rotwang constructed a robot having in mind his beloved named Hel, who having left him for Joh Fredersen, died while giving birth to Freder, the son of the ruler of Metropolis: "There are still bad feelings between Joh and Rotwang because both loved a woman named Hel, who chose Joh over Rotwang, and ultimately died in childbirth with Freder. … All these years, Rotwang has been toiling away in his sadness and anger, building a new kind of woman to replace Hel, a woman who will never leave him and who will never die." (Abrams, 2008: 155).

It is not clear how Rotwang's "mechanical human being" was to restore to life his dead beloved, maybe it was the inventor's paranoia from which he suffered after losing the love of his life. What is interesting, though, is

1 See updated information about versions of the film in the Internet movie database "IMDb": *Metropolis (1927)*, Alternate Versions, accessed on 9 April 2013 <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0017136/alternateversions?ref_=tt_ql_trv_5>.

the meaning of the name of the woman summoned from afterlife – Hel is the name of a Norse goddess of the underground world: "The name 'Hel' points to the mythological Norse goddess HEL. She is the guardian of the realm of the dead and therefore she is a goddess of death." (Schulze-Mittendorff, 2011), joining the mechanical creation with a dark magic of summoning the dead to the world of the living: "'Hel' is a hybrid deity; she is half black and half white, half dead and half alive. Thus she proclaims to be withholding something from those that live in the world that is only revealed through death" (Schulze-Mittendorff, 2011).

Summoning the dead, even if it actually amounts to calling up dreams for therapeutic reasons to facilitate the experience of mourning, is a magical competence which Jules Michelet ascribes to a witch. (Michelet, 1992: chap. *King of the Dead*, 61–68). In this context, the false Maria turns out to be a figure of a witch at an even darker level, associated most strongly with the sanction of being exiled from the society – as a co-participant or even performer of a terrifying act of violating the sacredness of life, a partner of satanic actions.

Second, in the narrative of *Metropolis* "[t]he false Maria becomes the whore of Babylon (from Revelations 17), riding upon a great seven-headed beast." (Abrams, 2008: 168), in the final part of the erotic dance at the "Club of the Sons", personifying sinful corruption and the resulting doom. The symbolic role assigned to the mechanical temptress is strengthened and confirmed at the level of the film narration by including the revelation of the dancing False Maria as Babylon the Great in a moralistic vision of feverish Freder, when stone figures personifying Seven Deadly Sins from the Cathedral came to life. Their ominous procession is ended by the figure of Death, raising in a prophetic gesture a scythe over Metropolis.

The female robot symbolically embodies any biblical sins leading to the fall of Metropolis as a new Babylon – and in Josaphat's story about insanity that the false Maria brings on decadent sons of wealthy men trying to win her favour, there is jealousy, anger, gambling, taking one's own or someone else's lives (duels and suicides), hedonism of luxury, alcohol and sex. But the most conspicuous is the demonic sexuality of the machine created in the likeness of a woman.

Brigitte Helm, playing the double part of Maria and her humanoid avatar, clearly contrasts the two characters with respect to their sexuality: Maria is modest, gentle and humble, shy with men and never exposing her body – unlike the false Maria, who is from the beginning lascivious, provoking, offering her body to men, transgressing without any inhibitions the intimate distance with any man. Being sexy is a tool to manipulate not only sons of the rulers of Metropolis but also workers from the Underground City, who at the meeting in the catacombs are not just beguiled by the robot's rhetoric but also seduced by her sexually aggressive behaviour.

Demonic or rather devilish – from a Christian perspective on the world – sexuality of Maria the robot is another trait strongly revealing the clear connection of the mechanical woman from Metropolis with a stereotypical image of a witch: untamed sexual passion both desired and feared by men, rejected and stigmatized in the patriarchal social order as a manifestation of a sinful relation with the devil (Michelet, 1992).

If we abandon the perspective assumed by superstitious residents of the Underground City and reject the moralizing tone of apocalyptic associations with Babylon, the female robot is no longer the devil's tool for doing harm to humanity. The humanoid, however, is still a "witch" as a female figure in

a patriarchal world dominated by men holding power and machines setting the life in Metropolis in order. The false Maria copies structural features of the cultural, if not historical, position of a witch in a mythologized order of the world: excluded from the hierarchy of power, she challenges and threatens it. Her feminine sexuality arouses uncontrolled desire in men, and the way she exploits her sexual attraction undermines their domination. Her unrestrained sexuality, unyielding to male domination, is tempting and disturbing, attractive and terrifying; and the more it inclines men to succumb to her, the stronger she should be broken, to return to the patriarchal control.

If this fails, she must be exiled from the social system, before a conscious rebellion starts, destroyed and burnt at the stake.

The same duality defines also the false Maria as a robot: she is a machine created by a man to replace a dead woman and controlled by another man to strengthen his power over the city and workers. To construct the robot, Rotwang sacrificed his hand; Frederson, awed and fascinated, looks at the metal body of the mechanical woman, feeling equally ambivalent about the robot made to resemble Maria. The men want to have full control of her and she escapes both of them. Furthermore, for both of them, she is a tool for achieving the most important goals, which she at the same time threatens: becoming a woman, she did not become Hel; inspiring the rebellion of workers, she shakes the foundations of the city of machines and Fredersen's power.

The robot, reproducing the mythographic schema of the cultural function of a witch in the narrative structure of *Metropolis*, similarly accumulates ambivalent emotions and opposing dichotomies of desire/rejection, admiration/denial, submission/domination, similarly focusing them around the psychoanalytically complex and contradictory patriarchal model of relation to feminine sexuality. This time, however, the popular vehicle of intense and emotionally contradictory experience of feminine sexuality functions in *Metropolis* to manifest in an expressive manner the ambivalent reaction to technology, especially fear combined with admiration.

As Andreas Huyssen notes, "the machine-woman typically reflects the double male fear of technology and woman". (Huyssen, 1981–1982: 227), and in particular: "The machine vamp in *Metropolis* of course embodies the unity of an active and destructive female sexuality and the destructive potential of technology" (Huyssen, 1981–1982: 233). In 1927, society is not ready yet to accept technology as an indispensable element of individual and collective life. Machines are terrifying and fascinating, mechanical devices are perceived either as a wonderful gift for man or as a threat to humanity – nothing in between. The machine frightens especially not as a tool but as workspace, the place of everyday struggle for survival, incomprehensibly necessary. This is not a time of co-existence, but of discovery and the associated fears and fascinations.

According to Krzysztof Lipka, „[i]n the 1920s, a human being had to do with a machine-monster, with the bodily power of the mechanism against which he had to struggle. The machine in its infancy, imperfect, was stronger than a human being, who fought with it almost tangibly and it could be thought that the fight would be lost. Never again, after Lang, did the developing technology allow for such a presentation of the conflict, real at the time"[2] (Lipka, 1993: 88–89).

In view of the above, in *Metropolis* by Fritz Lang from 1927, it is impossible to use technology in a neutral way, to use mechanical devices unemotionally in everyday life. Machines appear fascinating and terrifying, and the fear

2 Translation mine – Z.W.

of them may be overcome by a symbolic act of purification of the mind. The role of a "scapegoat", whose elimination will restore order in the world, liberate from the fear of mechanization, purge the experience of technology from forces destructive to humans, fell to Rotwang's robot. At the stake to which fire was set by workers operating Metropolis machines, "technology has been purged of its destructive, evil, i.e. 'sexual', element through the burning of the witch-machine" (Huyssen, 1981–1982: 236). For Metropolis workers, to return to work in peace, free from the fear of machines which they operate and on which two things depend: the effectiveness of capitalist economy, equally strange to them as magical technique, but first of all, their own survival in a new, mechanized world of approaching future.

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