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*Metropolis* and the Dehumanization of Women: Lang's Depiction of the Woman as a Machine

It is no coincidence that the first believable representation of a robot to appear in film was modeled after a woman. The crowds of the 1920s were shocked at the stunning effects that designed this bot in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. The robot, designed by a scientist's attempt to recreate a lost love, is modeled after a pious woman named Maria. She upholds all the values of good and is so to speak, the Virgin Mary of the grim dystopia that is the metropolis. Although modeled after this virginal maid, the robot takes on a perverse version of Maria's femininity and becomes a false Maria. Through the robot's sexualized body, and antagonistic nature, False Maria acts as the polar opposite of real Maria. They present womanhood as a dichotomy of either good or evil. The juxtaposition between real and false Maria demonstrates that the source of fear surrounding robots does not stem from technology, but parallels a fear of powerful women. Through the eyes that envisioned *Metropolis* women are rendered the original androids – incapable of depth or complexity, women like robots, are tools to create destruction or peace between men.

The distinction between real and false Maria's purposes lies within their different sexualities. *Metropolis* demonstrates their divergent sexualities through the use of mise en scène and montage. Lang introduces Maria into the film, in a holy and revered light. She is

immediately characterized as a blessed symbol of innocence and beauty. In a wide shot, she enters the frame through a large door, surrounded by young children. The music changes to a graceful, mild tone and the shot zooms in to reveal a young, beautiful maiden. The lighting brightens and the actress' face is peaceful. Maria's composed manner, elegant make-up and high buttoned collared dress, present Maria as a unique blend of power and feminine serenity. Furthermore her representation as the paradigm of a reverent, virginal power is illustrated through montage. Maria's shot when she is surrounded by children is collided with a shot of the extravagant and chaotic party of the rich upper class. In this collision of shots, Freder, the protagonist and hero of *Metropolis*, stands before a large fountain near a woman in a luxurious, revealing costume. Maria's image collides with a common, unimportant image of an unnamed woman. The collision between the intertwining shots of superfluity and modest shots of Maria heavily emphasize the rare, simple significance of Maria as a prominent female figure. Freder is struck with awe at Maria's appearance and thus *Metropolis* through Maria's innocent sexuality characterizes her as an object of hope. Maria is established as an object because the film focuses and defines her through her appearance. The actresses costume, make-up, serene nature and Lang's use of lighting only portray a superficial understanding of Maria as a visual symbol of peace. As an object, Maria is analogous to a machine that through surface level traits, possesses an awesome effect on the men. In this scene Maria is not valued for her humanity, but for her appearance as a holy symbol. This parallels robots who are valued for their superficial traits and believed to be devoid of inner complexity. In the film's emphasis on Maria's prudish nature and appearance, *Metropolis* sets the foundation for the definition of women and machines based on their sexuality and bodies.

It is in this same vein of body image and sexuality, that the robot is gendered as a woman. Arguably it would seem that a robot's indestructible physical power would be emphasized more than her physical beauty but this is not at all the case. In the creation of the robot, Maria is again used as an object. The scientist Rotwang abducts and steals Maria's body – thus stripping her of her innocence. The false Maria takes on a perverse sense of Maria's construction as a peace weaving maiden. False Maria becomes a sexualized weapon. The first shot of the life-like robot is a close up of the actress with wide, unwavering eyes and bare shoulders after her immaculate conception in the scientist's lab. The description reads, "She is the most perfect and most obedient tool which mankind ever possessed." *Metropolis* specifically assigns the robot the pronoun of she, despite the impossibility of a machine possessing a biological sex. Lang's use of gender in the character of false Maria draws uncanny similarities ideal purpose of robots and the ideal purpose of women. Specifically when the movie labels the anti-Maria as an "obedient tool" the film is actually describing what an ideal woman would be like. Despite this idealism as the movie goes on, Lang argues that this ideal fails in reality, and that both machines and women can be used as weapons.

Lang challenges the assumption that women and machines will be obedient tools, during the revealing of the False Maria at the club. Ironically the robot is supposed to be the most obedient tool, but the robot actually takes on a dominant and destructive power over men immediately as she is revealed. During the revealing, the robot's extremely sexualized, illicit nature is highlighted in an iconic use of technology, mise en scène, and collision. Suspenseful music compliments the entrance of the glimmering robot who is surrounded by a dark background. Her feminine silhouette is visible through a sparkling shroud which is quickly

removed to reveal a bare body dancing in a dramatized erotic fashion. The use of nudity humanizes false Maria. It defines robot's magnificence, not through technology, but through the female body. The robot's body sparks fights between men who yearn for its body and sexual displays. Montage also pushes the archetypal role of the robot as a temptress by colliding the dancing with shots of lustful men pining for the robotic body. Lang uses break through technology to create a shot of men's eyes over-layered and intertwined in a close up. The technology used to create the melding of the eyes directly demonstrates that the robot is an object causing unparalleled physical desire.

In the robot's ability to cause conflict between men, Lang foreshadows that the robot's sexuality will be used as a weapon of mass destruction. The robot finds power, not through the backbone of technology, but through a solely female outlet of body image and sexuality. During the dancing montage, the film even contrast the image of false Maria and the image of the grim reaper awakening. This is an obvious and direct message from Lang that the robot will cause death. However because the robot finds its power through the use of the female body and sexuality, the film likens the lethal powers of robots to the lethal power of women. *Metropolis* argue that female sexuality and body image are weapons, much like machines used in warfare.

The film further defines women as machines, through the political uses of Maria and anti-Maria. Both characters have a profound effect on politics through their ability to control the masses. Rotwang models the robot's political capabilities after Maria's ability to placate the proletariat workers. The proletariat are slaves of corporate control and fiend for a revolution. Maria serves as a peace-weaver between the two social classes, and preaches about a messiah that will bring greater social equality. Her political influence is presented in the setting of an

underground union meeting. The shot opens to dark group of uniformed people looking up to an elevated white figure surrounded by crosses. The chiaroscuro of light and dark reflects the light of hope that Maria brings to the dark masses. The actress spreads her arms out slowly, and raises a hand to the sky as if preaching to a choir. Her graceful movements contrast the rigid unmoving dark men, and her elevation reflects her elevated control over the workers. Her role in the looming rebellion, illustrates her as machine designed to be used as tool for peace. The film's creation in the Weimar Republic places Maria as a machine for political protection. The 20s was a time preceding the rise of Hitler, where under the guise of national protection atomic bombs were created. Maria's role in politics, parallels the role of machines in war fare. Lang uses women like tools for either peace or destruction. However just as technological advances are ideally meant to prevent war, in reality they do not. *Metropolis* argues that like bombs and guns, women in reality can be catalysts for serious conflict.

The anti Maria and real Maria's political acumen is juxtaposed through the use of the same underground setting that is altered through elements of mise en scene according to each character. The actress when portraying the robot uses violent hand gestures by shaking and extending her arms to create an exaggerated sense of urgency. The suspenseful music further contrasts Maria's peaceful speech, and even though the actress wears the same costume, the dress is disheveled and pushed off of her shoulder to invokes the idea that the robot is the opposite of real Maria. The jittery body movement and messy costume reinforce the dominance of the robot's sexuality and portrays false Maria as a defective, malfunctioning android. Especially since as the movie progresses and the robot's power climaxes she is no longer under commands of the scientist who goes mad in his longing for his dead lover. Therefore from the larger

perspective of the audience and the narrative, the robot is no longer an obedient tool. It has gone rogue and is in control of itself. Anti-Maria is a femme fatale, characterized as dangerous and lethal woman. It is created to be, not only the ideal robot, but the act like the ideal woman who is subordinate and completely obedient to men. The film plays on the assumption that robots should not have internal conflicts or complex personalities, and affirms that women too should ideally be obedient. In the malfunctioning of false Maria, Lang equates women to machines: both entities have a potential to use their assets for destruction and war.

The women in the film are machines used to maintain peace or cause class warfare. The characterizations of Maria and false-Maria reflect the normalized view of women as dichotomies of good or evil. Maria is a tool of peace and goodness through her placid antics and innocent nature. Contrasting Maria's prudish nature, anti-Maria is a tool of destruction empowered by an overtly sexualized female body. Besides the sexualities and use of the characters in war, *Metropolis* fails to show a distinctly human quality within either female. The contrast between the two archetypes of the innocent maid and the femme fatale depicts women in a robotic light. The film confines women to a binary of either good or evil and they are stripped of the capability of personal development and internal complexity. Through the lens of *Metropolis* the danger of technology pales in comparison to the potential danger of female power. Thus as a corollary the film establishes that female power, like technology, should be restricted to state of inferiority.

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*Metropolis*. Directed by Fritz Lang, performances by Gustav Frohlich, Brigitte Helm, Alfred Abel and Rudolf Klein-Rogge, Bebelberg Studios, 1927.