

## Preface

### *Metropolis Redux*

On February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2008, the German weekly *Die Zeit* carried a special supplement devoted to one of the most sensational film history finds in recent years: the “missing scenes from METROPOLIS”:

Last Tuesday Paula Félix-Didier travelled on a secret mission to Berlin in order to meet with three film experts and editors from *ZEITmagazin*. The museum director from Buenos Aires had something special in her luggage: a copy of a long version of Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*, including scenes believed lost for almost 80 years. After examining the film the three experts are certain: The find from Buenos Aires is a real treasure, a worldwide sensation. METROPOLIS, the most important silent film in German history, can from this day on be considered to have been rediscovered.

Fritz Lang presented the original version of METROPOLIS in Berlin in January 1927. [...] The most expensive German film ever made, it was intended to be a major offensive against Hollywood. However the film flopped with critics and audiences alike. Representatives of the American firm Paramount considerably shortened and re-edited the film. [...] The original version could only be seen in Berlin until May 1927 – from then on it was considered to have been lost forever.

*ZEITmagazin* has now reconstructed the story of how the film nevertheless managed to survive. Adolfo Z. Wilson, a man from Buenos Aires and head of the Terra film distribution company, arranged for a copy of the long version of METROPOLIS to be sent to Argentina in 1928 to show it in cinemas there. Shortly afterwards a film critic called Manuel Peña Rodríguez came into possession of the reels and added them to his private collection. In the 1960s Peña Rodríguez sold the film reels to Argentina’s National Art Fund – clearly nobody had yet realized the value of the reels. A copy of these reels passed into the collection of the Museo del Cine (Cinema Museum) in Buenos Aires in 1992, the curatorship of which was taken over by Paula Félix-Didier in January 2008. Her ex-husband, director of the film department of the Museum of Latin American Art, first entertained the decisive suspicion: He had heard from the manager of a cinema club, who years before had been surprised by how long a screening of this film had taken. Together, Paula Félix-Didier and her ex-husband took a look at the film in her archive – and discovered the missing scenes [...].

Helmut Possmann, director of the Friedrich-Wilhelm-Murnau Foundation, the holder of the rights to METROPOLIS, said to *ZEITmagazin*:

“The material believed to be lost leads to a new understanding of the Fritz Lang masterpiece.” The Murnau Foundation now sees itself as “responsible, along with the archive in Buenos Aires and our partners for making the material available to the public.”<sup>1</sup>

The discovery of this badly scratched, 16 mm preservation copy made headlines throughout the world.<sup>2</sup> All of the leading German-language newspapers ran anticipatory reports, as did much of the quality press in the USA, France and Britain. Peter Bradshaw, film critic of *The Guardian*, for instance, announced: “I can't wait to see it. [...] This promises to be an unmissable, and unique ‘director's cut’.”<sup>3</sup> *The New York Times* critic was equally enthusiastic: “an 80-year quest that ranged over three continents seems finally to be over.”<sup>4</sup> Some, like the critic of *Neue Züricher Zeitung* sounded a note of caution: “Might the allure of the fragment, which by now belongs to the mythology of METROPOLIS, be a thing of the past?”<sup>5</sup> Similar doubts made the round of the blogs, one wondering whether “in an age where there’s a director’s cut of everything from THE ABYSS to ZODIAC”, some movies weren’t better off without someone splicing in extra scenes.<sup>6</sup>

Such glum speculations are, at least in this case, misplaced: the restored version of METROPOLIS more than compensates for any lingering nostalgia film lovers might have had invested in the lacunary version, one that Enno Patalas, former director of the Munich film museum and perhaps the first to seriously dream of making the film whole again, had called “a ruin in progress”. The team entrusted with fitting the newly found footage into the “working copy” (of which a DVD study edition had been made available to “educational and research facilities”<sup>7</sup> was made up of Anke Wilkening, restorer at the Murnau-Stiftung, the official rights holder of the film; Martin Koerber, head of film archive at the Deutschen Kinemathek Berlin and internationally recognized expert in analogue and digital restoration of German silent films, having already been in charge of the previous (and by no means first) reconstruction-restoration of METROPOLIS in 2001; and Frank Strobel, responsible for recording the original musical score (composed in Wagnerian style, complete with *leitmotifs* by Gottfried Huppertz), which he performed live as the conductor of the European Film-Philharmonia, first at the 2010 Berlin Film Festival, and since then at screenings in major cities all over the world.<sup>8</sup>

By using what persuasive powers I could muster and putting some cultural capital on the line, I did manage to see this newly restored version of *Metropolis* on its premiere night on Feb 12th, 2010. Not in Berlin’s Friedrichstadtpalast, but in a parallel performance, at the Frankfurt Opera, with the added bonus of Paula Félix-Didier in

attendance (and recorded for broadcast by the Arte television channel). The experience was unique, not merely because of the excitement the event had generated in the press, and the sense of being present at a historic occasion: the “rebirth” of a masterpiece.<sup>9</sup> It was one that I had half fantasized, when I wrote my synopsis in 2000, which does in fact contain accurate descriptions of the missing – and now restored – scenes, thanks to the copy of the composer Gottfried Huppertz’s working copy of the shooting script, acquired in 1979 and ever since the blue-print for all reconstructions. However, the evening was unique also because I really felt I was seeing METROPOLIS as if for the first time – with the added benefit of knowing it so well. Yet because the restored footage retains the slightly smaller format and is much grainier, the inserts remain visible as such, or rather, they are the slightly smudged and streaky windows into another version, the one from 85 years ago. In fact, we can now experience two films: the ‘old’ familiar one and the ‘new’ one, which of course is how the old one should have been. What is restored, in other words, is also the material history of the prints, and thus another aspect of METROPOLIS’ status as a classic. Far from diminishing the allure of the fragment, it preserves it as the trace of time itself.

### ***Restoring the Story: Doubles and Delegation***

Aware of the exemplary value of their work, the restoration team put up a website, assembling sample scenes to show how the process of digitally cleaning, stabilizing and contrast correction had gradually brought the distressed 16 mm material back to life; Spanish title cards had to be replaced with German ones, and a page from an illustrated Bible about the “whore of Babylon” was painstakingly re-translated and re-created.<sup>10</sup> Coinciding with the February 2010 premiere, the Deutsche Kinemathek Berlin put together an exhibition „The Complete METROPOLIS“, which “unites all of the preserved original documents for the first time: the film script, the musical score, architecture and costume designs, trick paintings, props and cinematographic equipment. [...] The extensively compiled documents and the newly restored film images make its production process come alive, allowing a deeper understanding of this film that has already been proclaimed as part of the ‘world’s cultural heritage’.”<sup>11</sup>

However, as Martin Koerber has pointed out in seminars, scenes are still missing. David Bordwell, attending one such seminar in Hong Kong in April 2010, conveniently summarized them: „some shots in the Argentine version may have been censored; we’re missing a bit in which Georgy, at liberty in a cab, sees a woman baring her body. Also lacking is nearly all the fight between Rotwang and Fredersen, which enables Maria’s escape. In addition, the Argentine print lacks a scene showing a monk preaching in the cathedral, which yields some apocalyptic images.”<sup>12</sup>

What then, do the twenty-seven extra minutes add to the narrative, and how does their restitution alter our understanding of the film? First of all, the storyline builds up more slowly, and evolves much more coherently, now that all of its minor characters and subplots are in their place – visible, comprehensible and tangible to the viewer.<sup>13</sup> The recovered scenes flesh out the narrative, which despite being more layered than before, has become rather less convoluted, because now driven by several competing “power-centers”, all clearly established, and dynamically set off against each other, in a rhythm of alternations and complementarities that transmits itself to the viewer as a steady, but also steadily escalating pace. Fredersen, the power-centre “above”, is doubled by his henchman, *Der Schmale* (Slim, played exquisitely by the lanky, leering and squinting Fritz Rasp), acting as the master’s delegate, and pulling the strings “from below”. This double delegation and dispersal of the all-seeing eye, reigning over the city, is matched by Rotwang, the dark power-centre of the city, all-knowing, and also masterminding – through a proxy, the False Maria - how the masses move and behave, as well as how the elites are driven to suicidal frenzy. Yet – as to be expected in a Fritz Lang film – all three instances of surveillance are also duped and self-deceived.

This is because each character has, as it were, a double. We think of the two Marias, but Freder has a double in Georgy (a.k.a. Worker 11811), and Josephat, Fredersen’s disgraced subordinate, becomes the counter-figure to Slim, Fredersen’s loyal spy. One of the most crucial among the recovered scenes is therefore Georgy’s car ride through the city, wearing Freder’s clothes, and using the money he finds there to go the Yoshiwara nightclub, instead of – as arranged – making his way to Josephat’s apartment, while being followed by Slim, who mistakes him for Freder.

Mirroring, mistaking and doubling – with different intent, at different speeds and across different characters – now becomes even more clearly than before the structuring principle of the film. It makes the direct confrontations and fights between Fredersen and Rotwang all the more startling in their atavism, as they eventually face each other without “mediation” at the same time as it carefully prepares the multiply mistaken identities of Maria, first by the mob and finally, by Rotwang. Equally central now is the figure of Hel, wife of Fredersen and Rotwang’s mistress, who died giving birth to Freder. When we witness how Fredersen discovers the gigantic statue of Hel in Rotwang’s laboratory, his own grief briefly unites him with his rival, while Rotwang’s political motives for creating the female robot now resonate with a more urgent sense of loss.<sup>14</sup>

While these intertwining character constellations put the principles of doubling and delegation at the heart of the narrative and provide, as David Bordwell has remarked “a few more eerie Freudian substitutions”,<sup>15</sup> they also speak of major Langian themes, such as friendship and loyalty, betrayal and rivalry that traverse his work, from *DER MÜDE TOD* to *THE RETURN OF FRANK JAMES* (1940) and from *DIE NIBELUNGEN* (1924) (1921) to *RANCHO NOTORIOUS* (1952).<sup>16</sup>

The second major change wrought by the restored footage has little to do with new narrative information, and is all about pace, rhythm and intensification. It concerns Lang’s “imagination of disaster”, his mastery of the “movement image” and thus his aptitude as an “American” action film director – had he chosen to become one. The scenes of the flooding of the housing tracts are now truly breathtaking and heart-stopping: much more extensive and extended, they give the final part of the film – aptly called “Furioso” – an entirely new rhythm of epic proportion, with scenes that make all the human actions seem trivial and petty by comparison. The staging and editing is extraordinary, and one can now appreciate more fully Lang’s innovative power in conveying the elemental forces of both nature and technology. None of today’s directors of action pictures, even with all the digital technologies available, would be ashamed to have signed these sequences. If nothing else, they allow one to fully appreciate how crucial the insertions, beyond their value to the narrative, are to the rhythm and scale of *METROPOLIS*. Comparable to the final battle, bloodbath and all-consuming conflagration of *KRIEMHILD’S REVENGE* a few years earlier, with the flooding of the underground city we are witnessing a modern *Götterdämmerung*.

Which leads me to a closing paradox that struck me when leaving the Frankfurt opera on the night of *Metropolis redux*. Just as the film is now more complex and layered, but feels simpler and more coherent, so it is with its duration. Even though twenty-seven minutes longer, it actually feels shorter than it was before: more tightly interlocking and faster paced, it reaches its crescendo and final resolution in a dramatic arc that is now all of a piece, heightening one’s sense of a symphonic architecture that turns space into time and time into space: reaffirming once more Fritz Lang’s stature as one of the cinema’s true innovators.

Thomas Elsaesser, New York, February 2012.

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- <sup>1</sup> “Key Scenes Rediscovered” *ZeitMagazin* 3.Juli 2008. See also: <http://www.zeit.de/2008/28/Metropolis-Reportage-28> (last accessed 28 January, 2012)
- <sup>2</sup> As was customary in many archives during the postwar period, the Buenos Aires film museum, too, had junked the 35 mm as a fire hazard. It had duped the film onto safety stock, making, for cost reasons, merely a 16 mm negative, inadvertently transferring the wear and tear, the dirt and scratches of the heavily-used 35 mm print, as well as losing much of the larger format’s picture quality.
- <sup>3</sup> Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian*, 4 July 2008
- <sup>4</sup> Larry Rohter, “Footage Restored to Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*,” *New York Times*, 5 May, 2010 <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/05/movies/05metropolis.html?scp=1&sq=Metropolis%20restored&st=cse> (last accessed 29 January 2012)
- <sup>5</sup> Ursula Kähler, “The Mystery of the Fragment,” *Neue Züricher Zeitung*, 29 October, 2009.
- <sup>6</sup> [http://www.allmediany.com/details\\_article.php?art\\_id=44](http://www.allmediany.com/details_article.php?art_id=44) (last accessed 29 January 2012)
- <sup>7</sup> [http://www.filmhistoriker.de/magazine/metropolis\\_study\\_dvd.htm](http://www.filmhistoriker.de/magazine/metropolis_study_dvd.htm) (last accessed 29 January 2012)
- <sup>8</sup> For US performances, see <http://collider.com/fritz-lang-metropolis-re-release-trailer/23284/> (last accessed 31 January 2012)
- <sup>9</sup> “rebirth” became a frequent epithet: see, for instance, Andreas Kilb, “Die Wiedergeburt eines Jahrhundertfilms”, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 25 January 2012.
- <sup>10</sup> <http://scientific-media.de/showroom/metropolis/> (last accessed 29 January 2012)
- <sup>11</sup> <http://osiris22.pi-consult.de/view.php3?show=5100008870739> (last accessed 29 January 2012). The catalogue is Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek (ed.), *Fritz Langs Metropolis*, (Munich: Belleville Verlag, 2010).
- <sup>12</sup> “Metropolis Unbound” <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2010/04/05/metropolis-unbound/> (last accessed 29 January 2012)
- <sup>13</sup> Among the detailed assessments of the new version, apart from David Bordwell’s “Metropolis Unbound” (s. note 12), see Glenn Erikson, “The Complete *Metropolis*” (<http://www.dvdtalk.com/dvdsavant/s3380metr.html>) and Gordon Thomas, “Metropolis Restored” ([http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/71/71metropolis\\_thomas.php](http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/71/71metropolis_thomas.php))
- <sup>14</sup> As Peter Bradshaw rightly surmises, the erotic charge of the robot’s creation now has a more secure plot motivation: “New scenes may make more sense of the head-spinning narrative [with] more scenes reportedly showing fights between Fredersen and Rotwang, who is revealed to have been in love with Fredersen’s late wife, Freder’s mother - these scenes may shed more light on the film’s deeply strange, innovative techno-sexual imagery.” *The Guardian*, 4 July 2008.
- <sup>15</sup> “Metropolis Unbound” <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2010/04/05/metropolis-unbound/> (last accessed 29 January 2012)
- <sup>16</sup> For an analysis of an even earlier template for many of these themes, see my “Time, Space and Causality: Joe May, Fritz Lang and the Modernism of German Detective Film”, *Modern Cultures* 5.1. (2010), 79-105.