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INDUSTRIAL SYMPHONY

BY J. HOBERMAN

METROPOLIS

Directed by Fritz Lang
Written by Lang and Thea von Harbou
Kino
At Film Forum July 12 through 25
ROAD TO PERDITION
Directed by Sam Mendes
Written by David Self, from the graphic novel by Max Allan Collins
DreamWorks Opens July 12

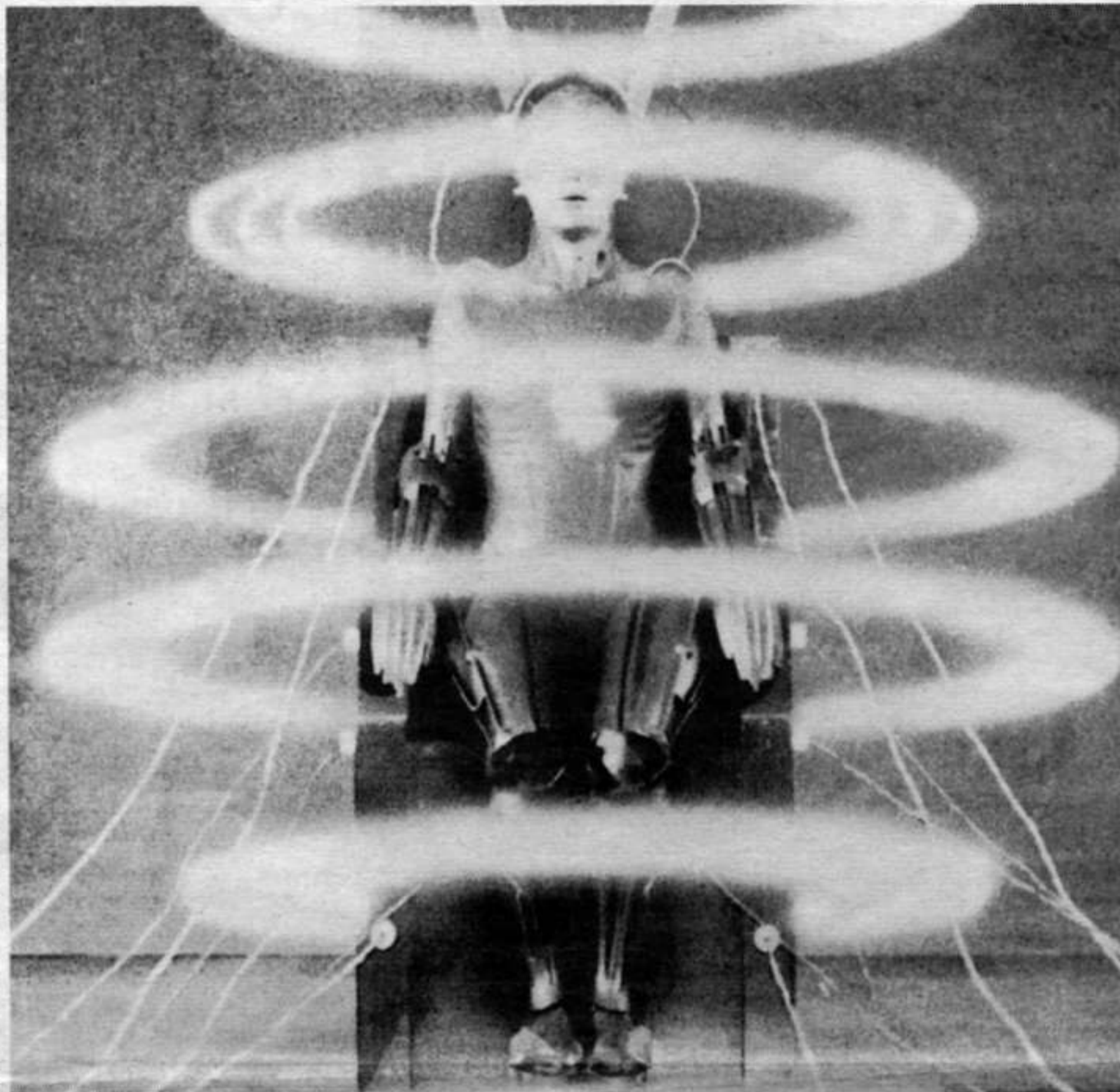
The greatest of all pulp fantasies, Fritz Lang's 1927 *Metropolis* returns to the borough that inspired it in the most complete version since its Berlin premiere—and in most likely the most beautiful print as well. Showing at Film Forum for two weeks, this vision of a future city is a movie whose graphic intelligence is exceeded only by its conceptual audacity.

Metropolis was profligate in every sense—Lang's attempt to top his previous Wagnerian epics and a German bid to challenge American primacy. A year and a half in the making, it wound up costing 10 times as much as the average Hollywood production and like its descendant *Titanic* was a continual source of journalistic copy. ("Even before its opening, the magazines have stirred us up and tired us out for so long behind the scenes of this film that we now stagger into the theater quite exhausted and apathetic," the critic Rudolf Arnheim wrote.) Unlike *Titanic*, however, *Metropolis* effectively bankrupted its studio—if not an entire national industry. The German consortium UFA had to be reorganized and recapitalized, bailed out by Paramount and MGM.

Lang's cut ran over two and a half hours. After its premiere, the movie was trimmed by 40 minutes, then shortened again and re-edited for American release. For 75 years, it has existed as a magnificent ruin. (Commercial cuts acted on *Metropolis* "as winds, rain, barbarians, etc., do upon classical edifice," Stan Brakhage once observed.) In a suitably epic archival undertaking, all the surviving material was culled to create this restoration, which represents about 80 percent of Lang's version and returns his narrative structure (reintegrating lost subplots and extending familiar sequences) while it revives the original score.

Even in 1927, *Metropolis* was recognized as the most ambitious spectacle in the decade since D.W. Griffith went broke with *Intolerance*—as well as the craziest. (Stroheim's *Greed* is a close second.) *Metropolis* evokes the most extreme view of a class society. The rulers of this world-dominating city cavort in garden-ed palaces higher than the Sears Tower while the proles are confined to quarters somewhere below the subway. Freder, the pampered son of the Metropolis autocrat, has a revelation and joins forces with the saintly Maria (17-year-old Brigitte Helm) to liberate the workers; their efforts at reform are confounded when Freder's father enlists the resident mad scientist, Rotwang, to replace Maria with a robot double (Helm again, flinging herself around in a dance of demonic arabesques) who leads the workers to destruction.

Metropolis's colossal scale was realized with a process using mirrors to place thousands of extras in the same frame as vast



THE MOTHER LODE OF 20TH-CENTURY ICONOGRAPHY: FROM *METROPOLIS*

miniature sets. *Deco* is too tame a word to describe the design. Arnheim complained of Lang's mad medieval-Americanist-Old Testament amalgam, but the film is even more eclectic in its aesthetic progeny. After *Frankenstein* and *Flash Gordon*, Leni Riefenstahl and Stanley Kubrick, *Star Wars* and *Apocalypse Now*, and the complete works of comic-book artist Jack Kirby, Lang's mother city seems the mother lode of 20th-century iconography. (Indeed, thanks in part to the 1984 rock-scored reissue engineered by Giorgio Moroder, *Metropolis* remained a living part of pop culture long after silent cinema was consigned to oblivion—inspiring Whitney Houston's bondage costume in *The Bodyguard* and Madonna's video "Express Yourself," as well as *Blade Runner* and *Batman*.)

On one hand, *Metropolis* celebrates its own mechanism. The movie revels in cinematic might, as manifest in its spectacular set pieces—the opening gear-and-piston montage, Freder's hallucination of the machine as Moloch, and the flooding of the underground city (not to mention the studio). On the other hand, this is a movie in which every detail is subordinate to the overall effect—most notoriously in the ways Lang deploys the decoratively arranged suffering masses. (The restored print carries this sense of absolute ornamentation over into the titles, which drip sweat or "descend" along with the workers.)

This design is not without ideological implications. While Lang's Mussolini moderne predicts the totalizing aesthetic of Nazi Germany, the movie itself seems haunted by the Russian Revolution as expressed by Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, which opened in

Berlin as *Metropolis* went into production. The workers are a naturally destructive force; the false Maria could be construed as Bolshevism personified. Not surprisingly, the Weimar left attacked *Metropolis* even as the right endorsed the idea that technocratic billionaires and brainless workers might be reconciled by an idealistic spiritual leader. Hitler and Goebbels were among the movie's fans, and although Lang left Germany when Hitler came to power, his wife and collaborator, Thea von Harbou, co-author of the *Metropolis* screenplay, enthusiastically joined the Nazi Party.

There's no denying that much of *Metropolis* is absurd—and always was. The young Luis Buñuel was particularly straightforward, writing in a Spanish newspaper that the narrative was "trivial, bombastic, pedantic," and redolent of "antiquated romanticism," but if the story was ignored in favor of the movie's "plastic photogenic basis," *Metropolis* had the power to "overwhelm us as the most marvelous picture book imaginable." A similar law governs Lang's politics. Metaphor rules: Image trumps text.

No movie has ever more vividly visualized the industrialization of social relations. The metaphor of a dehumanized urban proletariat buried alive beneath the city it built is worthy of Marx. Calling for his father while crucified on the clock that balefully regulates the Metropolis time-space, Freder is the ultimate worker—a sacrificial wage-slave as 20th-century poster boy.