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Palimpsest or Parasite?
(Re)Thinking Giorgio Moroder's Noisy *Metropolis*

Of the manifold difficulties that one encounters when engaging with the version of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) fashioned by composer Giorgio Moroder and released under his imprimatur in 1984, the foremost – in a spatial sense, if not necessarily an ordinal one – presents itself almost immediately, as one seeks an accurate term to describe the later work's relationship to Lang's film, which it restores and transgresses at one and the same time. To resolve the ambiguity of this relationship, Giorgio Bertellini has proposed understanding Moroder's text as a "palimpsest" (277-287 *passim*) written over Lang's film. Taking up where Thomas Elsaesser's related claim that Moroder's *Metropolis* "partakes in a broader cultural shift, away from 'reconstruction' and 'interpretation' altogether and closer to the gesture of sampling, selective appropriation and even cannibalizing incorporation" (Elsaesser 58) leaves off, however, it is my contention that the relationship Moroder's text bears to Lang's film is *parasitic*, rather than palimpsestic, and in fact tracks closely with the thinking of the parasite offered by Michel Serres in his book of the same name.

A viewer unfamiliar with Lang's film might easily be tempted to identify Moroder's *Metropolis* as a restoration, albeit a somewhat unconventional one, of the earlier work. As Bertellini explains, such a restoration has been warranted since shortly after the film's premiere:

> *Metropolis* was first released in Berlin, 10 January 1927. That 'first' version was already shorter than the one approved by the Censorship Commission on 13 November 1926, which was 4,189 metres long. In addition, as was a conventional habit for silent films, different 'national' versions were prepared for distribution. In particular, the 3,170 meter American edition, shorter by one fourth and with remarkable new re-editings and intertitles, soon influenced German domestic versions, which were then rearranged according to the American revision. This second German edition (third at this point if we also consider the censorship edition) came out in the summer of 1927 with equivalent differences in form and content; it was 3,241 meters long, slightly longer than the American version. In the following years, neither the first nor the second German editions were satisfactorily preserved. In fact, when in 1936 the Museum of Modern Art bought a copy

> from UFA, there were approximately 700 meters missing. The copy at the MoMA, with English intertitles, was only 2,530 meters, 640 meters less than the first American release and 1,660 meters less than the German premiere version. It is from copies of this MoMa version, however, that *Metropolis* returned to Europe after the Second World War… (282)

Moroder's text includes material that had not appeared in *Metropolis* since it was first drastically re-edited shortly after its Berlin premiere, an operation that Lang once described as the film being "'slashed … so cruelly that I dare not see it'" (Koerber 75-76); indeed, in *The Fading Image*, a short documentary about Moroder's work with the film that was created with the composer's close involvement, Moroder's project is explicitly situated within the broader discourse of film restoration. "A contemporary film lover concerned about the welfare of classic German films – and, in particular, *Metropolis* – was composer Giorgio Moroder … In 1981, Moroder began a three-year search for the missing footage to *Metropolis*."" an off-screen narrator explains, as the documentary transitions from a general explanation of the conditions under which restorations become necessary into a discussion of Moroder's treatment of *Metropolis*. The film returns to this theme in its concluding lines – perhaps unsurprisingly, given that it was written and directed by film archivist Daniel Woodruff (who also makes an appearance as a talking head) – as it characterizes Moroder's efforts as an exemplary instance of cinematic restoration and (or as) a bulwark against the ravages of time and decay: "While motion picture history is crumbling around us, another work of cinematic art has been resurrected from the rubble. The preservation of *Metropolis* is one step in what must be done in order to save our motion pictures." Although Moroder's version does not come close to restoring *Metropolis* to its original length, *The Fading Image* thus presents it as essentially a labor of love for and devotion to Lang's film, primarily intended to introduce a new generation to a masterpiece while attempting to clear away some of the interventions that had been distorting Lang's vision since the year of its release.

Identifying Moroder's *Metropolis* as a restoration of Lang's film becomes problematic, however, in light of the other changes that Moroder made to the film whose name his own text bears. According to Bertellini,

> Moroder partly owed his Metropolis re-edition to [Enno] Patalas' archival work, and partly took personal artistic initiative in the treatment of the film form. Not only did he replace the original score of Gottfried Huppertz with a contemporary pop soundtrack, but he edited several sequences on the basis of a 'new' rhythmical (thus narrative) path, adding colors on the basis of typical silent movies principles (blue for night, red for dreams or fire sequences, etc.). Finally, he replaced the stylized intertitles with subtitles better accepted by a modern audience. (284)

Due to these alterations, Martin Koerber's only mention of Moroder's *Metropolis* in his "Notes on the Proliferation of *Metropolis* (1927)" – a detailed history of the wide array of variants of Lang's film that have appeared in the decades since its debut – comes as he exclaims (without explanation) that Moroder's film has no place among the versions of *Metropolis* that his article examines, declaring that "the Moroder version … is not discussed any further here, as I do not consider it a restoration" (80). Koerber's dismissiveness of Moroder's *Metropolis*, however, pales in comparison to film critic David Edelstein's condemnation of what he called a "desecration" of Lang's original film, an act of cinematic violence that Edelstein claims "drove [him] frothing with rage from the theater after half an hour" (Edelstein 2002). Edelstein's reaction clearly demonstrates the ease with which Moroder's treatment of *Metropolis* can be understood to function in a fashion diametrically opposed to that envisioned for it by *The Fading Image*. Instead of clearing up the layers of noise that had accumulated in the space between *Metropolis*' production and its contemporary reception (and that had rendered Lang's original utterance nearly inaudible in the process), Moroder's modifications to the film can instead be understood as introducing additional notes of discord to an already noisy channel, such that Lang's signal is finally drowned out beneath their clangor and cacophony.

Insofar as Bertellini's characterization of the 1984 *Metropolis* as a palimpsest diverges from this harshly negative view of the consequences of Moroder's alterations to Lang's film, it does so almost entirely on the basis of a fundamentally different understanding of the work of film restoration, one which is itself premised on a deep skepticism about the idea of an original text with the potential for being "restored." "What exactly are restorators and archivists eager to accomplish in their endeavors to return a film to its *original* form?" (279) he asks. "If the act of writing about the past is in fact an operation which includes an interpretative *mise en scène* where past documents and events are framed by a present discursivity, restoring the original version of a film cannot be an objective and neutral procedure. Rather, it already constitutes an *eclectic* historiographic practice which may not acknowledge its present methodological obsessions." If one should therefore "not dismiss Moroder's commercial experiment as an irreverent, unrespectful exploitation, but rather [take it] as a model for an *archeological approach* which maintains a distance from the past, and treats its documents as 'discovered objects,'" it is not because Moroder's modifications to the film do not overwrite Lang's text, but precisely because they *do*; as Bertellini reminds his readers, "palimpsest … literally means 'scraped again'; it indicates a parchment or manuscript where the original writing has been erased or wiped out. The former text, known as *scriptio anterior*, is often still visible at the margins or among the lines of the new textuality, since the interline is often opportunely redrawn" (280). Thus, he continues, "one may argue that the writing of history means a detailed and industrious re-writing on imperfect erased textualities whose blank (or grey) spaces constitute the other, the void, and the loss that the historian, as modern scribe, constructs and fills with current cultural exigencies." Bertellini therefore identifies Moroder's *failure* to faithfully restore Lang's film as the source of his version of *Metropolis*' value.

While Bertellini maintains that no such thing as a pure restoration, uninflected by the shifts in discursive frames that have taken place between the time of a text's creation and that of its attempted recovery, is ever (even theoretically) possible, he maintains that such a restoration is less conceivable still in the case of *Metropolis*, given the impossibility of identifying an "original" that one might hope to restore beneath the layers upon layers of alterations to the film that rendered its text(s) non-self-identical within months of its premiere. Thus, Bertellini concludes his essay with the claim that

> within an analysis of the historiographic heuristics of film restoration, Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* has resulted in an emblematic text. The dissemination of its different prints and the chronicle of its different critical receptions has shown that the only text to be restored by film studies is not simply a virginal nitrate edition, but rather a 'history of effects'. In this sense, *Metropolis*' 'genealogy' is the history of a palimpsest, where different spectators have scratched their discursive effusions or their violent rejections. At issue, there is no stable heritage to preserve. (287)

To substantiate this claim, Bertellini looks closely at a scene whose excision from the first American version of *Metropolis* (on which nearly all subsequent versions of the film were based) resulted in major elements of the film's plot becoming impossible for viewers to ascertain: "Scene n. 103, also called 'Hel's Room … [in which] Rotwang is showing Joh Fredersen an enormous stone monument of his beloved and never-forgotten Hel, Joh's wife who died giving birth to Freder,'" (282-284), In Koerber's account, the deletion of this scene meant that "the basic conflict between Joh Fredersen, the industrialist (Alfred Abel), and Rotwang (Rudolf Klein-Rogge), the scientist-inventor, namely their rivalry over a dead woman, Hel, was completely removed from the film, and with it the rationale for creating the machine woman and the final destruction of Metropolis" (Koerber 75). This quasi-originary lack, Bertellini argues, "changed the poetic textural balance of the film. It was still *Metropolis*, but it was no more a 'certain' *Metropolis*" (284), which leads him to make the bold claim that "the technical recovery of its *original* edition has to make clear that such 'originality' or 'authenticity' is not Metropolis'

supertemporal essence. Rather, it is simply the semiotic verisimilitude of one of its German prints." Bertellini's contention seems to be that a film that has had such a vital sequence missing for the overwhelming majority of its existence cannot be understood to have a sufficiently stable original version for a text such as Moroder's to be able to drown out its "essence" with noisy alterations.

Bertellini's discussion surrounding this point involves an error, however, whose recognition is as deeply problematic for the logic of his argument as its promulgation is necessary for the coherence of his claims. Bertellini correctly points out that the "lost" Scene n. 103 was reconstructed by Enno Patalas on the basis of recently-discovered documentary evidence of the original film's missing sections, but implies that Patalas' restoration of *Metropolis* was produced "a decade later" (282) than the restoration carried out by the Staatliche Filmarchiv "in the 1960s" – a chronology that would decisively situate Patalas' *Metropolis* before Moroder's version, which was released in 1984. According to Koerber, however, Patalas' *Metropolis* was first released "in 1986/1987" (Koerber 84), which would mean that it came out *after* Moroder's version. This slight imprecision with respect to the publication dates of two versions of *Metropolis* that bear wildly disparate relationships to Lang's "original" film would be relatively inconsequential, were it not for the fact that perhaps the most significant previously-missing material in Moroder's text is nothing other than a reconstruction of Scene n. 103. Given that it is, however, Bertellini's argument that Moroder's text restores *Metropolis* by palimpsestically effacing Lang's original text – an operation that Bertellini identifies as legitimate *on the basis of* the quasi-originary excision of Scene n. 103 from Lang's film – becomes largely untenable. At the same time, the presence of a version of Scene n. 103 in Moroder's text suggests parasitism *à la Serres* to be a more apt framework for understanding the

relation between Moroder's work and Lang's film – a suggestion which is amplified by the specific way that Moroder's film handles the "restored" sequence.

Before looking at how Scene n. 103 operates in Moroder's *Metropolis*, it is worthwhile to first pause and consider what the figure of the parasite means for Serres. The "Translator's Introduction" to *The Parasite* explains that in Serres' native French, "the parasite is a microbe, an insidious infection that takes without giving and weakens without killing. The parasite is also a guest, who exchanges his talk, praise, and flattery for food. The parasite is noise as well, the static in a system or interference in a channel" (Serres x); furthermore, "whether it produces a fever or just hot air, the parasite is a thermal exciter. And as such, it is both the atom of a relation and the production of a change in this relation." Serres himself argues that "parasitism is an elementary relation; it is, in fact, the elements of the relation" (182). Parasites function by capitalizing on "a relation without exchange" (80) that Serres calls "abuse value...the arrow with one direction"; crucially, however, while the "arrow" remains unidirectional, the positions of the actors constantly change: "the guest becomes the interrupter, the noise becomes interlocutor; part of the channel becomes obstacle, and vice versa. Questions: who and where is the third man? These questions have fluctuating answers, functions of noise, time, and of the new relations of equality or similarity between the terms … [T]he parasite parasites the parasites. In other words, any given position in the ternary model is, *ad libitum*, parasitic" (53-55). Finally, the parasite is intimately tied to mediation; it is the channel through which the first term of a relation communicates with the second. "There is always a mediate, a middle, an intermediary" (63), writes Serres, "[the parasite] is the being of the relation, coming from it as it comes from him. His roles or incarnations are a function of the relation, the relation is a function of the parasite, in a circular causality, in feedback loops."

Given that Moroder's version of *Metropolis* is literally made up of the extant text of Lang's film at the time of its production (along with some reconstructed "lost" shots), it is difficult to say that its noises overwrite Lang's film in the way that a palimpsest overwrites its *scriptio anterior*; while Moroder's modifications to the film alter it, they do so from within, parasitically. Even Moroder's New Wave score does not write over Lang's production; rather, it exists alongside it, feeding off it, introducing new noises into its channel. Like a proper parasite, one cannot imagine Moroder's new score for *Metropolis* (or any of his other alterations to Lang's "original") existing without Lang's *Metropolis*, even as it infects Lang's film, causing it to go into strange and uncomfortable contortions. Furthermore, insofar as Bertellini is correct in calling Moroder's text a "commercial experiment," it therefore also functions as a channel, bringing Lang's *Metropolis* to a new generation of viewers (albeit in modified form); indeed, one must identify the three terms in relation in this case as Lang's film, Moroder's text (which, insofar as it consists of modifications of and additions to Lang's film is intrinsically parasitic), and something like *the concept* of *Metropolis* – which is, ultimately, synonymous with the viewer's (or viewers') reception of the film. All that one still needs in order to identify Moroder's *Metropolis* as bearing as a properly Serresian parasitic relation to Lang's film, then, is an instance in which Lang's film parasites on the concept of *Metropolis* in order to communicate with Moroder's text – and this is precisely what Moroder's restoration of Scene n. 103 provides.

In Moroder's *Metropolis*, Scene n. 103 is exceedingly brief, taking up less than two minutes of screen time. Prior to the restored sequence, an intertitle sets the scene: "In the middle of the city, overlooked by time, stood a mysterious old house. Legend claims it was built by a master wizard." The film then cuts to a shot of Rotwang's house; following this, another intertitle reads: "Here lived Rotwang, the inventor, obsessed with the memory of a woman named Hel."

The film then cuts to a shot of a monument topped with a woman's head, and pans down over an inscription that reads: "HEL – Born / To be my joy / Lost / To Jon [sic] Fredersen / Died / In giving birth to his son Freder." Next, the viewer sees Fredersen announced to Rotwang, followed by a shot of Fredersen looking at the monument. Another intertitle reads: "The once close friendship between Fredersen and Rotwang had long since been impaired by their rivalry for Hel." After this come three short shots; a two-shot of Rotwang gesticulating wildly at Fredersen, bearing a subtitle reading "I have re-created her," followed by a direct-to-camera close-up of a wild-eyed Rotwang bearing the subtitle "At last, my life's work is complete!" The film then cuts back to the two-shot of Rotwang and Fredersen, as Rotwang points off-camera and exits the frame in the direction that he is pointing; following this, the film cuts to an establishing shot of Rotwang's lab, at which point Scene n. 103 ends and the previously-extant text of Lang's *Metropolis* returns to the fore.

In addition to parasiting on Moroder's text in order to arrive on American screens for the first time, then, Scene n. 103, also functions as a moment of perverse self-reflexivity within Moroder's text, even as it consists entirely of long-lost material re-inserted into the otherwise-incoherent garble that previous modifications had made of Lang's film. The long-forgotten house inhabited by a "wizard" could easily be *Metropolis* and Lang, and Rotwang's declaration that he has "re-created"Hel could just as easily describe Moroder's re-creation of Lang's film – a long-time passion project, if not necessarily his "life's work." Furthermore, Scene n. 103 is immediately followed by the audience's first look at Rotwang's robot, the most widely-known and recognizeable image from Lang's film. On top of all of this, Moroder's score, which so frequently calls attention to itself at the expense of Lang's images, here fades into an indescribable and almost undetectable percussive murmur that could easily be mistaken for

silence. Here, then, one finds Lang's original film communicating with Moroder's text through the channel of the concept of the movie itself; a conceptual field that both constitutes and is created by the relation between the two texts. This example of Serres' "parasitic chain … [or] cascade" (4-5) does not stop here, however. As Moroder recounts in a 1984 New York Times article about his version of *Metropolis*, the extant images of Hel's tombstone that he was able to obtain were not useable in his film, so his shot of Hel's monument is not only a reconstruction, but a *recreation* (as one may have guessed from the errant, Americanized spelling of Joh Fredersen's first name on the monument): "'I couldn't find any picture of Hel (the hero's dead mother). By pure coincidence, someone from the Film Museum went to the Cinematheque in Paris, and in this disorganized place, he found 400 pictures in an album. One showed the tombstone of Hel, but I couldn't use it because it was a production still and you could see the cameraman's head! So I recreated the monument and filmed it'" (Insdorf), Moroder explains. Furthermore, the introductory intertitle and two subtitles that enforce home the parasitic quasi-self-reflexivity of the restored/re-created sequence are themselves modifications of the various pieces of archival evidence turned up by Enno Patalas (Patalas 165-167), which provided the evidentiary basis for Moroder's reconstruction of Scene n. 103 (Patalas 172). Thus, within the parasitic cascade already described, Moroder's text *once again* parasites on Lang's film – even at the very moment when it is ostensibly getting out of Lang's film's way, and allowing the earlier work to use its body as a host.

Giorgio Moroder's version of *Metropolis* is therefore a quintessential instance of Serres' parasite, and it is so in a way that brings greater clarity to some of the more difficult elements of Serres' theorization of parasitism. That this is the case is likely no accident; after all, even Lang's "original" *Metropolis* is brimming with instances of parasitism, ranging from the industrialists'

exploitation of the workers, to Rotwang's appropriation of Maria's appearance for his robotic creation, to the film's repeated insistence that, as Maria says, "between the mind that plans and the hands that build there must be a Mediator, and this must be the heart" – a role which winds up being played by Freder, from the point that Maria (a "hand") stirs his desire to the moment that he effaces himself in the consummation of the relation in the film's final shot, guiding his father and the leader of the workers' rebellion into a handshake before stepping back once each grasps the other's hand of his own accord – a moment that reads as practically a performance of Serres' claim that "systems work because they do not work...if the relation succeeds, if it is perfect, optimum, and immediate, it disappears as a relation. If it is there, if it exists, that means that it failed" (Serres 79). Rather than being a palimpsest that captures *Metropolis'* palimpsestic essence, Moroder's *Metropolis* is thus a parasite that recapitulates the nesting layers of parasitism that constitute the film's central preoccupation, in all of its thematically-diverse expressions – thus reinforcing Elsaesser's claim that in multiple ways, "*Metropolis* has become 'more like itself' in the uncanny guise Moroder gave it than it had ever been before" (Elsaesser 63). But that, as we all must eventually say, is a story for another time.

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