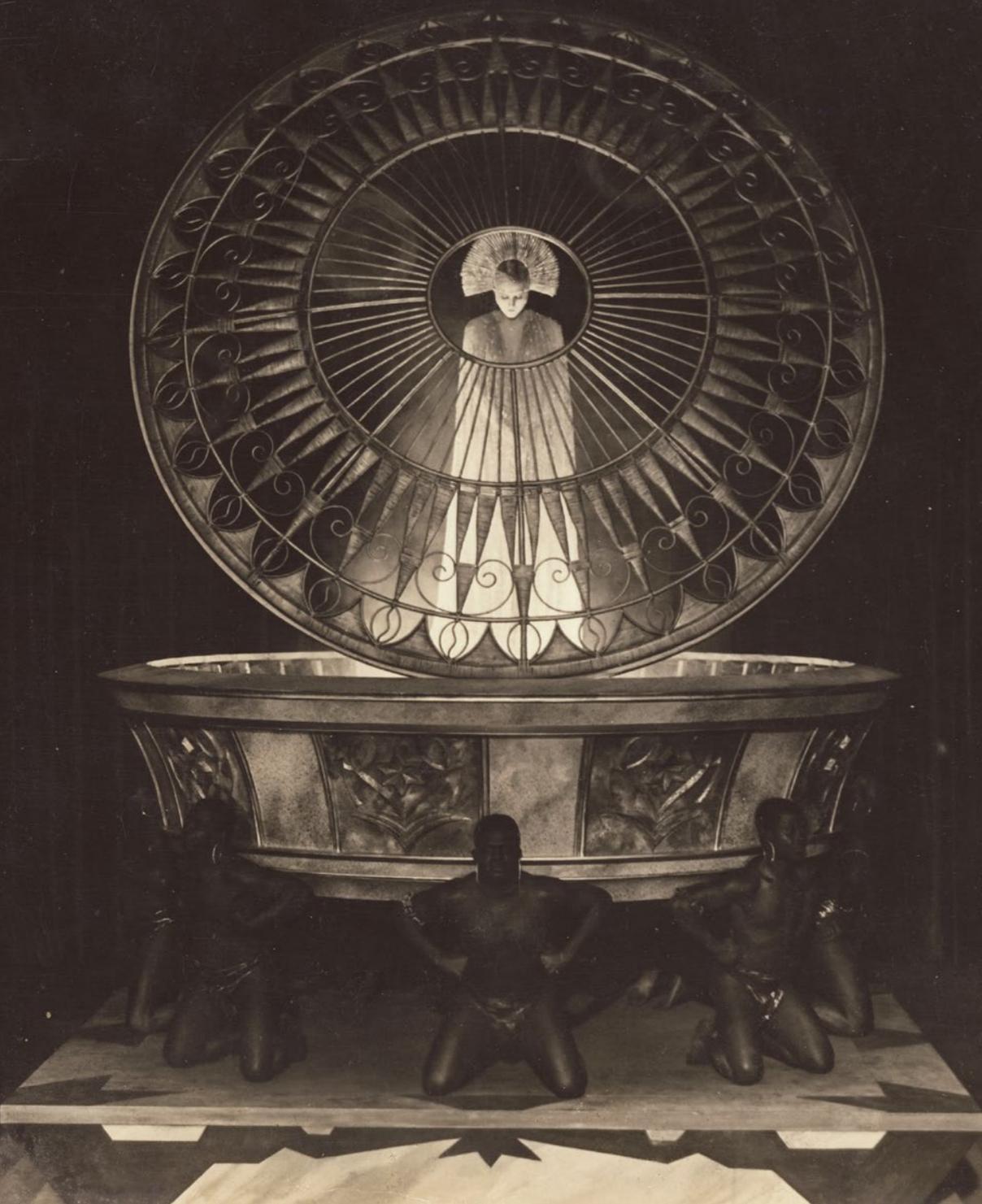


FRITZ LANG





VISIONS
OF
FRITZ LANG

Die Nibelungen
Metropolis
Frau im Mond

Adnan Sezer / Bruno Tartarin

Visions of Fritz Lang:

Ancient and modern liturgies, tragic destinies (1923-1929)

This is a collection of 40 production stills, vintage gelatin silver prints, in three formats – 30 prints in 21.5 x 27.7 cm, 8 in 17.9 x 21.9 cm, 2 in 13 x 17.5 cm – drawn from the archives of UFA (Universum Film AG), Berlin, with the abbreviation in white in a corner of each print, and Decla-Bioscop AG, Berlin, with a stamp on the back. The prints document three films made by Fritz Lang in the 1920s: *Die Nibelungen*, *Metropolis* and *Frau im Mond* (“Woman in the moon”).

Lang’s silent films reveal much about the substance of his work. Here, in epic form, he explores German mythology (*Die Nibelungen*, 1924) and, in a major Expressionist film (*Metropolis*, 1927), the city of the future and urbanity. What view of his own period was in his mind while filming these two works, which are not readily comparable? Did he, like a number of his contemporaries, particularly in Vienna, hesitate between the myth of a new age as Adolf Loos expressed it in 1917 in a text praising Karl Kraus (“On the threshold of a new era, he shows humanity, which has strayed so far from God and nature, the path”) and what Gottfried Benn said at the start of the 1920s (“Man no longer exists, only symptoms”)?

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Lang explores the old grandeur of myth and the new power of industry. Myth and industry are “superior” constructions: they are characterized by sovereign virtues, but also by deeply corrupt forms. With the war still fresh in people’s minds, and the looming threat of collapse, Lang and his partner Thea von Harbou conceived a great fresco in two parts, *Die Nibelungen* (*Siegfried, Kriemhild’s Revenge*), filmed in 1923 and released in 1924. Here we find a legendary, heroic German past peopled with specular figures, in a series of scenes that inevitably lead them to destruction. But this is more than just a metaphorical rush toward an abyss. With the interplay of the antitheses that constitute the narrative, Lang goes beyond immersion in a mythical frame of reference to mold its temporality and space. Heroes and specters give themselves up both to favorable signs and tremblings, to ascending life and fatality, to transfiguration and ruin. Lang does not seek to resolve the metaphysical dilemma that haunts his personages, any more than to free them from the crushing weight of their appalling condition. He forces them to face reality in their desperate attempt to escape from their state of unrelieved suffering. Nor is there any critique of violence. In the second part of the cycle, Kriemhild proclaims that “blood calls for blood”. And indeed the murder of Siegfried triggers an interminable sequence of brutal acts. The only possible connection is to violence itself: a residue of humanity cannot halt

a race towards disaster. A succession of impulses in the unfolding of the film situates actions in the absolute, as though a disruption of judgment had obviated any relational relativity.

Die Nibelungen, to begin with, is a twofold movement that corresponds to a crime and its punishment. It is not dialectical. But in any case this was not Lang's intention. A succession of shots eloquently demonstrates, without internal discontinuity, the inextricable nature of the different situations. The narration is recilinear, with a considerable deployment of resources. Lang generally favors a symmetrical order in his establishing shots, as shown by several of the prints in the collection: Siegfried in front of the castle of Gunther, the King of the Burgundians; warlike or religious celebrations. This parallel confers magnificence and density on solemn acts that might otherwise be seen in terms of mystical theology. The epic motif replaces the story's underlying stratum of rationality with a form of abstraction dominated at memorable junctures by ornament and chiaroscuro, as in Siegfried's encounter with the dragon. On one side there is the valiant Siegfried of unparalleled virtue, and the vengeful Kriemhild, with the wild theatricality of her corporeal dynamism; on the other, the cunning Hagen, and the sub-human pack of Huns who dominate the visual field, for example, in the tavern scene, prior to the massacre. In Lang's dramaturgy there are situations that can be separated out from myth only at the cost of destructive tensions, and a hypothesis of individuals caught by their fate in the headlong acceleration of history.

Transposing into images a monument of medieval literature that is one of the symbols of German culture and unity, Lang brings out the "Stimmung" of his actors as a counterpart to that of his contemporaries. This concept, which has been of central importance in Germany since Hölderlin, designates the disposition of a being with regard to the world. And Lang

observes the resignation of his characters in the light of their destiny. This tonality, this mode of being represents danger as a horizon, and it pervades the films Lang made in Germany. Without stating any new truth about the period, these films are based on a desolate vision produced by an initial cataclysm, and an inchoate idea of another to come.

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The characters in Lang's films are confronted with a tragic reality. It is their inner life, as much as a pathetic sense of fate, that confronts the heroes and the frail Nibelungen, the powerful and the outcast figures of *Metropolis*. This futuristic fable had some precedents, and in particular Georg Kaiser's tragedy *Gas*, the central element of a trilogy written in 1917, which, with premonitory power, portrays fearful technical progress opposed by robotized factory workers controlled by powerful industrialists and the State. Lang and his scriptwriter completed their preparations for *Metropolis* in 1924. And legend would have it that a visit to New York in the autumn of that same year supplied the decisive mechanical rhythm of the modern city. This spectacular work of anticipation, set in 2026, involved a new aesthetic which distanced it from Expressionism in German cinema, a movement that came to the fore in the primitivism of the paintings in Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, 1919. *Metropolis* marked the point at which cinema made the transition from painting to photography.

The script for *Metropolis* was accompanied, as was usual at the time, by a book, whose publication as a serial novel, in the illustrated supplement to the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, began in August 1926. The version of the film that was first shown in Berlin on January 10 1927 was divided into three parts: prelude, intermezzo, furioso. The prints that are brought together here give an overview of its plot, and Lang's architectonic vision.

The city is governed by the industrialist Fredersen, whose son falls in love with a young woman named Maria. Following an explosion in the huge machine hall, Maria restores hope to the workers with her prophecy of a brighter future. Fearing for his power, Fredersen orders the inventor Rotwang to superimpose Maria's face on a cyborg he has developed, which Fredersen then sends down into the subterranean city to deceive its inhabitants, and thus discredit the young woman. The workers destroy the master-machine, causing a flood that threatens the lives of their children, who in the end are saved by Maria. The workers direct their anger onto the robot, which they burn at the stake. But the prophecy comes true when Fredersen's son mediates between them and his father.

In this self-sufficient society, whose sole identity is "industry", and where machines, as the ultimate stylization of power, do not recognize their operators, the workers lack agency. They form a horde of tensile bodies that follow orders, bound to a task which is its own entelechy. Having finally come to their senses, the oppressed rise up against their corrupt, repressive rulers, assimilated to the caprices of the elite, albeit in a situation skewed by the intrusion of the human machine ("Maschinenmensch"). Their final uprising, in a dichotomy between freedom of action and submission to fate, is not the result of a liberating event.

With its tower blocks, its elevated roads on imposing pylons, its stadium in the style of New Objectivity and its zone of decadence, the city is like an hallucinatory vision of a world to come, a petrified enigma that generates a powerful shock, its darkness blotting out "inferior" people. The machine rooms above the working-class city are both majestic and monstrous. The workers' underground dwellings have only artificial lighting. The filthy buildings and alleyways are diagonally striped with light and shadow; and this contributes to the crepuscular atmosphere. There are

sprawling catacombs which are the hidden locations of the prophecy. The labyrinthine temptations of the architecture are, so to speak, in infernal affinity with the oppression to which the population is subject.

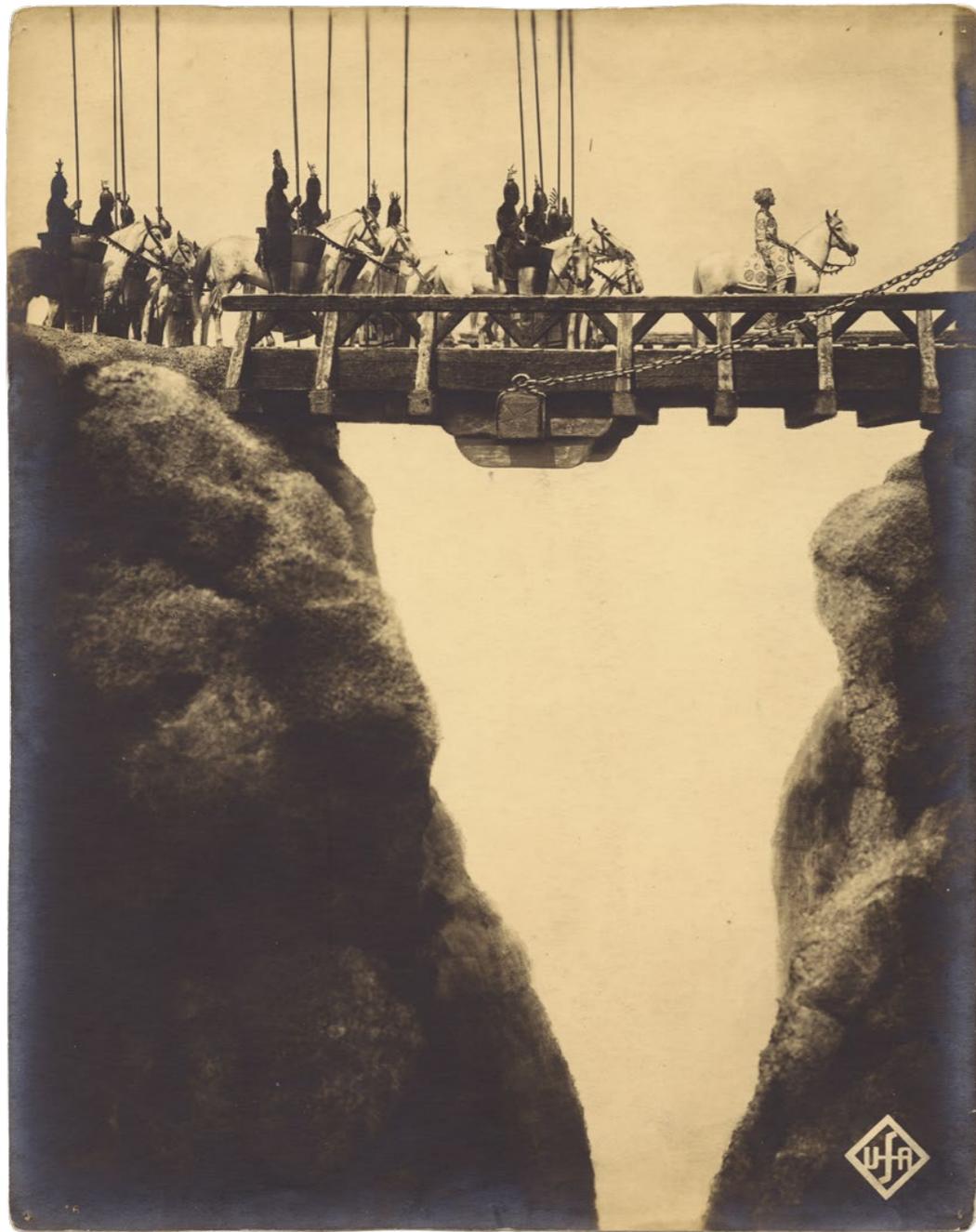
The shooting of *Metropolis* was a spectacular affair. Lang used the most cutting-edge cinematographic techniques, and the visual inventiveness of the film owed something to special effects including animation and overprinting, but also to the montage. The innovations took place directly on the set. Lang used a Stachow camera on account of its lightness, while the Schüfftan process allowed him to combine life-size and miniature decors. He filmed split images and, with his team, invented a system for creating multiple exposures.

This film, one of the high points in the golden age of German cinema, puts forward a form of social morality rather than one of political engagement. But it is difficult to decide if *Die Nibelungen* and *Metropolis* embody an idea of coercive destiny or of emancipated life. The cinema historian Siegfried Kracauer felt that both of these possibilities were "reflected aesthetically". In Fritz Lang's silent films, as witnessed by the remarkable photographic prints referred to in the present text, subject and form are indissociable.

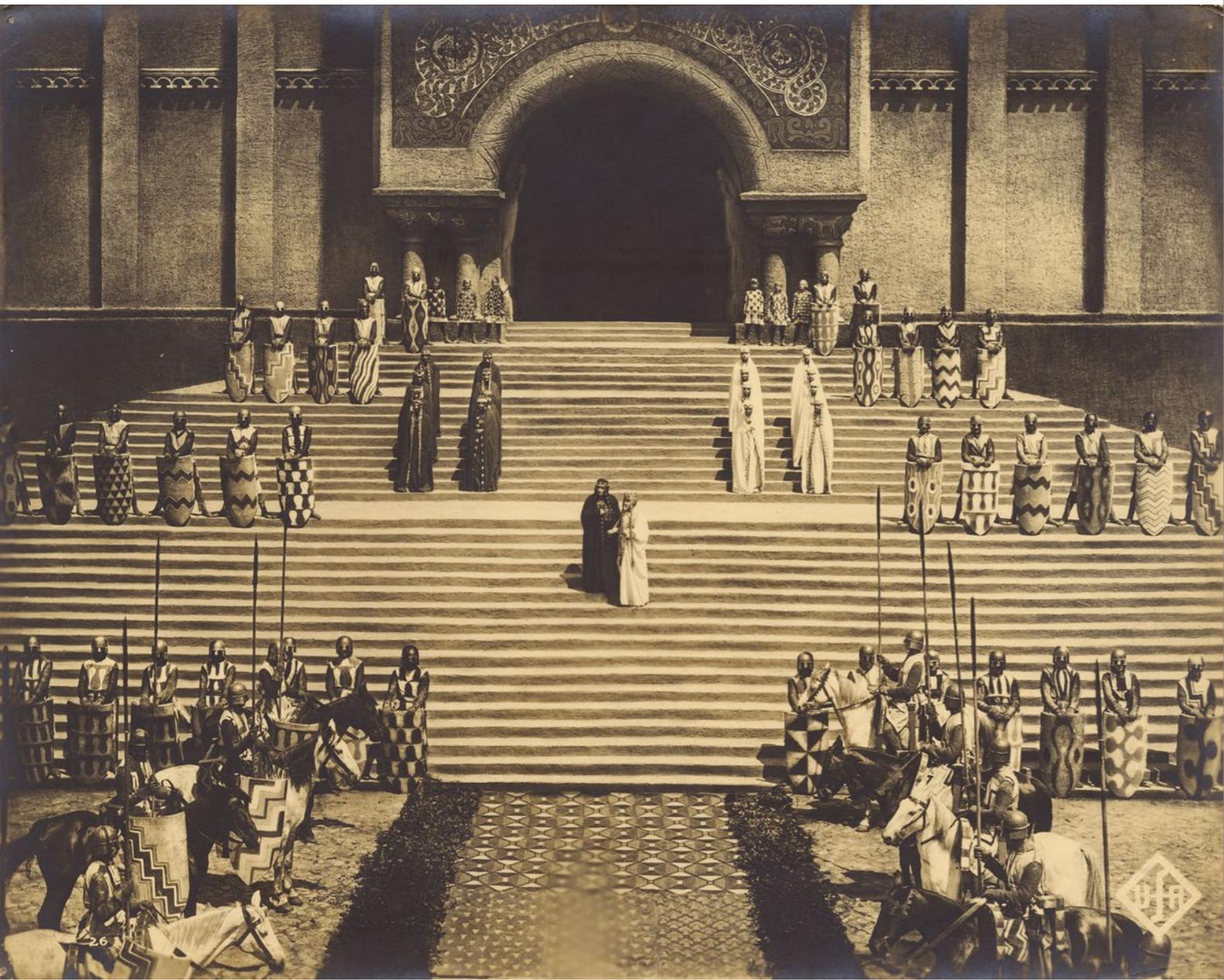
Pierre Dourthe

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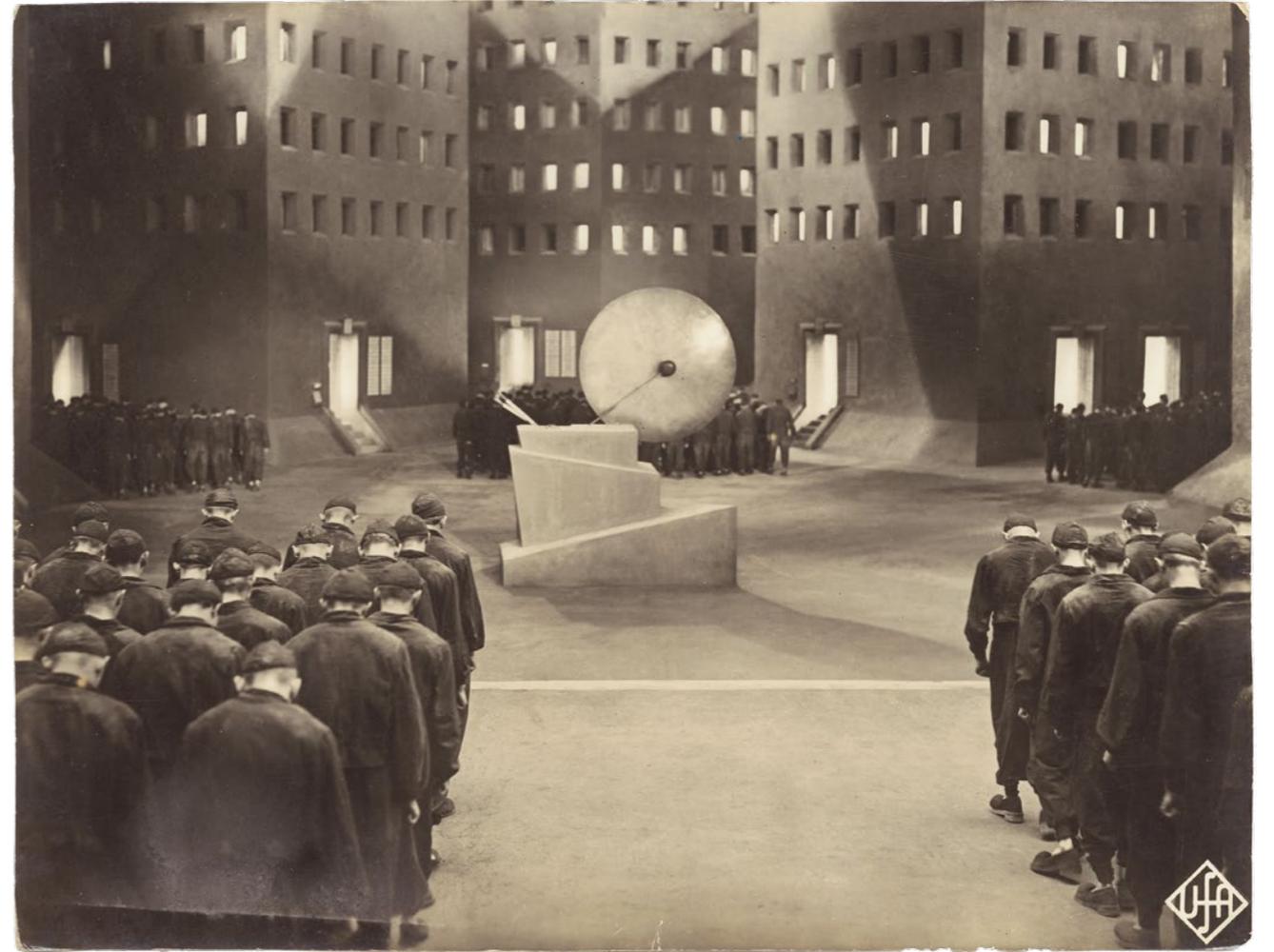
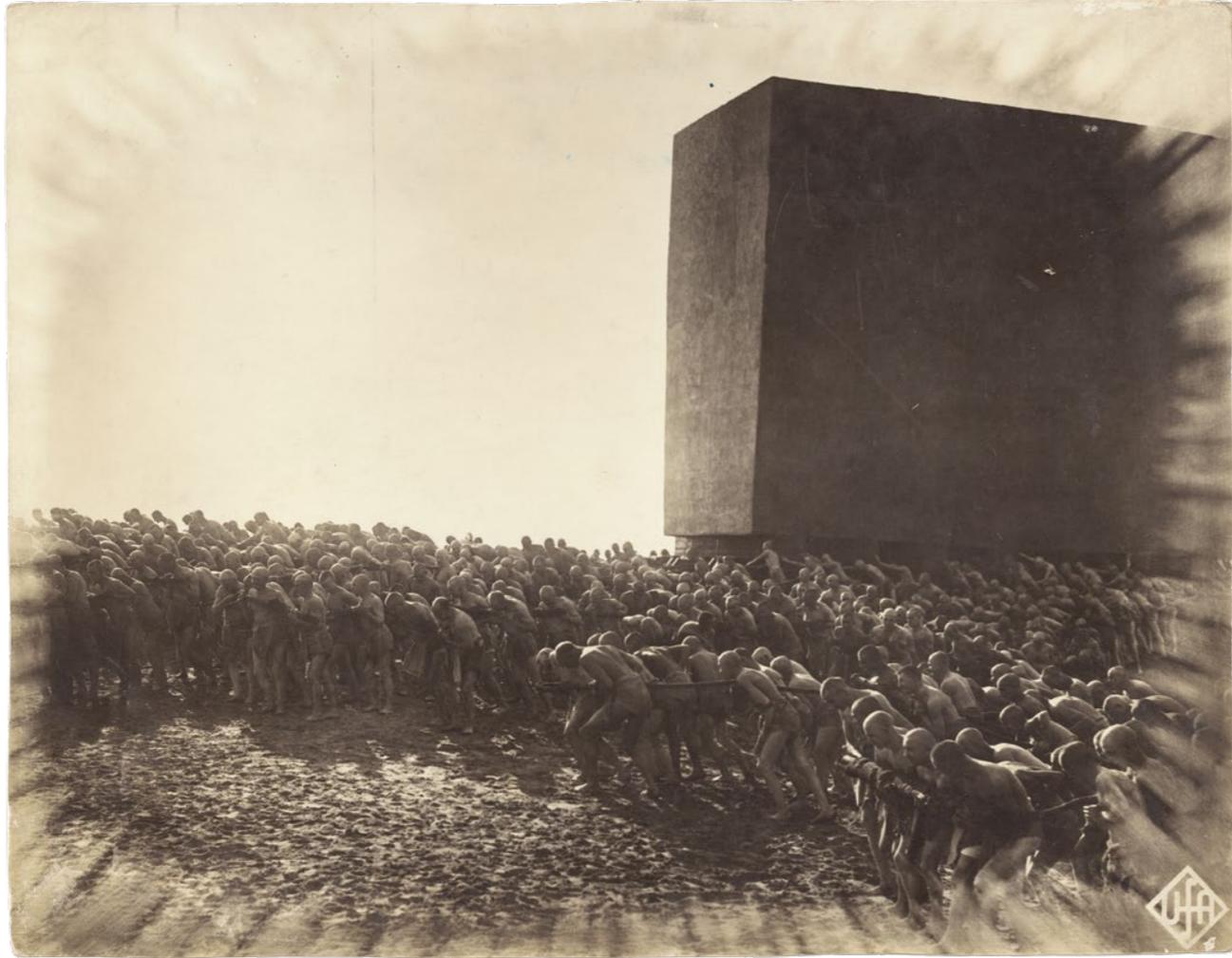




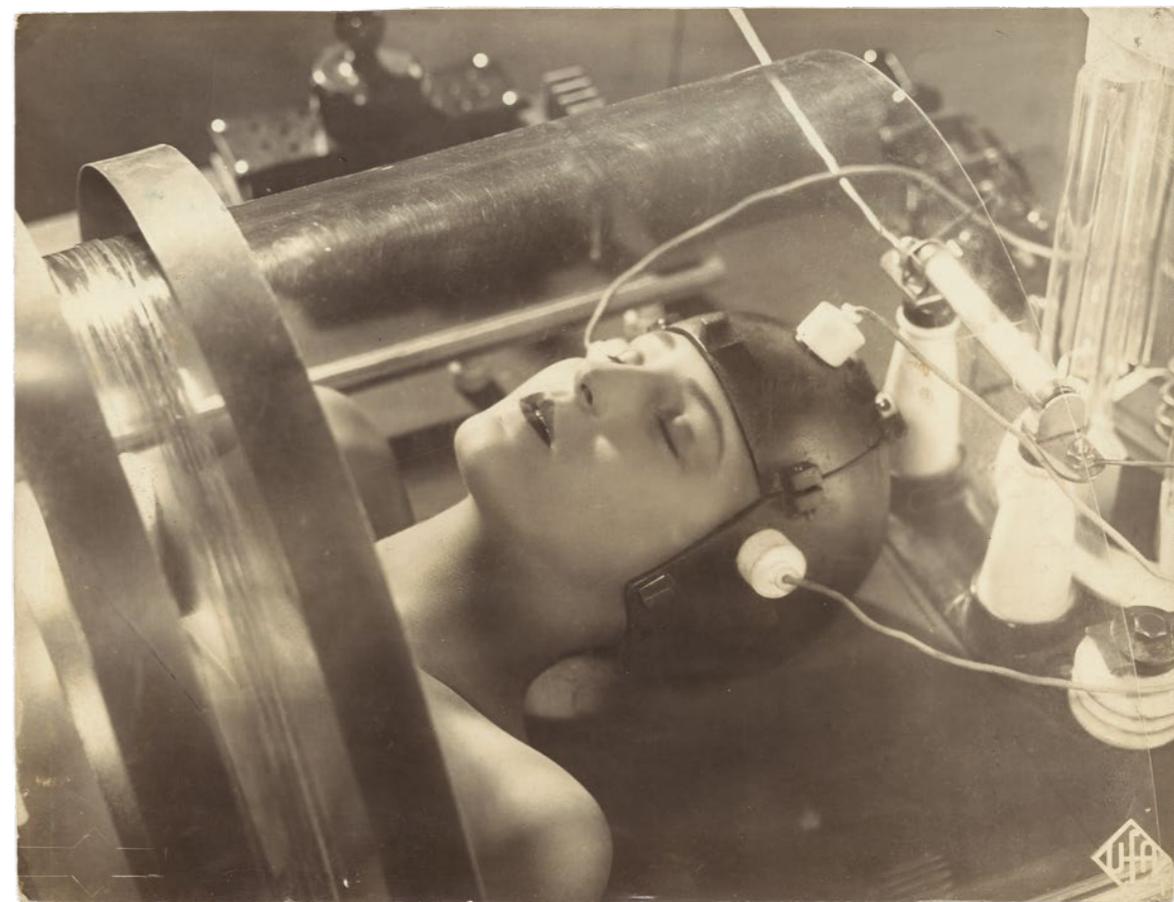
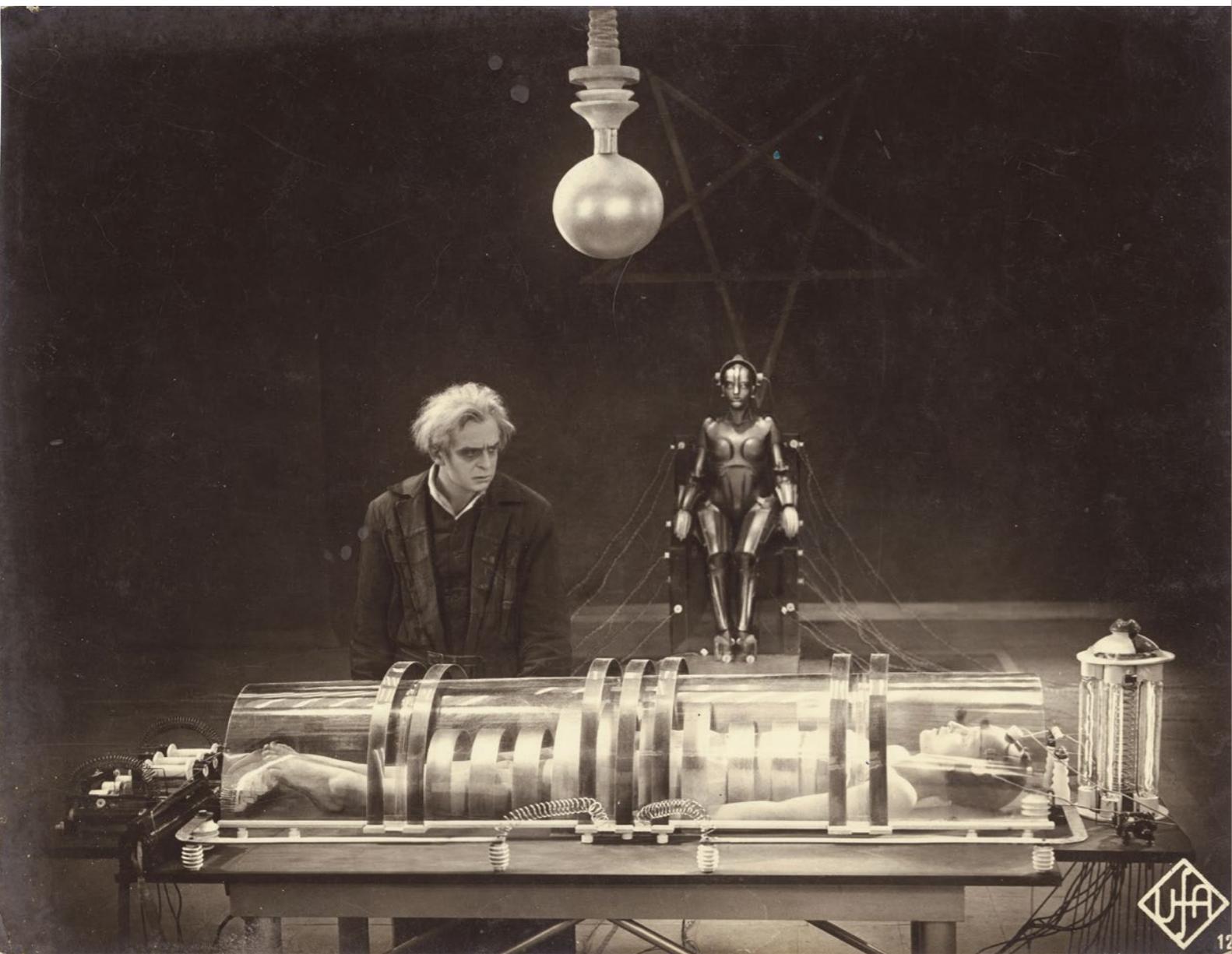


II
METROPOLIS

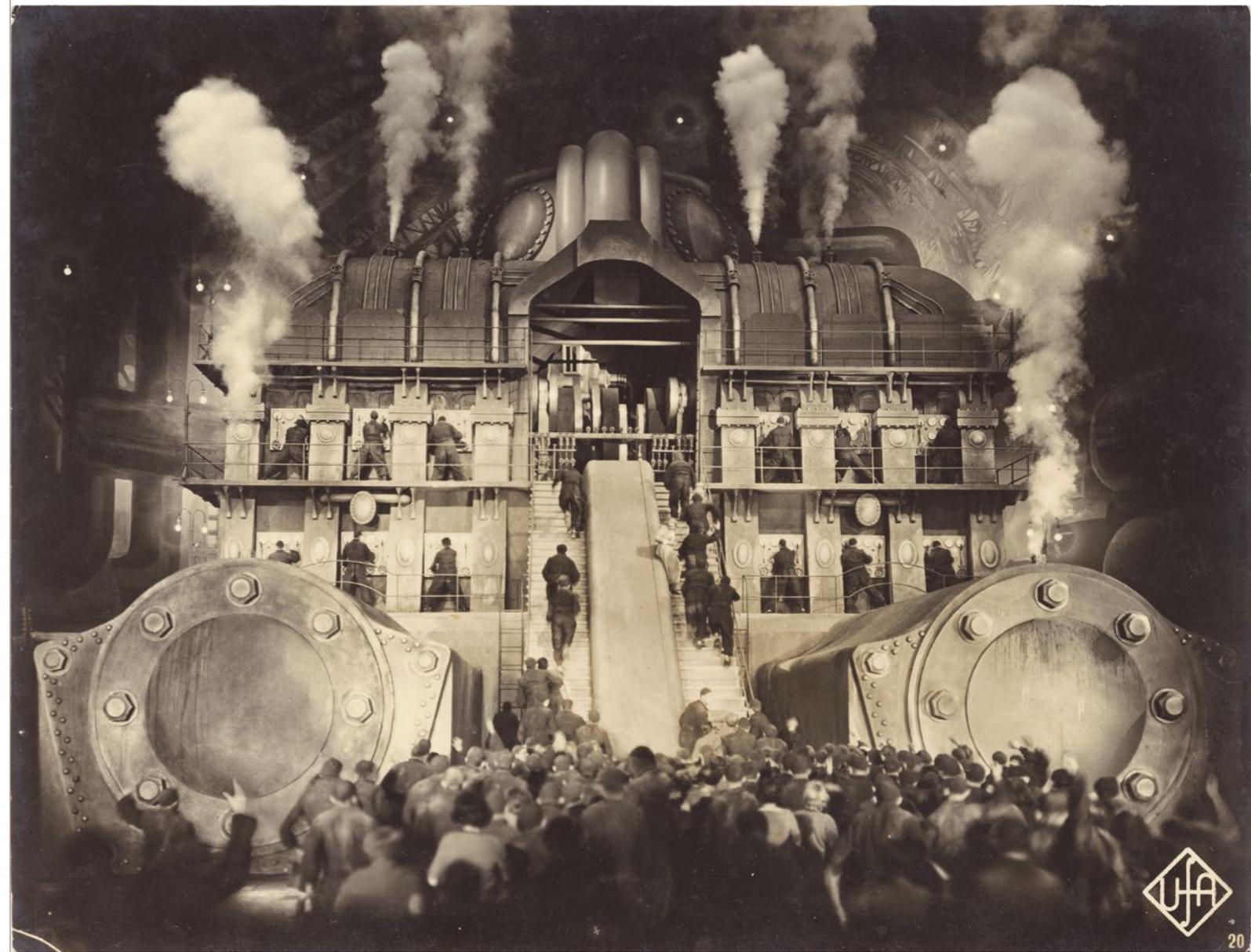


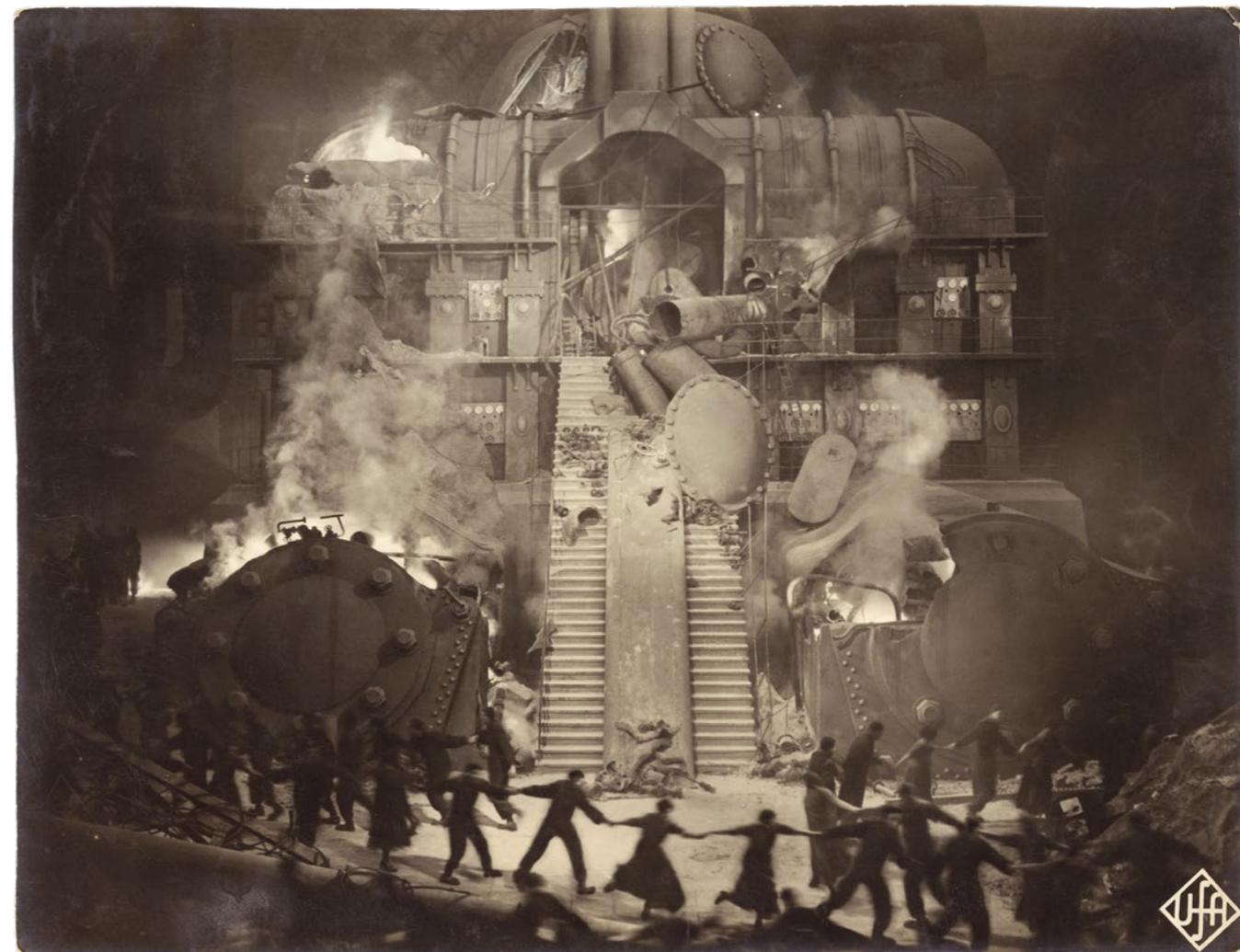








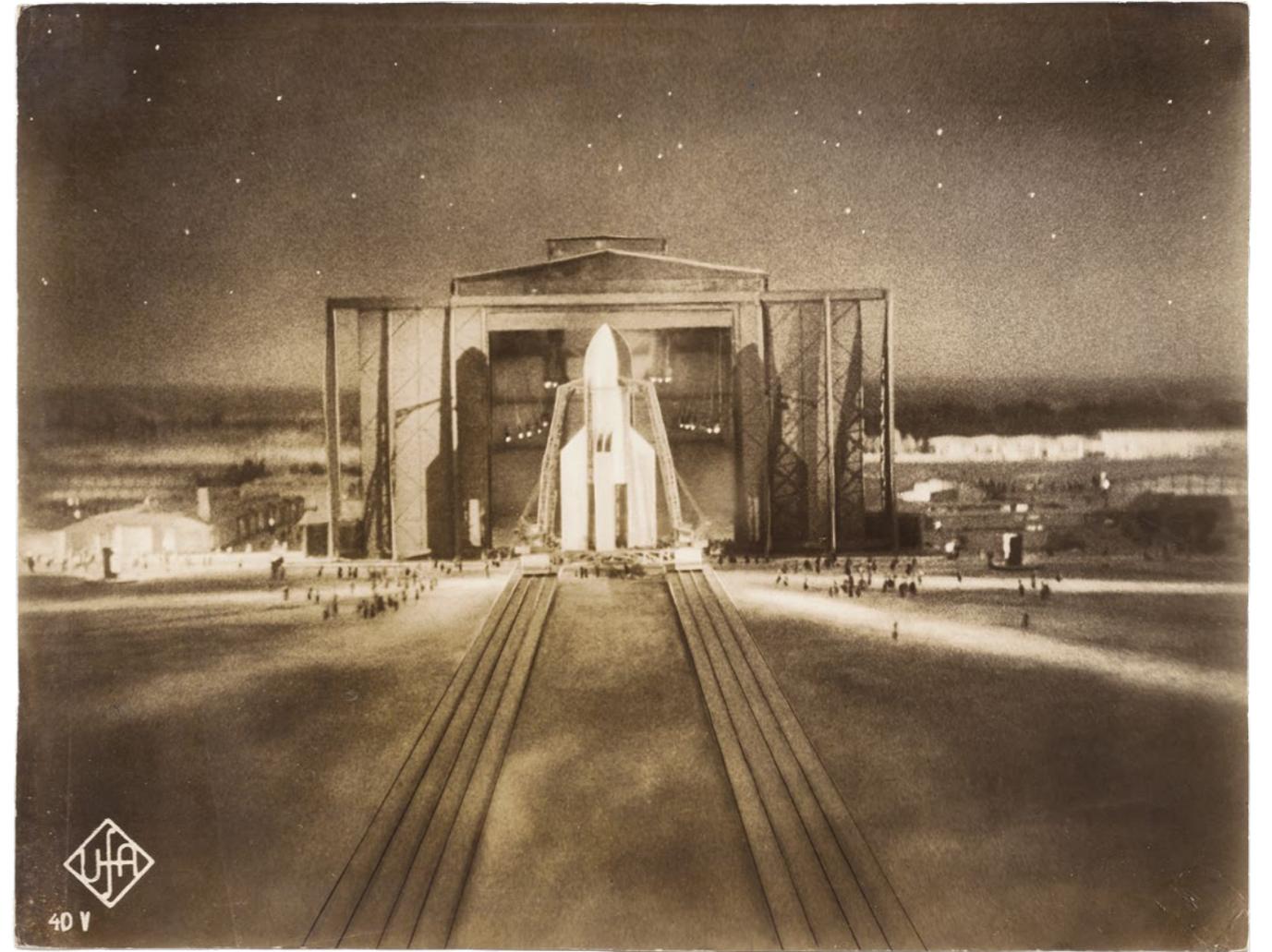








III
FRAU IM MOND



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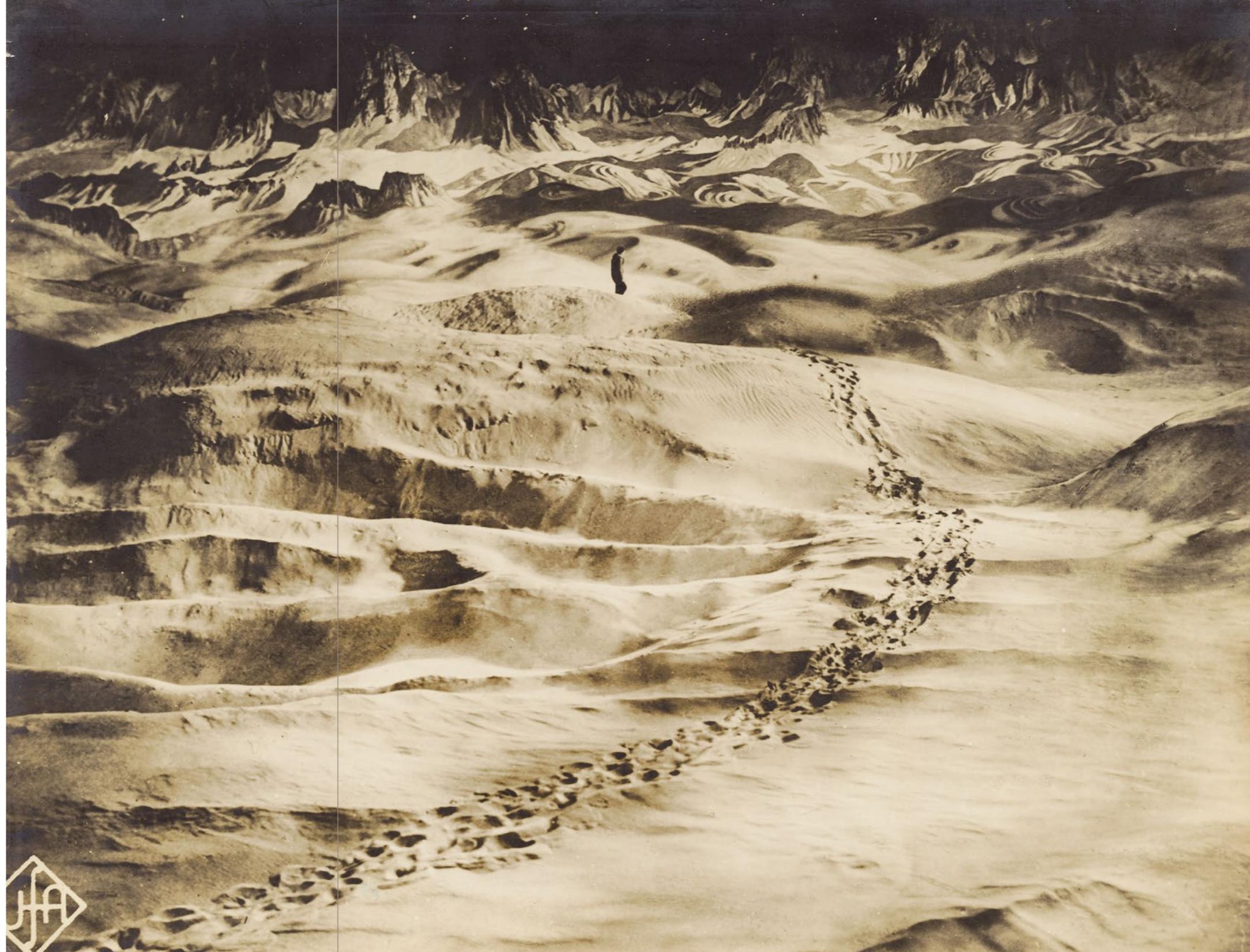


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20 V



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Neubabelsberg.

Aufnahme-Abtg.

Siegfried 5

Nibelungen 1. Teil

Siegfried 9

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