

Note: This essay was given a final grade of 91% (A) because of problems with spacing, commas, and a reference to a scene in the original film that was not included in the version seen in class. This is one of my favorite essays, and "Metropolis" is now one of my favorite films. The restored edition is now available on DVD so the world can see it the way it was intended to be seen.

Metropolis (1927)

Kristopher T. Marks, February 14, 2002

In depression-era Germany, during the political and social turmoil that eventually led to the rise of Hitler and his Nazi party, Austrian painter and World War I veteran Fritz Lang took a risk to create *Metropolis*, a significant milestone in film history (Flipppo). The film takes a deep look at the lives of workers during the industrial revolution and questions the impact of technology on their lives. But to truly understand this remarkable film and its original meaning it is necessary to dig deep into the long history of *Metropolis* and look at what Lang intended during its creation some 75 years ago.

Lang based his film on a 1924 book of the same title written by Thea Von Harbou, his wife and uncredited co-director. Lang started production in 1926 with financial help from Germany's Universum-Film-Aktiengesellschaft company, completing the silent film in 1927 at a cost of 5 to 7 million Deutschmarks (US \$1.68 million) - arguably making *Metropolis* the most expensive film made in pre-war Germany (Organ) (DeBartolo). The majority of that money Lang spent on the film's massive sets and for the services of some 36,500 performers (mostly extras), both of which helped give the film a unique look that remains difficult to reproduce even with today's advanced production methods (DeBartolo). *Metropolis's* high costs were made even more outrageous by the economic depression raging in Germany during the time it was made - an outside factor that ultimately led to the film never becoming profitable.

Commercial failure was not, however, the worst fate lying in store for Lang's film. After the unsuccessful European run, Universal Pictures in Hollywood picked up *Metropolis* for American distribution - but before sending it out American audiences and their short attention spans, Universal cut the film's 3-hour running time to 63 minutes by speeding up some segments and leaving others on the cutting room floor (Areal) (DeBartolo). A slightly longer 90-minute version was released in Germany a bit later that decade, but the original negatives were lost and *Metropolis* was never again shown to the public in its original form (Erickson).

By the time *Metropolis* gained attention again in the 1960's, quite a bit of the original film was lost forever. A reconstructed version was made for German television during that time using uncovered footage not in any previous secondary release, but that addition only stretched the film to 114 minutes (Areal). More attempts at restoration and "improvement" were made in the 1980's and 90's, most famously with Giorgio Moroder's 1984 edition that featured color-tint frames and a rock music soundtrack (Areal).

The film was eventually released on home video by several different companies in

the original black and white with a tolerable soundtrack, but most of those (especially the recent DVD) were of poor quality and caused the film's once stunning visuals to look worn out and drab in comparison to other better-preserved films from the same era. Fortunately, a fully restored DVD using an appropriate soundtrack and as much of the original film as possible (along with still shots and explanatory title cards to fill in the missing plot) is scheduled for release in October of this year (Bar-Sagi). That will do quite a bit to clarify what Lang originally intended to say with his *Metropolis* masterpiece, and open up the film to millions of people who had no interest in seeing the abbreviated, unrestored film.

The particular VHS release of the film I viewed was, fortunately, in relatively good condition and enabled me to understand a lot of *Metropolis's* original theme, at least at the most basic level. At its core *Metropolis* is a basic story of good versus evil: greedy, selfish men exploiting technology to oppress the innocent workers who need a mediator from above to liberate them. Society inside the city of Metropolis during 2027 is sharply divided into two classes of people: the greedy, selfish Masters of Metropolis who spend most of their time frolicking in a utopian Eden, and the slavish workers who spend their pointless lives keeping the masters happy.

The upper-class masters, represented by Johhan (John) Fredersen and his son Freder, are quite content to lounge around in lush "Pleasure Gardens" where every imaginable pleasure is at arm's length and they have not a care in the world. As noted by Brian Koller, "sheltered from the harsh realities of life, Freder may look like an adult, but he is really an innocent, overgrown child" (Koller). Freder appears to be completely unaware of the poor souls who provide him with such luxury, at least until Maria comes up from the depths below with a large flock of the workers' children. Maria, at this point representing the revolutionary leaders who demanded labor reform during the 1920's and 30's, tells the children that Freder and the other masters are their "brothers" - a term often used by members of labor unions to describe each other.

Upon hearing that, Freder immediately comes to realize that not everyone in Metropolis is as privileged as he is. Freder becomes curious about the workers' lives and the living conditions of his "brothers," so he tries to find out more about them. Freder first seeks out the help of Rotwang, Metropolis' resident inventor and evil genius (a character copied in sci-fi films throughout most of the 20th century), and then becomes a worker himself in order to better understand how they live. This breaks away from symbolism of oppressed workers and adds to the film an element of Christ coming to earth in order to understand the suffering of His people. Several other religious symbols scattered throughout *Metropolis* suggest that Lang did intend to deliver a religious message as well, but the exact meaning of that has been lost.

Freder discovers that the workers' lives are miserable and pointless, wrapped around the unflinching 10-hour clock. He sees workers who march to and from their designated jobs, unthinking and unfeeling with tired backs and broken spirits. At one point several workers die in an accident and Freder imagines the machine as a ravenous monster, devouring workers for its own satisfaction. This mirrors the reality of life in early twentieth-century Germany where Fritz Lang and Thea Von Harbou lived, as

thousands of people around them had to choose between dangerous monotonous work or starvation. Lang may have also had similar feelings about his experience in the Great War some years earlier, where he had seen young men sacrificed to the machine of war while carrying out the plans of Germany's own Masters of Metropolis.

Even as Maria and the workers plan a peaceful revolt, John Fredersen and Rotwang employ technology to disrupt their rebellious plans and create an excuse to oppress the workers even more. Rotwang kidnaps Maria and fashions a robot (a term not used in Lang's original work) that looks like her. The original 1927 edit of *Metropolis* used the robot as part of a love triangle gone terribly wrong, but since much of the original is gone and the version this references was cut differently, we must try and get a deeper meaning from the film as presented.

In the referenced film, Futura the robot is sent to the workers looking and acting like Maria. This false Maria then encourages the workers to violently revolt against the Masters, giving John Fredersen an excuse to oppress them further. This is symbolic of technologies such as electricity and the automobile that were being introduced during the 1920's; technologies that made workers feel more empowered while stealing away some of their individuality and freedoms. As Roger Ebert said in his *Metropolis* review, "The buried message is powerful: Science and industry will become the weapons of demagogues" (Ebert, 2001). This is certainly still applicable to our lives in the 21st century, perhaps more than ever with the world abuzz over human cloning and genetic manipulation.

Despite their best efforts, Maria, and the workers are unsuccessful in gaining freedom, primarily because of the Master's technological advantage. But when Freder is placed in a position of danger by Rotwang, John Frederson realizes his mistakes and seems to temporarily repent for his oppressive actions. At the end of the film, Freder steps in as a mediator between the Master of Metropolis and Metropolis' workers. This reverts to religious symbolism again, with Freder serving as a Christ figure who connected the people with the Master when they were unable to connect on their own.

We can summarize that men are, by nature, greedy and selfish. Those who have the capacity to oppress others for their own gain will always do so, and the advancement of technology makes that easier. Rebellious masses can be placated, fooled, or eliminated by technologies that appear to be helpful at first but slowly remove more freedom and individuality as they become more advanced. The only way to break the endless cycle of oppression, rebellion, and technological suffocation is to introduce an outside party, a mediator, or a "heart" between "the Brain" and "the Hands" as the film so clearly says. This heart can come in the form of a labor's rights activist, a Christian savior, or simply the son of an upper class Master of Metropolis.

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