

## Metropolis and the Modern Self

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### ABSTRACT

Fritz's Lang's *Metropolis* was produced in 1926, not long after the industrial revolution. It therefore demonstrates the prevailing worries and miseries of people under the industrial capitalist system.

**Key words:** Industrialism, Capitalist System, Working Class

Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* was produced in 1926, Not long after the start of the industrial revolution. It demonstrates the prevailing worries and miseries of people under the industrial capitalist system. That is to say, competition in this capitalist system led to social inequality. The romantic poet Shelley wrote a bitter poem ("Song to the men of England") to remind the workers that, "The robes ye weave another wears;/The arms ye forge another bears." That is to say, the workers are not benefiting from their work; someone is taking what is rightfully theirs. In *Metropolis*, Lang also demonstrates this idea that capitalism does not obtain the most good for the most people, but rather the most good for a small minority: the elites who own the factories.

*Metropolis* is set in the year 2026. The people of Metropolis are divided into a rich, elite minority and a group of repressed, impoverished workers. The workers live underground, operating the machines that keep the above ground in order. At the beginning of the story, during the shift change scene, we see a group of workers mechanically moving in and another mechanically moving out, like herds. At the same time, the privileged leisure class lives above ground in stadiums and gardens, under the blue sky and surrounded by birds and flowers, breathing the fresh air.

The city of Metropolis is overseen by Jon Fredersen, the master of Metropolis, the structure that others inhabit. The film thus recounts the myth of the builder. Jon Fredersen is a man who orders nature according to his will. For him, Metropolis is a marvel of rational design. It shows how human energy imposes itself on its environment. But how does this marvelous product of human intelligence function for the people in it? One cannot fail to notice that it functions as a prison. It is a trap for the workers who live and walk inside of it. The film shows how building a structure is an exercise

of power, particularly over those who inhabit it. Lang shows the prestige of the above ground design and the darker ramifications of the underground design. He also shows the conflict between the two. He illustrates how one person's design is another's nightmare.

*Metropolis* shows that the façade of unity in the city is unsuccessfully covering up decay, disorder, and chaos. The film tells the story of Jon Fredersen, the master of Metropolis, who is running an industrial city on slave labor. The film moves toward a paternalistic theme: Jon Fredersen must learn that those who work around the clock underground—endlessly performing the same specialized mechanical labor—are humans rather than machines. The agent of this change is his son, Freder.

As Freder flirts with girls in the garden, he sees Maria coming in with a group of children. He falls in love with her and pursues her to the underground. There, he sees a worker struggling with a machine. When the worker fails to keep the machine under control, the machine blows up. Freder sees the machine become a mouth and devour the masses of workers. This powerful imagery shows how human life is sacrificed for the machine, and the upper class is completely indifferent. In another trip to the underground, Freder sees a worker struggling, hanging on to the hands of a ten-hour clock. This is another brilliant image that Lang uses to show how the workers are being crucified by their jobs.

Maria is a very Christian character. When the workers' shift ends, they gather in the catacombs to hear Maria deliver a sermon. Tirelessly, she tells the workers to accept their condition as they will get their reward in heaven. She supports her sermon with the story of the Tower of Babel, the city of noise and confusion that God destroyed because of

its corruption. Her point is that both cities—Metropolis and Babel—lack an agent that connects the ruled to the ruler. She suggests the workers learn from the example of Babel and try to be patient and peacefully find that agent.

With this telling of the story of Babel, Fritz Lang emphasizes that part of the religious discourse helps people develop a coherent worldview. It encourages a group identity, solidifies group cohesion, and forges a connection to a group's traditions and roots. Indeed, this is what happens in the film. We see the workers gathered around Maria, relieved and encouraged by what she says and acting toward one goal—like one group. They believe in a mediator who is going to resolve the conflict peacefully.

Lang also uses the scene of good Maria in the catacombs as a critique of religion. Ludwig Feuerbach's projection theory of religion says that the concept of God is really an imaginary projection of the human essence into the sky.

Marx also has a theory of religion that parallels Feuerbach's to some extent. He argues that religion is the consolation for what the worker has lost. This imaginary realization is needed because the human being possesses no true reality. Therefore, he or she must have an imagined reality, a consolation like going to heaven, where his or her humanity is fulfilled or realized. Religion is a hope of restoration for the worker's stolen humanity. For Marx, religion is both an expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering; he states that "it is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart in a heartless world the soul in a soulless condition, it is the opium of the people." Religion is a way to make life bearable. In short, Marx believes that religious discourse involves lying and propagandizing to impose and maintain social control.

Maria wants to maintain order in the underground. She wants to make sure that the workers do not riot or strike. However, there is another character in the film: a mad scientist who invents a robot to take Maria out of action. He succeeds in capturing Maria and endowing the robot with her likeness. This robot Maria does the opposite of what the real Maria has been doing. She encourages sexual orgies with the elite who run the factories. She uses the same charismatic speech as the real Maria, but she reminds the workers of their own stories—rather than religious myths—to charge them with hatred and push them toward revenge. She plunges the whole city into an extraordinary act of violence, provoking the workers into a riot. They then blow up the place. She says:

You know I have always spoken of peace but your mediator hasn't come. You have waited long enough! Your time has come ... Who is the living food for the machines in Metropolis?! Who lubricates the machine joints with their own blood?! Who feeds the machine with their own flesh?! Let the machine starve-! you fools-! Let them die-!!

The image that I will use to explain the film is a piece of thread. This piece of thread has, of course, two ends. Imagine that between the two ends of this thread there are beads. This state was the beginning of the film. Things were not very steady; the slightest imbalance would cause disorder and chaos, and that is what happens when the scientist

intervenes with his creation. Now, imagine that one end of the thread lies aboveground and the other underground. On one end stands Freder and on the other stands Maria. Throughout the film, the two ends try to connect in a kind of a romantic quest. At the end of the film, this quest ends with a grand encounter. The real Maria is saved by Freder, and reconciliation takes place. The film ends with Jon Fredersen shaking the head worker's hand.

*Metropolis* is a film about the loss of individuality, self, and authenticity in the age of industrialization and capitalist arrangements. It shows people's robot-like actions as they perform the same monotonous tasks around the clock. The scientist's robot is a natural result of the capitalist economic system in which there is a total division of labor. In this system, the work itself becomes so specialized and automated that the worker is reduced to a machine. In keeping with Marxist ideology, it alienates men from themselves and from one another. It perverts human values, causing human beings to come to value things over one another. It encourages avarice, competition, and inequality.

In capitalism, competition demands that each businessman invests in the latest technologies; moreover, it demands that each invest in the research and development of future technologies for labor-saving devices, so that he or she can get a leg up in the competitive struggle with his or her colleagues. This is obvious in the master of Metropolis's actions when he resorts to the scientist, as usual, when things do not go the way he wants. We see this behavior in the workers who adopt the machine mode of existence as they try to keep up with the demands of the machine. Here, machines are an instrument of oppression of the workers; we see the workers as humans without their humanity and identity. They have become human remnants that the world does not really care about; they have become nobody. The workers of Metropolis are reduced to nothing more than an extension of the machines to which they are attached.

Lang shows another dimension of the workers of Metropolis: they are all dressed in the same uniform. One cannot tell them apart. In addition, the robot Maria and real Maria are also identical. This shows a version of urban anonymity reminiscent of Charles Dickens' *Cocktown*:

It was a town of red bricks or of bricks that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; but, as matters stood it was a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage. It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of buildings full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness. It contained several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom

every day was the same as yesterday and tomorrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next.

This is a vision of the city as “an ugly citadel where nature [is] strongly bricked out [and] killing air and gases [are] bricked in” (Dickens). It is a vision of a city of machinery, a serpent of smoke with rivers that run purple. This also shows anonymity as a fundamental fact of the modern city. In the city, people are destined to be nameless and faceless. Sameness dominates the workers’ lives; all are nearly indistinguishable. The men are all shapes and sizes, but their dress is identical in every detail. This is a portrait of a highly degraded industrial environment. People are emptied in this kind of impersonal environment, which operates according to functional relationships rather than human feelings.

To conclude, Steven Wallace wrote in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction”:

From this the poem springs: that we live in a place  
That is not our own, and much more, not ourselves  
And hard it is in spite of blazoned days.

This is the most suitable statement to describe the situation of the people trapped in the bureaucracy of the modern city, of those workers who are unsatisfied and unhappy in their jobs. It also describes the art that such conditions produce. Wallace suggests that we are not proprietors of our bodies and our place in the world. We are bereaved and dispossessed of self. That is to say, our own makeup—our own equipment—is, in some sense, alien, autonomous, and following its own rules. It is not easy to manage this double

dispossession of not being at home and not being oneself. The awareness of this fact of not owning either our place or ourselves is the origin of the poetry of the modern world.

In a stylized, exaggerated way, *Metropolis* makes us see how this modern world—the stage that the human subject occupies—has become demonically alive and dreadfully active. In it, things change shape; nothing remains still, stable, or itself. In this world, the human subject shrinks and the machine flourishes. The human subject has less maneuvering room, less control over the environment, and less ability to maintain or to actualize his or her potential or longings. *Metropolis* is about how much less space the human subject takes up, and how much less power the individual can have in a world that is now animated by the forces of capitalism.

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