

MIT Student

Metropolis, Fritz Lang (1927)

Setting:

- “The Future”
- Metropolis
 - A combination of New York and Paris; New York from the scale and look of the buildings (monolithic sky scrapers) and Paris for the long boulevards leading to a focal point (Tower of Babel) and also the Cathedral, which is modelled similarly to Notre Dame.
 - It’s only a model.
- Metropolis has influence on future fictional cities, defined as ideas or at least vehicles for them; detached from a larger population that includes rural areas, the city is economically self-sufficient and politically independent
 - *The Lego Movie* in its plot formation and situation of its main villain “President Business” have vestigial qualities from *Metropolis*; the Tower of Babel equivalent here actually does seem to reach the stars. The plot still has the bildungsroman of the protagonist discovering the city is not as idealistic as he thought and the “chosen one”/Jesus narrative.
 - The Robot Planet City in *Futurama*, where humans are banned and “mindless repetitive tasks” are valorized. The working city in *Metropolis* is essentially a city of robots; they have numbers not names, no choice in life, and are comparable to slaves (with which robot has some etymological roots)
 - Rapture from the video game series Bioshock, a city created by one man with a vision for how he would like a city to be, economically, politically etc. A city that couldn’t exist in a country, so it was built underwater
 - Metropolis as a city seems to represent the idea that man can separate himself from earth (by leaving the country and agriculture) and reach the heavens to rearrange the stars celebrating his creator, and himself as a creator. In that way, Joh Fredersen rules his city with the inherent hubris of human imagination unfettered by physics and reality.
 - Davis’s analysis of how areas urbanize primarily from rural-urban migration that significantly decreases the agricultural population dependent on the land reminded me of this separation and from earth and de-naturalization that accompanies industrialization
- The idea of “How the Other Half Lives” and an Engels-esque “Conditions of the Working Class” pervades the image of Metropolis as a city creating a commentary on industrialization.
 - The sense of constriction the buildings we never see the tops of from the ground is a silent reminder of the inequality that exists in Metropolis, as in all industrialized societies. The city becomes a structural re-enforcement of the inequality.

5 Adjectives

- Mechanical
- Inhibiting
- Apotheosized
- A house of cards
- Bifurcated

A Remarkable Scene:

- The “Moloch scene”
 - The explosion of the heart machine when Freder firsts visits the worker’s city that turns into the vision of Moloch/Machine literally consuming the workers that march into the mouth the same way they march into the elevators; blindly and without the hope of choice.
 - Cinematically, it establishes a lot:
 - It foreshadows the apocalyptic destruction of the Heart Machine later
 - Re-enforces the theme of industrialization as evil, but necessary
 - The fact that Freder, “the mediator/heart” goes immediately to the Heart Machine which then shocks both him and the viewer, and initiates the shakedown of the structure of Metropolis. We see everything breaking down almost immediately after in the Tower of Babel.

Questions/Comments

- Welles writes in his critique that *Metropolis* certainly does not describe the city of 1927, unconvinced and I think overvaluing the hyperbole in the plot. His argument that no American city has the “drudge workers” because they have prevented the immigration of them because they are so obviously harmful to the economy is the most eloquent expression of anti-immigration sentiment I think I’ve ever read. However, the exploitation of the labor force is something development economists have shown to be necessary for industrializing countries. Metropolis seems to be a newly industrialized city if it still has this exploited population. The problem seems to be that it was billed as a view of the city “one hundred years hence” when it seemed to actually be, to Welles, more like the city fifty years ago during the take-off of the industrial revolution. But with rising inequality in today’s society and the rising wealth that is collects only in the top percentile (making the “top ten-thousandth” listed on the invitation eerily prescient) does Metropolis reflect a more obvious version of today?
- Buñel critiques *Metropolis* on a very important aspect when examining it as a city: the crowd. He argues we do not feel the crowd’s soul, but the whole point of the crowds of workers is that until they are incited to violence by Hel, they have no soul, they are barely more than parts of the machine, numbered pieces, replaced when worn out. His comparison to a ballet is also interesting because the nature of silent films tends to involve more obvious blocking for emotion, not unlike a stage performance. For instance the characters clutching (or not clutching) their hearts every time something emotional happens conveys their nature. There is also the very purposeful downward position of the face when referencing the working class; Freder lowers his head when joining the workers, and Josephat immediately assumes their posture when he his fired. This motion emphasizes the

difference between the workers who never look up to the Founders who only look up and dream of rearranging the heavens.

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