

Metropolis

Director: Fritz Lang

Producer: Erich Pommer

Cinematography: Karl Freund, Günther Rittau, Eugen Schüfftan (special effects)

Set Design: Otto Hunte, Erich Kettelhut, Karl Vollbrecht

Screenplay: Thea von Harbou

Original Music: Gottfried Huppertz

Spieldauer: 148 minutes (restored version)

Premiere: January 10, 1927 – Berlin

Cast: Alfred Abel (Joh Fredersen); Brigitte Helm (Maria); Gustav Fröhlich (Freder); Rudolf Klein-Rogge (Rotwang); Fritz Rasp (Der Schmale); Heinrich George (Grot)

Commentary by A. Krumm

Meinhattan, a.k.a Fritz's kind of town.

"When I finished *Metropolis*, I didn't like it at all." Fritz Lang's assessment resonates now as much as it did in 1971 when he gave that interview and in July of 1926 when shooting was completed. Lang deserves credit for giving people permission to like or dislike his most famous film. If asked, people nowadays will often reflexively tell you that, well, it is a masterpiece. Whether that equates to liking it often remains unexpressed.

It was the movie's script which Lang had in mind when he said he didn't like the film, even though that script was largely written by his wife at the time, Thea von Harbou. Channing Pollock certainly agreed with Lang. Pollock was hired by Paramount to edit the film for release in America, and he said: "As it stood when I began my job of structural editing, *Metropolis* had no restraint or logic. It was symbolism run such riot that people who saw it couldn't tell what the picture was all about. I have given it my meaning." That was probably just as well; whatever meaning was intended by von Harbou seemed to veer into apocalypticism run amok.

The basic pattern of response was that many critics appreciated the technical brilliance of the film, but deplored the dramatic quality. Alfred Hildenbrandt, a critic for the *Berliner Tageblatt*, summarized what he heard from fellow critics thus: " *sie sagten ... es sei ein gekünsteltes, kaltschäuziges Machwerk mit herrlichen Photographien, mit verlogendem Ethos, mit beispielloser Technik, ein sentimentaler, anspruchsloser Kitsch, mit alten und neuen Tricks, schlechtem Spiel, mit qualvollen Texten, mit hohlen Symbolen und leerem Geschwätz, mit schiefem Realismus und schiefer Romantik zugleich, mit Unwahrhaftigkeiten im Stoff, mit Abhängigkeiten aus bekannter Literatur.*"

Theodor Heuss was a specific example of Hildenbrandt's summary: "über das Kitschige des geistigen Motivs will ich gar nichts sagen ... Aber die Vermischung der mystischen, allegorischen, symbolischen und der realistischen, konkreten Motive ist so schwer erträglich weil in ihnen die ganze seelische Verkrampfung dieser Zeit liegt...."

Wolfgang Jacobsen and Werner Sudendorf, in their work on the film, aptly summarize what most film students would probably accept as the enduring net worth of *Metropolis*: "It is not Thea von Harbou's naive vision that has survived its time, but Lang's arrangement of images."

Examples of that vaunted technical brilliance include the use of miniature sets coupled with the process perfected by Eugen Schüfftan whereby mirrors were used to make actors realistically appear in those miniature sets. Another innovation was Walter Mittendorf's sculpting of the *Maschinenmensch* costume onto a plaster cast of Brigitte Helm so she could 'wear' the robot. Stop motion was used to show motion within those miniature sets in long shots. Superimposition was enlisted for the shimmering rings of light when the *Maschinenmensch* is created. Lang adeptly employed such innovations in the service of the memorable scenes and indelible images that comprise the unique visual signature of *Metropolis*.

Lang was fond of promulgating the story that the inspiration for *Metropolis* came from a visit to Manhattan in 1924. Actually Ufa had been planning the film for some time to follow in the wake of Lang's previous success, *Die Niebelungen*. Years later, Lang confided in a letter that the script had been finished six months before he showed up in New York. *Metropolis* was one of the last big budget silent films and one immediate result was that it got producer Erich Pommer demoted. It cost over six million marks, at least four times the original estimate, and was a financial failure for Ufa.

Unlike the script, so conspicuous for its pretentious pomposity, the acting stands out for its strangeness. Are we watching the fading vestiges of 19th century stage technique, or a short lived, transitional phenomenon adapted for silent films, or are we simply watching the instantiation of images flitting about within Fritz Lang's fertile brain? Critic Kurt Pinthus referred to the "bloated gestures" and one can quickly overdose on all those stagey poses and intense, histrionic gazes (although there is no question that Rudolf Klein Rogge (a.k.a C. A. Rotwang) has the spookiest gaze in movie history).

There is a nagging *déjà vu* dynamic in play as you watch *Metropolis*; you keep seeing images and scenarios that are vaguely familiar (the opening vista of downtown Metropolis, the workers trudging in and out at shift change, the energized liquids and eerily kinetic lights of the laboratory, the chase on the roof of the cathedral, the evil Maria *Doppelgängerin* dancing at the Japanese nightclub). Whether you're thinking of *Blade Runner*, or an Arnold action hit, or the "raygun gothic" style permeating countless sci-fi flicks, or *Vertigo*, or an eighties music video, it eventually strikes you how many of the images from *Metropolis* are littered throughout the offerings of popular culture over the last eight decades. There is certainly no anxiety over the influence of *Metropolis* for the likes of Ridley Scott or Madonna or Hitchcock or George Lucas.

Few would claim that Thea von Harbou displayed much insight about her times or any other, but did Lang have any foresight? Did he anticipate anything very concrete about the technological or social future of mankind? The jury continues to deliberate on that, but it is irrefutable that Lang caught at least a small glimmer of the computer revolution. There are no clear examples of googling in *Metropolis*, but it is wonderful to watch Joh Fredersen skyping with Grot, the chief mechanic of the Heart Machine.

We have in the restored version nearly two and one half hours of images, but no spoken words. This is not the fault of Lang (he would not work with sound until 1931 when he directed *M*) but two and one half hours of merely moving lips can be wearying. There is a score, a lovely score, but a twenty first century sensibility cannot help but acutely miss all those words which were spoken but never heard. We might know Maria and Freder and Rotwang much better, or even entirely differently, if we could only hear their voices.

All the original critics of *Metropolis* are long gone now and we are well into the third generation of debates between defenders and disparagers of the film and the passive acquiescence of nearly everyone else that it is, well, a masterpiece. Lang himself never seemed too troubled by such debates or the need for some final status for *Metropolis* or indeed any of his other films. In his seventies, in a letter to his friend Lotte Eisner, he merely noted: „Weißt du, liebe Lotte, je mehr ich versuche, in mich hineinzuschauen, desto mehr wundere ich mich über die schlafwandlerische Sicherheit, mit der ich meine Filme gemacht habe...“

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