

A segment from **METROPOLIS** (1926):

Analysis and Additional Notes: Aside from the concluding excitement of the final scenes, like Freder's battle with Rotwang and the flooding of Lower Metropolis, there is little more than a cursory nod to the technical accuracy of building an android and controlling it, and the industry at work in the advanced "futuristic" city of Metropolis. We are not shown how the entire system works. We are only shown that workers manipulate the controls of the machine to exhaustion, with little explanation why. In retrospect, one could say that these scenes were but the foreground for the larger work as we peel back the layers and begin to see the whole machine for what it is.

But the social impact of the division between the upper class and the lower class (note that there is no "middle" class save among the managers reporting to Fredersen) is telling in that it takes the entire population to keep the city going. The upper class cannot live without the labor of the workers, who up to now toiled under the illusion that the machines granted them prosperity, while actually performing a vital and underappreciated function: keeping the city from flooding.

I am reminded of the levees collapsing when hurricane Katrina flooded the lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans, and the attending lack of attention to restoring the city until years later. Had Metropolis fully flooded and the children been killed without the intervention of Freder and Maria, it would have seen total ruin in the collapse of its industry; not to mention the blame being heaped on Joh Fredersen and his misguided approach to leadership, the lack of resources to rebuild, and the lack of incentive for the workers to rebuild if the city is built in the wrong place. The social contract having been breached, the populace likely would have preferred to move and build somewhere else, and that would have been the end of it.

The comparison to the Tower of Babel is lost somewhat in the translation when we see the dominance of the "ziggurat" of Fredersen's tower looming in the distance against the foreground of equally massive buildings. Like most of the greatest skyscrapers of the world, they are impressive for their design and their impact on a city skyline; but nothing else. The idea of communication using a common language is better demonstrated in the end, when Freder and Fredersen are reunited and the workers understand their place in the grand scheme; that their hard work is vital to the survival of the city. Their grumblings against the upper classes are seen as meaningless when compared with the worth of their work to keep the city from flooding. But then they should have known that already, though the film clearly shows that they don't and were never informed in a practical manner.

I am reminded of a Japanese anime film called *Memories*, and its third segment called "Cannon Fodder". We see an entire society living and prospering around the industry, rituals, and procedures of arming and firing a giant cannon like a gun of Navarone. Each worker has a specific function, and the chance to be "promoted" to do a greater part. The star of the show has the sole function of firing the weapon. All he has to do is to press the button.

We see a child of that society learning his engineering lessons and going to sleep under a poster of the firing officer. He says he wants to be him one day. The firing officer is his true hero, and the man he wants to emulate. It's too bad it is not a real goal. There is no discussion of how much the man earns and if he ever worked to get there.

We never see the enemy, though they are probably living in a similar society. Neither side even knows why the war was started, or which side started it. War as a means to keep the economy going has turned into a way of life, and the machines of war are the only way people retain their standard of living. I can see that there are many in this country alone who see war as a way to maintain the status quo, but is it the best way to live? Only time will tell.

Additional notes: Produced in Germany during a stable period of the Weimar Republic, *Metropolis* is set in a futuristic urban dystopia and makes use of this context to explore the social crisis between workers and owners which is an inherent flaw of capitalism. The film was produced in the Babelsberg Studios by Universum Film A.G. (UFA). The most expensive silent film ever made, it cost approximately 5 million Royal Marks, or approximately \$15 million when adjusted for inflation.

Metropolis was cut substantially after its German premiere and much footage was lost over the passage of successive decades. There had been several efforts to restore it, as well as discoveries of previously lost footage. A 2001 reconstruction of *Metropolis* was shown at the Berlin Film Festival. In 2008, a copy 30 minutes longer than any other

known to survive was located in Argentina. After a long period of restoration in Germany, the film was shown publicly for the first time simultaneously in Berlin and Frankfurt on February 12, 2010. This version was also shown in New York at the Ziegfeld Theater in the last two weeks of October of 2010, and is the version I saw on TCM (Turner Classic Movies).

Sidebar: I have seen Osamu Tezuka's wondrous anime film Metropolis which was a masterpiece of visual perfection. The focus for the story centers on Maria, who is shown as an adroid with no memory but who imprints on a boy named Kenichi for her socialization. Kenichi already has a special affinity for the droids working in the lower levels of the city, and his ability to communicate with them makes him special to her. We see much of the plot through the eyes of his uncle, a police detective from another prefecture who has come to look in on his nephew and take in the sights.

Marduk is the man at the center of the city. There are special allusions to the god-king Marduk and the god Enki, whose daughter Inanna was the guardian of the laws of order and chaos. The great tower is in fact a ziggurat surrounded by lush gardens, plazas and magnificent edifices. (the gloriously painted animation backgrounds alone are worth the viewing). Marduk's son is a rake, jaded and cynical about the power his father already has, and Marduk's quest for more power only aggravates the delicate peace they share. In point of fact, Marduk frequently ignores his son entirely while pursuing his own goals, a fact which proves to be telling as the film progresses.

This story is more about the abuse of the machines than of living workers. The machines are treated as especially vile and not worthy of respect. There is also a faction of living citizens who delight in destroying the machines for "taking our jobs" even as the machines only do jobs they won't do themselves. There are a couple of incidents which point to sabotage of the machines in the form of a controlling circuit going bad in one of them. Left unreplaced, the droid goes out of control and must be "put down" to restore the peace. An investigation begins but it is assigned to a humanoid android, who is both helpful and somewhat empathetic. He is tortured and then destroyed by an angry mob of citizens.

Maria is caught in the middle of the power struggle between Marduk and his son, who sees her as an impediment to his father's attentions, even thinking that she is out to steal them. By now he is insane. He forms a rebel faction whose goal is to destroy Metropolis from within, and his particular target is Maria. He then organizes a brief rebellion of the dissatisfied which is stopped by the Metro police. When he escapes he shoots her and tries to kill Kenichi. The bullet damages Maria enough that she becomes disoriented and confused. Kenichi's uncle wounds Marduk's son in a firefight and helps Maria and Kenichi to get away.

But Maria and Kenichi are caught by Marduk's men. Marduk attaches her to the great machine at the heart of the city's substructure, and in a spectacular build up of mechanical interconnection, the machine takes over her small android body and turns her into a mindless superweapon which proceeds to destroy everything. The great machine is "angry" at Marduk and his people's treatment of the droids (possibly a result of the damage to Maria's positronic brain). It targets Marduk in particular and he flees in a panic.

Only Kenichi's voice restores Maria to herself, but by then most of the city is in ruins. Marduk and his son die in the destruction, and the great city is left to the mercy of the machines. Kenichi finds to his delight that the machines have been restored to their peaceful identities. He decides that he will stay and become their caretaker. Perhaps I see it differently, but aside from the super effects the story also touches on the difference between power and control. Maria was innocent as any machine can be, but she was transformed into a pitiless goddess of war by the ambitions of man.

Inanna, in all her mechanized glory.