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Feature: METROPOLIS (1927)

Produced by Ufa
Scenario by . . . Thea von Harbou
Photography by. . Karl Freund and
 Gunther Rittau
Design by Otto Hunte,
 Erich Kettlehut,
 & Karl Vollbrecht
Directed by. FRITZ LANG

METROPOLIS is a product of the German era of studio films and artistic flux. Both of these factors united to make such a film both possible and probable.

METROPOLIS was made in a time which, for Germany, was one of intellectual interest. The post-war atmosphere was one of "frenzied" search for new formulas, the passionate desire to establish new dogma. Disillusioned by defeat, German intellectuals, who could not and would not resign themselves to a new reality, turned instead to "their old reputation as a 'people of poets and thinkers.'" They became mystical. Since the real world had slipped from their grasp, they resorted to a world of "anguish, unrest and a vague unrest, obsessed by the memory of a glorious past."

As a medium, German writers and artists chose the expressionistic style of the Stanislavsky and Meyerhold Soviet theater. Expressionism superseded all other artistic principles. Furthermore, expressionism as an abstract art form was very near the native doctrine of art based upon intellectualism rather than the senses.

The best form of expressionism was in film art. Here one could "evolve in a visual but unreal manner, phantoms created by their perturbed minds." Germany was overwhelmed by a sense of fatalism, and this found its way into their films. "They found a temporary escape in films formed in their own image: films of horror, death, and nightmare."

Lang made METROPOLIS at a time when others were concentrating on stark realism. In a period when people were having too much "realism" of their own, this film had originality and imagination.

METROPOLIS, made in what Kracauer calls the "grand style manner" during the "stabilized period," was conceived by Lang when he first viewed New York. The Lang city of the future is on two levels: an upper level for the rich and pleasure loving; and a lower level for the workers to tend their machines. In the film the workers, more than slaves, revolt against their masters; and eventually the two classes reconcile their differences.

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THE PLOT

Freder, the son of an industrialist, rebels against his father and joins the workers of the lower city. He becomes a friend of Maria, who gives saintly comfort to the oppressed. She advances the idea that the heart must mediate between the hand and the brain. The industrialist overhears, and fearing the mediation of the heart, has a robot made to look like Maria, to incite riots and furnish an excuse for the industrialist to crush the workers' spirits.

However, the rebellion gets out of hand. Doom is avoided only by the intervention of Freder and Maria. The picture ends with a symbolic alliance between labor and capital, and the mediation of the heart.

But by yielding to the heart, in reality, the industrialist now has an even stronger hold on the workers. This was the essence of the propaganda formulated by Goebbels, who believed it better to win the heart of a people than to beat them with arms. The final scene contains the analogy between the industrialist and Goebbels. The industrialist becomes omnipotent. "Freder's rebellion results in the establishment of totalitarian authority, and he considers this result a victory."

But all this is contrasted with Lang's own personal views. The "naivete or conventionalism" was probably due to his wife and collaborator, Thea von Harbou, and to Ufa.

"Thus...the artificial reconciliation of the workmen with their indifferent master, the easygoing, trivial slogan of 'the heart which has to be mediator between the directing brain and the toiling hands' contrasts deeply with Lang's revelation of social injustice..." as manifested in some of his later American films (FURY, for example).

The time of the making of METROPOLIS was one of new developments and experimentation, and so many of the camera movements are uninhibited. In the flood scene the camera soars upward to emphasize the struggle of those escaping upwards from the waters.

Lang's early background was as an architect, and his early films show an "individual use of expressionistic techniques combined with an architectural sense of cinematic composition." This is very apparent in his handling of crowds. "Lang likes to group his actors into a definite geometric frame... In METROPOLIS, grouped figures become more and more an element of the architecture itself." But Lang is not completely bound to expressionism. "He only makes use of this

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style for his psychological or decorative purposes; for example, when he wants to express the soulless, anonymous force of the masses in METROPOLIS..." This all contrasts with Lang's later, more sympathetic treatment of crowds in "M" and a few others of his films.

Lang was conscious of light and shadow as "dramatic factors." For Lang...light is a means of emphasizing the form and structure of his settings. Yet the basic idea of light as a means of obtaining dramatic effect is at its best in METROPOLIS when the mad inventor's torch chases Maria until she is caught in a circle of light out of which there seems to be no escape." Lang uses shadows in METROPOLIS when "during an accident corpses are being carried away, Lang only shows the gigantic shadows of the bearers framing the actor Frohlich, the only visible witness."

Being a fantasy, this film was well suited for the techniques of the German studio film. The director had complete control over the lighting and the sets. Lang used the Shafton process, "an ingenious mirror device permitting the substitution of little models for giant structures" to make his city. Lang was also very careful to get technical exactness in his scenes of the laboratory when the robot is created, of the bosses' office, in the vision of his tower of Babel, in the machinery and arrangement of masses.

Here is a film that shows some of the inner feelings of the German people. It has in it some of the mythological background and the later day fascism. It was powerful enough to encourage Goebbels and Hitler to ask the non-Aryan Lang to remain in Germany to make Nazi films although he disagreed with their policies.

(Notes supplied by American Federation of Film Societies)
(Sources: Robert Kaufman with thanks to Prof. J.C. Reid;
FROM CALIGARI TO HITLER by Siegfried Kracauer; THE FILM TILL
NOW by Paul Rotha; "The German Films of Fritz Lang" by Lotte
H. Eisner in THE PENGUIN FILM REVIEW NO. 6. Prof. Reid's notes
were originally prepared for the Auckland, New Zealand, Film Society)

Musical accompaniment for this film was programmed and supplied by William K. Everson, of the Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society. The recording "The Iron Factory" was supplied by Rudy Franchi, of the Abbey Film Society.