

# Metropolis

**T**HERE is a city of fantasy that is divided. But maybe this is not so unusual. Every large city is divided.

On one level, living space is shaped by the wealthy; on another, the poor and the marginalized. On one side is the part that always wants to be on show, as scene; on the other, the part that wants to be hidden, the obscene.

*Metropolis*, Fritz Lang's famous film, shows that division starkly, even though the city in the film is just a futuristic fantasy. Produced in 1927, this silent movie talks about a city far in the future in 2026, a city shown with buildings and infrastructure that did not exist in the world at that time.

But the film's moral is old indeed.

Behind the fancy skyscrapers and the highways set high above ground, power lies in the hands of one ruthless man: Joh Fredersen. He is not a politician. He is a capitalist. He is alone, without competition, without the need to share with (or confront) any other power. The screen even gives the impression of a deserted city. There are no crowds. There is no State. Fredersen is the One-and-Only God of Capital.

But from the beginning of the film, we know there is something nasty and sad behind all this: thousands of faceless workers are seen running the entire metropolis from an underground engine room.

As in the later Charlie Chaplin film, *Modern Times*, they are seen slaving away between the powerful machines. There are long uniform lines at work like puppets. Their lives are determined by time that is measured precisely. With absolute discipline. Without leisure. Without conversation.

The film indeed imagines a future that is disturbing, a dystopia. Many years after Fritz Lang's work, we find the same theme in films like *Blade Runner* and *Children of Men*: the future is darkness. The future is hell. Hope is extinguished with anti-utopia.

But every dystopia is basically a criticism of the present. There is no future that is not seeded by the now. Fritz Lang and his film were contemporaneous with the German expressionist painters in the Weimar Republic post World War I. Over those two decades in the early 20th century, artists witnessed the destruction of life in the very midst of the optimism of a modern city.

Grosz, for instance, painted Berlin in his work *Großstadt* (1916-1917): overlit with dark gloomy red, the metropolis, Berlin, looks like a depraved space. Grosz's canvas depicts in caricature the rich with bulging stomachs; neatly dressed men at a café looking at an almost completely naked seated woman; a man with the face of a pig kissing a naked woman...

As in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, there are shadows of piety here: money is the root of all evil, the Bible says. Fritz Lang depicts the Biblical allegory of the whore of Babylon and the arrogance of the Tower of Babel; *Großstadt* also reiterates religion's attack on the body and lust—even though Grosz was a fervently anti-capitalist communist. Probably because what he really set out to show was a city that wants to hide that part of itself that is obscene.

He once said that he himself was like the characters he depicted; at one time he was like a rich man filling his belly with food and sipping champagne. But at another, he was also someone standing outside the door, soaked by rain, begging. He said he felt as though he was split in two.

The problem is: what happens to this split? What can be done? Revolution? Both Fritz Lang and Grosz shunned it.

Grosz later moved to America, bored with his caricatural canvases. In *Metropolis*, the conflict between Fredersen, the super capitalist, and his oppressed workers is not resolved with revolt. In the end, *Metropolis* is merely a melodrama.

The God of Capital who is depicted as heartless later becomes aware because of his love for his only child, Freder. Like Sidharta Gautama, Freder is protected in the palace so that he never sees suffering. But one day he meets and falls in love with Maria, a young woman who protects the poor. Like Gautama, Freder changes. He sides with the oppressed.

But the film ends with a handshake. What started out as a dystopia ends as utopia. With

ease.

In many ways, *Metropolis*—which was shown in Jakarta a couple of weeks ago with live music played by the Babelsberg Orchestra to open the German Season, is an impressive cinematic triumph, well ahead of its time. But at the same time it is just a common story: repeating old advice.

Moral teachings often greatly simplify history, as though life is merely inhabited by pre-fabricated ideas. But *Metropolis* is comfortable with that: the work is magnificent but seems to favor pictures of sectors that are orderly, rather than what is unpredictable in humankind. At the beginning of the film, Fredersen, with his power, puts all those underground workers in order. At the end of the film, Maria, with her noble intentions, orders them neatly once again.

The weak are still faceless, nameless. Maybe they are even still seen as lifeless, as merely something squalid in a divided city.

It is not surprising that the Nazi party applauded *Metropolis*.

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