

Mediation and violence: the relationship between workers and the rich in metropol...



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From the beginning of Metropolis, there is a stark divide between the upper class and the working people. We see working people walk like soldier into huge elevators, heads hanging in clear misery, descending into what we can only assume is their version of hell, deep below the earth's surface. Their clothes are black and the world around them is just as dark. Topside, the sons of the wealthy are dressed all in white, playing and carefree. The intertitles make it clear that these wealthy people live off the backs of the workers. When the rich women see the children of the workers, they gawk at them like foreign creatures. Freder, the son of the master of Metropolis, is enraptured by Maria and follows her into the city of the workers, where he sees them toiling away at a machine. The workers struggle to control the machine as a gauge rises, eventually causing the machine to turn into a face with a gaping mouth that swallows scores of workers alive. These workers march obediently into the mouth, giving themselves over to death by machine, death by work. This is only one of many scenes that indicates the sense of violence that reaches across the otherwise clear class distinctions in Metropolis, a film that moves from a vision of class antagonism to a possible sense of constructive optimism.

Further into the movie, the robot version of Maria describes the workers as “living food” for machines. The head disappears quite suddenly, and Freder stares in shock as bodies are wheeled away. The workers on the machine have already been replaced and are back to coordinated movement like nothing has happened. The workers are expendable, perhaps even to each other, but certainly to the wealthy men above ground. Freder asks his father, Fredersen, where the people who built the beautiful Metropolis are, to which

he replies, "Where they belong." The upper class has no respect for the workers who run their city and believe wholeheartedly that they belong out of sight. Recall the rich women who saw the workers' children. They looked at them as if they were inhuman and with the way Fredersen spoke about them, it is likely the rest of the upper class sees them in the same light. Fredersen fires one of his employees, Josaphat, who would rather commit suicide than be condemned to become part of the working class.

Freder is visibly distraught when his father fires Josaphat, but Fredersen is entirely unmoved, his back turned on the viewer. Fredersen later refers to the people underground as "my workers", suggesting that they are little more to him than possessions. Freder returns to the worker's city and decides to take the place of a worker about to collapse, giving him Josaphat's address and telling him to wait there for him. This exchange is the first time we see Freder interact closely with a member of the working class, who is identified only by a number, 11811. The simple fact that the workers are apparently identified by number and not by name is telling of the way they are thought of as expendable by the upper class. However, this exchange between 11811 and Freder is also quite telling about what the film is saying about the working class. 11811 finds money in Freder's clothing, and instead of doing as Freder asked, goes to spend it in the pleasure district. The very first worker whose "name" is learned betrays the protagonist and steals his money. Metropolis could be saying here that if a poor person were suddenly given the power of a rich person, they would act in the same way. 11811 is given a hand up, and quickly betrays the man who helped him. The message that Metropolis seems to be sending here is that the working class can't be

trusted, but perhaps this is too fast of a judgement. As the clock moves towards the end of the work day, the hands jump back, and Freder asks if the work day will ever end. The workers are further exploited then, by being forced to work longer and longer days. Later on, Freder and a crowd of workers listen to Maria preach the story of the Tower of Babel.

Coincidentally, the tower in the story has the same name as the building Fredersen works in.

The essence of the story is that the “ heads” that had the idea for the tower needed the “ hands” of workers to build it, but when the workers realized how they were being treated, they revolted and destroyed the tower, leaving nothing. The two classes could not understand each other, and so Maria says that the “ head,” or the upper class, and the “ hands,” or the working class, need a mediator which she calls the “ heart.” The workers of Metropolis are growing restless, however, and grow tired of waiting for a mediator. It takes very little for the robotic version of Maria to incite violence later on. Again, it appears that Metropolis is saying the working class is untrustworthy and has the same capacity for evil as the upper class. The working class is a flood held back by a fragile dam constructed by Maria’s promise of a mediator. Metropolis shows the working class as people that need to be contained for fear of a violent revolution. Rotwang seems to be an embodiment of this violence. He creates the robot Maria to bring down Metropolis for selfish reasons, and she incites the revolution of the workers. Together, robot Maria and Rotwang are the instigators of violence, and both perish in the end.

In terms of message, Metropolis seems to condemn violent revolution and through the words of Fredersen, suggests that it simply plays into the hands
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of the upper class and justifies their violence against workers. This is a common argument against violent revolution and one that is still used today. Recent examples of similar situations would be police brutality and Black Lives Matter protests, as well as fascist gatherings and anti-fascist demonstrations against them. Applying the logic of Metropolis, the violence against protestors can be justified if the protest turns violent. There needs to be a mediator. As the workers revolt, they head towards the heart machine to destroy it. It's unlikely to be coincidental that it's called the "heart" machine, and the mediator is also meant to be the "heart." The foreman, Grot, obeys Fredersen and allows the workers to approach the heart machine, but warns them of the destruction that will follow if they break it. The workers do so anyways, flooding the worker's city and realizing too late that their children are still down there, trapped. In this moment of grief for the workers, both the violent workers and Fredersen who is worried about his son are humanized and given parallels. Both the working class and the upper class are capable of emotion. They both worry about the fate of their children. Luckily, both the children and Freder end up safe. The robotic Maria and Rotwang are defeated, and with them the violent revolution. Freder joins the hands of Grot who is the working class or the "hands" and Fredersen who is the upper class or "head," fulfilling his role as the mediator "heart." The worker Grot has been brought to the surface, and Fredersen has been brought down from the sky. All three- hands, head, and heart- are on the same level on the earth and within the frame for the first time in the movie.

Metropolis seems to be saying that both the working class and the upper class have their flaws, and both are capable of being evil, destructive, and

devaluing the lives of the other class. Only by coming together and being mediated can they live in harmony. There are plenty of flaws to this way of thinking, but it is the position that Metropolis presents, and one must assume it works for their world.