**Metropolis, Modernity and the Economy: Or why it was a flop!**

**Introduction**

*Metropolis* is an awkward film to write about. It is contradictory, eclectic, it has a visual imaginary which is both in awe of modernity and seemingly petrified by it.

Ultimately the film seems to accept a society led by a technocratic elite which recognises that the rather ignorant and stupid workers don’t deserve to be treated totally like slaves. The leader should nevertheless be benign and remain connected to the people. But it is an unconvincing ending.

*Metropolis* has been written about from many different perspectives with another book on the film produced this year (2006). This piece remains focused on trying to understand *Metropolis* within the context of its times. It also probes some issues which are raised by the failure of this flagship blockbuster film amongst the audiences it was meant to have been targeting. There is a huge mythology which tends to focus on the character of the director Fritz Lang which detracts from this from this fundamental question.

Another key issue is the numerous different versions which were deliberately made to target different audiences. This history is summarised in a separate blog entry. What remains an issue is the fact that the original version screened in Berlin for about 16 weeks has been lost and is unlikely to be ever reconstructed. This is important because, given its Expressionist impulse with an emphasis upon form as a method of making meaning rather than plot and script, then any viewing and analysis is strictly limited. The fact that this apparently best version wasn’t successful with audiences makes some provisional analysis of its failure with audiences even more important.

*Metropolis* represented a society without a spiritual vision which like the ancient Greeks was dependent upon workers who appeared to be slaves – not even wage slaves. Certainly, there were no consumer outlets for workers to spend an income although the elites clearly had their pleasure palaces.

Politically the film could be read as populist in the sense that it was a recognition that the plebs did have needs beyond pure slavery. Slavery is clearly signified in both the Greek
athletics stadium and the reference to the Egyptian Moloch. The film could thus be read as supportive of the centre-right coalition which had taken power in the Weimar after the Dawes plan of 1923 but it is more complicated than that. However there is much in this film that could be read as supportive of NSDAP principles.

**Germany & Modernity**

Going back to basics means briefly analysing what was happening on the economic front in the Weimar at the time *Metropolis* was released in 1927. By doing this I will argue that there has been an overemphasis on what Kaes has described as the cultural resistance to modernity:

The war had been fought, according to the ideologues, to defend traditional German Kultur against the onslaught of Zivilisation, i.e. the mechanisation of life, democracy and modern mass culture. (Kaes p 59).

Whilst this attitude described the position of many landowning aristocrats, provincial landowners and peasants, this was hardly the concern of the great industrialists, and empire makers. Nor was it the concern of the largest social democratic party in the world prior to the First World War. Their historical compromise with capitalism (to paraphrase Lenin) was to sacrifice their internationalism on the sword of nationalist empire building. This was sold to them as a pre-emptive defence against a greedy Russian empire keen to eat away at Germany. Without the support of the German working class the war could not have been fought effectively.

By 1914 Germany was an industrial powerhouse second only to the USA. Certainly Britain had been outstripped in terms of industrial production by the turn of the previous century. Wilhelmine Germany had a core leadership with great imperial ambitions. It was a modernising country which under Bismark had introduced the first welfare state to discourage rebellion and revolution.

Like other countries Germany had its tensions. These were more pronounced partly because the pace of change was faster than in Britain which as the first industrial nation grew slightly more organically. Uneven development meant that there was a greater cultural shock of the kind which Marx wrote about: *all that is solid melts into air*. The sociologist Ferdinand Tonnies had written about the process in his well known identification of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, in which the more organic face to face relationship of small communities was being replaced by much larger and more impersonal structures. The famous sociologist Max Weber wrote about the process as one of increasing bureaucratisation which he dubbed *an iron cage*.

Visually Lang’s film represents these strands of thought. Control, surveillance, the replacement of natural rhythms by clock time and lack of meaningful human interaction were all described visually by Lang. These were represented in what Kracauer has described as ‘mass ornament’ where the workers are choreographed in geometric patterns. This also relates to an expressionist love of visual form and this is an important aspect of the construction of meaning within the film.
Political and Economic Modernity

In terms of political modernity Germany failed to make the transition effectively to a more democratic society. Although the SDP were a large party they had very little power in the German constitutional structure which remained a very top down affair with real power residing with the Kaiser through leaders such as Bismarck in the past.

Britain had gone through its major recent constitutional crisis in 1910 when the House of Lords had to give up its right to veto absolutely the power of the elected government through the House of Lords. Of course there were still British aristocrats who resented the incursion of democracy and like lord Londonderry they looked upon Mussolini and Hitler as their saviours against potential Bolshevism.

In Germany democracy was hastily awarded so that the Prussian elites could escape the blame for the First World War. The Social Democrats took power and had to negotiate the Armistice. Known as the November criminals purveyors of the stab in the back to the German nation these unjustified slogans reverberated around the political right. Certainly their grab for power landed them with responsibility for the war and its aftermath.

The situation was made far worse because large numbers of the armed forces didn't understand that Germany had been defeated. This was not the time of rapid modern communications and the troops on the Eastern front had successfully forced a peace deal with the new Bolshevik regime having previously trounced the Czarist troops so badly that the Bolsheviks were well positioned to win their revolution. Hindenburg and Ludendorff, the main architects of the German High Command managed to escape criticism from the centre and the right.

The first few years of the ‘peace’ were marked by severe internal strife with attempts to seize power such as Hitler’s ‘Beer Hall Putsch of 1923’ always on the agenda. This was made against an economic background of inflation leading to hyperinflation as the Government attempted to stand up to the French takeover of the industrial Rhineland because they could afford to pay the war reparations. The Weimar republic of 1923 was a hollow democracy redolent of today’s Iraq.

The Dawes stabilisation plan worked wonders. However it left Weimar Germany with something closer to a three speed economy. Consumer electronics and chemicals industries became the biggest in the world providing the hungry American market. The workers and the cities they lived in such as Berlin and Munich were highly successful. Berlin became the cultural capital of Europe, in the mid to late twenties. There were no doubts about modernity here, it was a cause and means of celebration amongst large sectors of the population.

However, the heavy industries based upon coal, iron and steel in the Ruhr regions were stagnant, there was overproduction on the global market but they were coping. The strong communist party unions ensured that the NSDAP gained no serious foothold in these cities.

The third strand of the economy was the agricultural economy. They had been hit hard by hyperinflation with their savings eroded rather than spending them. Foolishly many borrowed when inflation was under control after 1923 to invest in better agricultural machinery, just as world agricultural overproduction knocked the bottom out of the food commodities market. The period of 1923 to 1929 was one of extreme hardship for over one third of the population. It was amongst these people that Nazism was finally to flower for nobody else was dealing with their plight. It was for them that anti-modernity was a fundamental enemy:
for a broad spectrum of anti-modernist and volkish Germans Berlin and all that it stood for as the devil incarnate, Berlin had become the crystallisation point of resentment against industrialisation, capitalism and democracy and the cultural influence of the West... Anti-modernists penned the term 'asphalt culture' to refer to the lack of genuine culture and social values promoted by urban life. (Natter 1994: 214-215 cited McArthur).

Why did Metropolis flop?

A core question to be asked of Metropolis is why did it flop with audiences? Arguably in terms of both form and content is entirely failed to resonate with those who were its target audience, in short it was not a zeitgeist film. In the light of the above it becomes much easier to offer explanations.

In terms of the Berlin based sophisticated and cosmopolitan audiences, this film must have been distinctly out of kilter with their expectations, lifestyle and ambitions. The Gothic and Prehistoric architectural spaces of cathedral and catacombs would have had little resonance with their experience. The elitist sports athletics stadium was an irrelevance at a time of rapidly growing health and sports activities. [Click on ‘Exhibition Tour’ and then Room 11]. Good health was an important part of international interwar modernism. The elitist night club space in the film seemed to be a grumpy critique of what large numbers of workers enjoyed every weekend and was a major source of wealth and status.

Culture was putting Berlin on the map. It was the city of Hitchcock, Pressburger and Isherwood to name but a few. Exotic cosmopolitanism with shows from people like Josephine Baker were enormously popular. The ethnography of People on a Sunday would have had far more resonance. Young professionals were being housed in Batchelor developments built by contemporary architects and loving it.

Modernist intellectuals were hardly likely to approve. The interesting and enjoyable spaces of the city such as parks and cafes shopping arcades and even cinema itself went entirely unrepresented. The representation of the ‘bad Maria’ would have seemed like a critique of young women who were enjoying their freedom in terms of earning money and sexuality. This was the ‘free air of the city’ as the old Hanseatic slogan had it made real in modernity. For the first time in history these freedoms were available to the working classes who would have been farm or domestic labourers in previous times. Neither church nor state was controlling them.

If workers in Berlin were going to be unimpressed by the naïve, desexualised and feeble storyline of Metropolis the communist dominated workforce of the heavy industry areas
would also find the film entirely unappealing. It was scornful of the power of organised labour and represented the working classes as entirely stupid. So much so that they were easily led to disaster by an agent provocateur the 'bad Maria'.

The intellectual and professional classes who might have been more attracted to the expressionist sentiment exploring the underside of modernity might well have been put off by the simplicity of the plot leave alone the anti-Semitic sentiments coming through around the Rotwang character.

There were no big name German stars and this was an audience used to the best Hollywood had to offer in terms of stars, technology and genres. As Taylor (1998 r.e.) notes; in 1926, the year before Metropolis was released, American feature films had 44.3% of the market compared to Germany's 38.2%. In short films American dominance was absolute with an astonishing 94.9% of the market compared to Germany's 1.2% of the market. Even these statistics don't tell the whole story for the Parafumet agreement which gave the American producers access to all the first run UFA cinemas situated in all the large and therefore modernistically inclined city populations signifies that Metropolis was a film which rather than being futuristic was decidedly behind the social and cultural zeitgeist of contemporary German cultural life.

There is little doubt that the visual effects are stunning, they are good to an audience now and in 1927 they were undoubtedly fantastic but good SFX doesn't make a good film. Unlike a modern day blockbuster there is no clear audience. There wasn't a genre of science fiction well established at that time, the romantic plot was feeble with an unconvincing hero in Freder who was a stand in actor anyway. Previously Lang had been able to create stars but that was when German cinema was in a highly protected environment. Metropolis was a serious but deeply flawed attempt by Pommer and Lang to establish a blockbuster formula to break into the American market.

Why would the rural anti-modernity and anti-modernist audiences in the rural areas flock to see the film? Something marketed strongly as science-fiction to a poverty stricken hinterland more used to ‘B’ movie standard comedy and dramas as their form of escapism were unlikely to buy into it. It would of course be fascinating to know just what the box-office breakdown of Metropolis was. Of course they would not have seen the original Berlin version in any case.

Perhaps it is to the American film executives reaction to the original print we can turn to, to provide us with an explanation for why Metropolis flopped. Horrified by its length, its lack of clear plot, lack of stars and with no clear generic market it was clearly a nightmare for them. Studying the reviews and the failure of the film to ignite Berlin audiences would have
confirmed their well-honed business instincts. **The Berliners liked Hollywood and they didn't like Metropolis.** Clearly this message got through to the UFA board and it was why the general release cut for Germany was very close to the American one. Despite global release in the main cinema markets of the world the film made a huge loss and almost bankrupted UFA.

Elsaesser argues that perhaps the coming of sound later in 1927 cut short *Metropolis*. This seems unlikely. There was only one significant sound film *The Jazz Singer* and like any technology sound needed time to bed in and be installed in cinemas across the world. It took time to make the sound films to go with the cinemas. While this was a relatively quick it is questionable whether this was a primary reason for the failure of *Metropolis* to attract significant audiences.