**Symbolic Imagery in Silent Films**

Aryion Sanchez

College of Arts and Media, Grand Canyon University

DFP-331-TO101: Visual Storytelling

Professor Lisa Tervo

September 13, 2024

**Symbolic Imagery in Silent Films**

The film I decided to choose for this essay was “ Metropolis” (1927) directed by the German director, Fritz Lang. It is primarily about rising conflicts between the workers below the ground and the people above due to a difference of social classes. The main character, Freder Frederson, falls in love with a girl named Maria who tells him that he’ll be the “Mediator” to bring peace between the two classes. It is about two and a half hours long, yet is entirely visual with only small instances of dialogue cards to show what is happening. Examples of the different types of visuals used include: lighting, set design, and character actions. Symbolize is also used to tell the story of “Metropolis” (Lang, 1927).

One major use of visual storytelling is lighting. For example, when the chief foreman, Grot, shows Joh Frederson the mysterious plans he keeps finding in the workers’ clothes, the light acts as a spotlight to Grot. This demonstrates the point of view of Joh as his eyes are only locked on Grot since this is concerning news he is unaware of. In response, it shows the isolation of Grot to the rest of the room which also acts as intimidation in the view of Grot. A similar use of light is when Rotwang, the royal inventor, is chasing after Maria. As Maria is trying to run, the use of the light as a spotlight is used to show Rotwang’s line of sight without explicitly showing him on the screen. The audience knows this, because an earlier scene shows a closeup of Rotwang looking terrifying behind a flashlight pointed straight at Maria in her point of view. Based on these last two examples, light within the movie can be used like a spotlight in order to highlight a character in an intimidating scenario. However, in the scene where Freder realizes he is the Mediator, a holy light shines from above to invoke a feeling of holiness upon him. A little later, a similar thing is done with Maria when she approaches Freder for the first time. The back light on her head is shone in a way that is almost angelic which showcases her role as a saint among the workers in the film. Therefore, lighting is used in both negative and positive connotations in a way audiences can understand.

Another example of visual storytelling used within “Metropolis” (Lang, 1927), is set design. The whole reason the audience is aware of the general world of the film is by set design.

One of the first things the audience sees is a line of workers heading to an elevator that reads that they are now on the 219th floor. The audience can then infer that technology has increased to such a level to allow such deep or high buildings to be formed within the world. Furthermore, the workers’ city being underground while everyone else is above ground helps the audience to discover the difference of classes within the city. The workers with their uninteresting city compared to the modernized city right above them. Speaking of the city, we are aware of its modernization based on the things the audience sees. We see tall buildings with shapes we do not see normally today, slick trains spanning across the city using long tall bridges, planes flying right through the city, and the amount of cars on vast highways below the great skyscrapers. The overall style of everything also helps to invoke this sort of modernized city look with art deco and architectural inspirations. Furthermore, near the very end of the movie, Joh is seen falling onto his knees in front of the cathedral as Freder and Rotwang fight on the roof. This scene is very important to the movie as Freder goes against his father as he works to help the workers his father is so desperately trying to bring down. However, as soon as Joh discovers his son may die in the cathedral nothing else matters how he kneels and looks up at the fight. The workers surrounding him attempt to fight Joh, but Joh simply pays no mind. As soon as he realizes his son is safe though, he sprints towards him. This shows the audience that Joh truly cares about his son and will sacrifice almost anything for him which was hinted earlier when Rotwang states how Joh will lose his son attempting to defeat the workers.

Moving on to one extremely important element of visual storytelling as a whole, especially in silent films: the actions of the actors. I can make a very long list of what I learned about the story or a character based on what the actors do. However, I will compile the biggest and most important examples regarding the story. The first example is when the audience is first introduced to the machine-man. As soon as Rotwang activates the machine-man to show Joh, the machine-man uses very stiff and slow movements. This is supposed to help the audience understand that this thing is a machine and is not a human whatsoever. Further into the movie when the machine-man takes the appearance of Maria, it keeps a creepy smile along with twitching its eye to keep up the illusion. This is done effectively, as you can tell the difference between Maria and the machine-man even if they look identical to one another.

Although visual storytelling is straightforward most times, symbolism can be used to tell the audience a story without explicitly showing it. For example, in the Eternal Garden, peacocks are shown roaming around the place. The birds, in this instance, are used to show the class and wealth of the people there as peacocks usually symbolize prestige or wealth. Furthermore, when the machine-man is seen hypnotizing those at Yoshikawa, they are seen atop a sort of pedestal benign carried by the seven sins. This is supposed to symbolize that the machine-man is the embodiment of those sins as a similar image is shown when Freder overhears a monk while at the cathedral. In this same scene, Freder daydreams about a statue of death slashing with his scythe. Freder puts together that the statue of death is supposed to symbolize the death of the city if the machine-man succeeds with its task. These examples of symbolism can be quite hard to find, but once the audience is aware of it it helps to elevate the story even more.

Overall, the use of visual storytelling in this movie has truly helped to inspire me in my own endeavors. The use of lighting can help in my own works to help isolate a character or even help show the audience of a character’s personality such as angelicism. The use of set design is important to help fully immerse and explain the world to the audience. Therefore, it is important to show the audience of the world I have created, different styles or even simple signs can go a long way. The final component would be the actors’ actions in a film. The main difference is that in today’s world, film has dialogue, with some exceptions. So, I must use the actors’ actions to showcase things that dialogue can not show you. Some of these things may show the audience that a character is uncomfortable using facial expressions or showing a distraught character when the actor is on their knees. After all the visual components have been implemented into my films, I can use symbolism to subtly tell the audience something. In fact, in my most recent film I have used symbolism to show the dawn of a new time after the death of a friend in the night. Therefore, all of these elements of visual storytelling are already being implemented into my filmmaking and I will use the techniques I have learned from “Metropolis” (Lang, 1927) to further improve my filmmaking skills.