

To what extent does the film Metropolis (1927) by Fritz Lang represent the basic principles of Marxism?



(Gamero:2006)

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Investigation

This investigation will assess the political ideology of the film *Metropolis* by Fritz Lang, and the extent to which the film represents the basic principles of Marxism. The film is about a society where class division is explicit, workers live underground, and the dominant bourgeoisie in the surface. The workers make sure the whole city functions, they are not aware of their power. Maria is a character that leads the workers into gaining class consciousness and into the alleged revolution. The revolution that Maria desired was class harmony. Maria falls in love with Freder Fredersen, the son of Fredersen, the leader of *Metropolis*. They join together in the search for class harmony. A scientist creates a robot that drove the workers into revolt¹ and the city starts to fall apart. The resolution of this problematic is when Fred Fredersen acts as the mediator between the dominant bourgeois and the worker, as said in the film “the mediator between the head and hands must be the heart” (Lang:1927) As seen in the plot of the movie, there are several aspects in which the film is rich for analysis.

Source 6 was written by Rosa Luxemburg². She argues how reform can never be the aim but only a means for the ultimate goal, the revolution. She counter argues Eduard Bernstein who believed that reform could be the aim that the proletariat should get to. The film, in this case is more similar to what Bernstein argued in the first place. There is no revolution in the movie, no overthrowing of the system, only reform. The reform of the movie is the bettering of the relationship between the workers and the master³. This is why Source 6 does not support the fact that the film *Metropolis* represents the basic principles of Marxism.

Source 1, titled *The revolution against “capital”* by Gramsci, published in 1917 in *Avanti!*, the Italian newspaper. This source communicates a certain ideology on the belief of how the revolution must be carried forward, the role of the proletariat and the level of intensity of the revolution. These topics from the source, are some of the basic principles of Marxism. Gramsci wrote about how the revolution must wipe off all the values that existed in the bourgeois society, for example, when the source states, “They have taken possession of power, they've established their dictatorship, and they are developing forms of socialism that mean the revolution will

¹ This was done to give Fredersen an excuse to repress the workers.

² She was a hard line German communist activist and thinker.

³ Referred to in the film as the hands and the brain.

finally have to ease off in order for things to continue harmoniously”. This quote clearly expresses how the socialist state cannot coexist with the previous one. In Gramsci’s terms even a dictatorship can be legitimized for the sake of a socialist revolution. That is one of the basic principles of Marxism which does not appear in the movie. The evidence is that in the film, when the workers have taken over to start the revolution by destroying everything, the city starts to crumble, they end up protagonizing the problem, not the resolution. However, it is not different because in the source Gramsci legitimizes the dictatorship and the movie doesn’t, it is different since Gramsci validates a dictatorship once the revolution has taken place,⁴ while the film discusses the means for the revolution. This is why, source 1 doesn’t support the affirmation that the film is naturally marxist.

There are some incongruences between Source 1 and the film. The source analyzes the management of power once the revolution has taken place and the film portrays the way in which the alleged revolution takes place, putting the film and the source in uncomparable basis since they are analyzing different stages of the revolution. However, the most striking difference is in the mention to the autonomy of the workers in the source, “they have taken possession of power”, accentuating on *they*, which is denied in the film. The autonomy of the workers is ignored by the film since they need a character like Maria to lead them into a revolution⁵. Since the source is previous to an actual revolution, she is thinking on a hypothetical case, so as the film. This source confirms that the film can not be the representation of a marxist basic principle since it does not portray the destruction of oppression, but class harmony.

Source 3 speaks mainly of the role of Maria and the effect she has on the consciousness of the people and what role does she play in the theoretical aspect of the film. What the source proposes is that although the film has certain aspects that can relate to basic marxist theory, like the exercise of oppression, Marx would never agree with the figure of Maria⁶. Marxism struggles with religion in general since it is “the opiate of the masses”. Therefore a marxist film would never put the protagonist to symbolize a divine figure, expressed by the white clothes and the

⁴ Putting the focus on the management of power.

⁵ This is confirmed then by source 6 that was written by another marxist thinker.

⁶ Representing symbolically christianity and religiousness for the proletariat.

spiritual behaviour. This is mainly why the source does not agree with the fact that the film Metropolis represents basic marxism.

Source 5 focuses on religion in Metropolis the connection to Marxism, while the book is focused on the impact of Marxism in film. The source states how if the revolution is taken “through half measures will yield at best only half successes”. Religion in Metropolis is displayed as the cause for partial success of the revolution. Maria’s figure in the film is the one that represents Christianity and how they offer love and charity to the workers to maintain the relationship of master-worker. Maria attempts only to modify the prevailing christian and capitalist system but not overthrow it. This is exemplified when Maria gives a speech about the Tower of Babel, telling the workers not to start the revolution but wait for the mediator that will unite the divisions of society. Leigh continues to explain how the fact that the workers didn’t gain consciousness by themselves but led by someone else, later gave the master a reason to oppress them. This is why the source does not agree with the fact that the film Metropolis represent Marxism but Fascism instead.

Both of the sources agree with the fact that the workers did not gain class consciousness righteously since this task was delegated to another person that lead them. It was not a ground movement that started the revolution. The concept of class consciousness in the film is delegated in the character of Maria and the robot that had her image, a character is of complexity since when she pacified the workers into awaiting for the mediator, she was angelic like Virgin Mary, but when she, as a robot, incited them into the revolution, she was sexualized and portrayed as a sinner, like Eve. If the workers don't gain class consciousness by themselves, the revolution will never be successful. The film does not represent the concept of class consciousness as Marx preached and it can be validated by both of the sources used to analyze it.

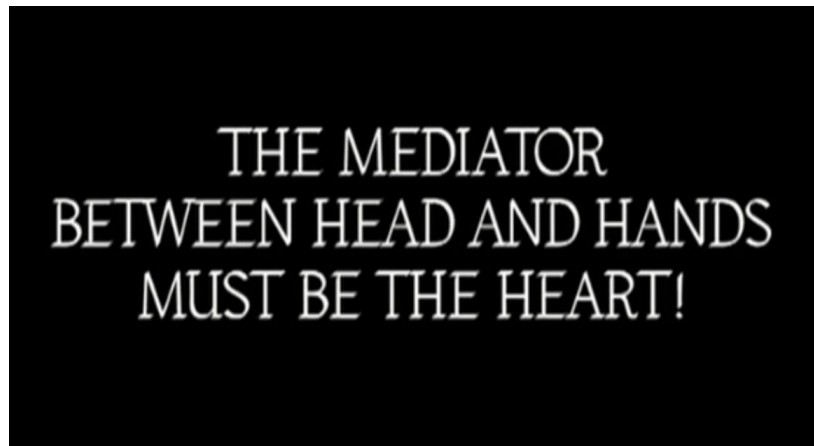


(El mundo:2013)

Source 2 is a study on the Marxist Theory of the State, which leads to analyze the system of oppression of the bourgeoisie and how the democratic state is an instrument of domination of the “economically weak class”, and the maintenance of the powerful ones. It also states that although the state is a public power, it rules in favor of the same people that manages it, the powerful and rich class. It is in these points that the source coincides with the type of ideology presented in the film. Is this characteristics of explicit oppression towards the working class that makes the movie feel so marxist. It is explicit in the sense that the workers in the movie move exclusive in the underground, they are not allowed to rise to surface, they move in robotic body language, their identities aren’t clear, they're just people in the mass and they are forced to do excessive jobs responsible for the functioning of Metropolis. These aspects make the audience believe that the movie is marxist since it victimizes the workers. Therefore Source 2 agrees on the film Metropolis being a representation of the basic principles of marxism.

Source 4, titled “*Metropolis: Social Representations of a Fascist Utopia*”, explains why the movie had a clearly fascist underlying ideology. This is mainly because of that famous epitaph of the film “the mediator between the brain and the hands should always be the heart”. It is the analogy of a new relationship between the “brain”, (bourgeois) and the “hands”

(proletariat). This relationship does not mean the end of exploitation, it's just the new face for it. It is far from the basic principles of Marxism. Marxism would preach a revolution that could cut form the root the hierarchical relationship of master and worker. This is why, the source rejects the idea that the film represented the basic principles of Marxism.



(Lang:1927)

There is a contradiction in the sources that talked about oppression. I believe this incongruence relies on the similarity of the fascist and marxist ideology in acknowledging the oppression towards the workers. However, source 4 has a stronger point since it arguments in terms of how the movie presents a resolution to the conflict which is explicitly fascist. Whereas source 2 does not even scope the whole process of the resolution of oppression, therefore it cannot tell whether the film is or isn't marxist.

Having analyzed all the sources, it can be said that the hypothesis was achieved, the film appears deceiving in terms of ideology, but once analyzed, it becomes clear that it has a strong fascist ideological stand. I believe this is due to the potential of the images of the workers. The level of exploitation was very strong and clear, like the workers walking as zombies, the mimicry and the symbolic meaning of them working underneath the great city but holding it together. Those were the images that struck the most. Now that the basic principles of Marxism have been analyzed, I agree with the fact that the movie has clear fascist tendencies, above all, the concept of class harmony.

Reflection

The topic interested me because I had watched the movie and realized it was rich for political analysis. The greater challenge was the search for sources that addressed Marxism and the film. I could manage to find sources that had either and in the analysis I joined the topics. By making this investigation I the changes of ideologies in history, like the popularity of fascism in 1927 presenting an alternative to the complex global political matters. This alternative was embodied in this prestigious film that was also one of the first sci-fi films. This investigation has left me a set of tools for analyzing films on ideological terms that I watch from now on, since I am particularly fond of how sociological changes are captured through visual arts.

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