

## Second Annual Center for German Studies Essay Competition, 2009/10

First Prize Winner:  
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### “The Machine” Versus the “Heart:” Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* and Modern Science Fiction Film”

Fritz Lang’s 1927 silent science fiction film *Metropolis* presents a dark view of the future in which an entire city functions as a machine. The image of the machine circulates throughout the film, from the opening montage of literal machinery, to the mechanical behavior of the workers, to the strict rules and patterns that govern all of Metropolis. Lang presents the idea that the machine is based on the absence of the individual – each person must function as part of the machine. The film concludes, however, that without the “heart,” Metropolis will self-destruct. In a 1927 New York Times film review, science fiction writer H. G. Wells criticized *Metropolis* on many different accounts, concluding that “the film’s air of having something grave and wonderful to say is transparent pretence” (Wells, 1927). In comparing *Metropolis* to modern science fiction film, however, it is obvious that Lang’s creation did indeed have something to say, and it has left a lasting effect on science fiction in the movies.

*Metropolis* opens with a sequence of shots depicting different pieces of machinery. Pumps rise and plunge quickly in a perfect pattern. Wheels of all sizes roll at varying speeds and ratchets churn in frantic rotations. The music behind the montage creates a disturbing chaos, with panging bells, climbing trills, pounding bass, and screeching chords until finally the cry of the whistle signals the beginning of the work shift. This opening is characteristic of Lang’s “intense visual style, which weds expressionist lighting techniques with highly geometric compositions to articulate a fatalistic, entrapping world” (Horak). The “entrapping” sensation of the opening montage embodies a theme that develops throughout the film, the all-encompassing nature of the machine.

Lang also includes a shot of the 10 hour clock in the opening montage. It is revealed later in the film that the workers must complete 10 hour shifts before they are allowed to leave their jobs. Thus, in *Metropolis*, even time is manipulated to suit the machine. The workers do not dare to leave their positions before the 10 hour shift is over; in fact, when Freder, the son of the Master, goes into the depths of the workers city and tries to make one man stop working, the man looks crazed and screams, “The machine! Someone must stay at the machine!” (Lang, 1927).

All of the workers act like the man who cried out at Freder. Between shifts, they walk and dress in unison, as if they are robots without personalities and individual characteristics. H. G. Wells referred to them as, “spiritless, hopeless drudges, working reluctantly and mechanically” (Wells,

1927). Wells also notes that while the workers slave over the machines to produce wealth for the Master of the city, how the machines actually produce this wealth is unclear. They seem to produce nothing, to have no real purpose (Wells, 1927). The idea that their work has no purpose has a disturbing connotation for the workers. If the workers' lives revolve around the machines, and the machines are actually worthless, then the workers are in turn worthless, as well.

The workers' insignificance is also demonstrated in Freder's first visit to the depths. As Freder enters the plant he looks up to find a massive wall of workers, each in his own cubicle performing his mundane task. One man fails at his task and an explosion throws the workers from their stations. Freder envisions the wall before him transform into Moloch, a mythical character Milton described as a "horrid King besmeared with blood of human sacrifice" (Luxon, 2008). The workers then ascend the stairs in their usual droning march to the jaws of Moloch. Freder watches in horror as dozens of workers are sacrificed, carried away, and replaced immediately by identical workers. This scene is particularly distressing, both for Freder and for the audience, because it proves that in Metropolis, human lives are unimportant and replaceable. It is as if the workers not only feed the machines with labor, but also become machines or robots, identical to their peers.

The character that believes most heartily in the insignificance of the workers' lives is the Master, Freder's father. When the Master visits Rotwang the inventor, Rotwang announces that he has "created a machine in the image of man that never tires or makes a mistake!" (Lang, 1927). Rotwang goes on to explain that the creation will eliminate the need for human labor. When the Master is reluctant to shake the hand of Rotwang's robot, the inventor proposes, "Isn't it worth the loss of a hand to have created the workers of the future – the machine man?" (Lang, 1927). In fact, with this question, Rotwang summarizes the Master's ideology. The Master has already lost the "hand," the workers below, and has turned them into simple parts of the machine.

Maria, the savior figure of the workers, points to the Master's ideology when she preaches, "There can be no understanding between the hands and the brain unless the heart acts as a mediator" (Lang, 1927). Maria leads the workers to believe that they are the "hands," patiently waiting for a mediator to voice their concerns to the Master, or the "brain." Freder becomes the mediator, embodying the "heart" by hearing the cries of the workers, seeing through injustice, preventing the workers from destroying Metropolis, and finally convincing the Master to recognize the workers as human beings. Throughout the film, Freder fights for change, despite the constant opposition of his father's authority. Freder's love for Maria, his father, and the workers (who he calls his "brothers") saves the people of Metropolis and restores the dignity they always deserved as human beings.

In 1927, H.G. Wells contended that *Metropolis* was foolish and "silly" (Wells, 1927). However, a comparison of the setting, fear, and moral of Andrew Niccol's 1997 film *Gattaca* with those of *Metropolis*, proves that H.G. Wells judged incorrectly. In fact, Lang's portrayal of a machine-

like society, dehumanized and dispirited citizens, and the ultimate victory of the “heart,” has made a lasting impact on science fiction in film.

Both Lang and Niccol create an environment that seems to trap its characters. Revisiting Lang’s “intense visual style” (Horak), Niccol also employs a striking use of geometry in his camera work. In terms of the stories’ content, just as Lang built a society that controlled every aspect of its citizens’ lives based on their status, Niccol crafted a world in which people’s destinies relied solely on their genetic make-up. In both cases, the characters have no control over their fate.

Because of this lack of control, the characters of both films also lack the “heart,” or the human spirit to surpass their limits. Of *Metropolis*, Wells noted that “what this film anticipates is... drudge employment, which is precisely what is passing away” (Wells, 1927). *Gattaca*, however, demonstrates that the fear of heartless, machine-like, dehumanized workers continues to be a theme in modern science fiction film. Just as Rotwang the inventor “created a machine in the image of man, that never tires or makes a mistake” (Lang, 1927), the scientists of *Gattaca* create genetically engineered people who are born to live perfect lives.

While the genetically privileged characters of *Gattaca* should be superior to those who are born naturally, they actually echo the drones of *Metropolis*. These characters are machine-like; they can be easily replaced by someone with a similar or superior genetic make-up. It is Vincent, the naturally born invalid, who has the human spirit to exceed his potential. Vincent proves that he can overcome his limitations, that he is not a machine (Columbia, Lecture 9/14/09). Vincent’s individual triumph over a strict societal structure mirrors Freder’s conquest for human dignity. Just as Freder saves the people of *Metropolis* by restoring their voice and identity as human beings, Vincent confirms that the human spirit lives on by exceeding his potential and inspiring others (such as Irene, his love-interest, and the doctor’s son, another invalid) to do the same.

H. G. Wells dismissed the conclusion of *Metropolis* in which the characters “are now to be reconciled by ‘Love,’” as silly and confusing, (Wells, 1927). As demonstrated by the film *Gattaca*, however, the idea that love, the “heart” and the human spirit prevail remains a lasting theme in science fiction films.

## Works Cited

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