

Pedagogical and Intercultural Implications of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*

フリッツ ラング監督の『メトロポリス』における教育的事例
と異文化間事例

Sean Collin MEHMET

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Introduction

Although visual arts and popular cinema might not occupy a great deal of the limelight in discussions on education research, few stakeholders would dispute that they do hold a compelling interest for many tertiary learners. Accordingly, there is no shortage of education research illustrating the explicit connections between popular culture and motivational strategies for young adult learners. Given this abundance of research focused on motivation, this article will instead concern itself with an examination of the two juxtaposed cultures in a fictional celluloid production from 1926, Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. More precisely, this intercultural investigation of two imaginary cultures will employ one of the more widely utilized theoretical constructs from the field of intercultural communication, ICC. This intercultural discussion and analysis will serve as a catalyst to uncover several potential answers to the following question: What are the implications of this silent film from Weimar-era Germany for twenty-first century education research?

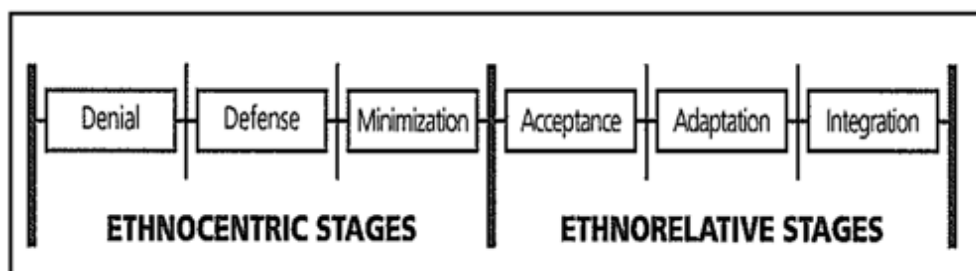
The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (Bennett, 1993) will comprise the principal theoretical construct underpinning this article. There are four main reasons supporting its inclusion here. Firstly, it will serve as an effective springboard to discuss various aspects of intercultural communication, and in turn, implications for education research. Secondly, given that intercultural conflicts frequently result in one culture

subjugating another, it will also serve as a catalyst to examine the ethics of education research. Thirdly, the DMIS has been widely implemented in the field of intercultural communications, and as a result, there is a substantial body of literature focused on it. Fourthly, and rather pragmatically, the author of this article is employing it as one of the main paradigms in his doctoral dissertation, and therefore has a certain comfort level with it.

Although this article will refrain from providing an extensive narrative synopsis of the film, the plot is focused on the romance that develops between a man and a woman living in the fictional city of Metropolis precisely one century from the film’s original release date, that is in the year 2026. This man, Freder Fredersen, comes from the elite class, and the woman, Maria, from the subterranean proletariat. Their forbidden love is complicated by the fact that a brilliant inventor, C.A. Rotwang, decides to use Maria to create a cyborg, the first cinematic reference to a cyborg (Ruppert, 2000). This cyborg is given the same physical appearance as Maria. Following orders from Rotwang, the cyborg, who physically resembles Maria, creates a series of problems for the underground workers. Eventually, Freder and Maria manage to stop the cyborg, and C.A. Rotwang falls from the top of a cathedral to his death. Given this plot structure, it would not be difficult to argue that *Metropolis* has been framed along Marxist lines, wherein the urban proletariat are exploited by a literally upper, intellectual class. Maria predicts that one day a savior will come to Metropolis, a savior who will join these two disparate elements, the head and the hands, with the heart. From this point of view, then, the narrative additionally shares common ground with Christian theology.

Milton Bennett’s Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)

Figure 1: The developmental model of intercultural sensitivity



The DMIS is a six-stage hierarchical framework. Its first three stages are called the ethnocentric stages, while its latter three stages are known as the ethnorelative stages (Bennett, 1993). Now, the first stage of ethnocentrism, which is called the denial stage, comprises the voice that there are no real differences among different cultures (Bennett, 1993). Individuals in this stage perceive their own culture to be the only legitimate one. Awareness of different cultures cannot truly happen, because proximity to differences is avoided physically, or mentally (Bennett, 1993). Presumably, the subterranean proletariat are at least partially situated in this denial stage, given that they are physically isolated and separated from the above-ground residents of Metropolis. Similarly, the argument could also be made that the latter group of Metropolis residents are located in this initial stage of the DMIS as well, given that the majority of them are blissfully unaware of the laborers' underground domain.

With respect to the implications of this for twenty-first century education research, this initial stage of the DMIS serves as a reminder that educational researchers should keep in mind that some survey samples will contain respondents whose voices are less than appealing, perhaps even morally repugnant, but that these voices must be honored in the same way as less potentially offensive voices. Of course, this is predicated on the fact that such morally repugnant voices are not spreading, or attempting to spread, hate. After all, spreading hate is illegal in many jurisdictions.

Defence is the second stage of the DMIS (Bennett, 1993). In this stage, a person's own culture is experienced as the only legitimate culture. For individuals in this stage, cultural differences are not simply viewed with mistrust, but these differences are actually considered a threat to one's own identity and self-concept (Bennett, 1993). Given that Rotwang the inventor feels superior to the subterranean workers, the argument could well be made that there is at least one resident of Metropolis in this defence stage. However, it would

be decidedly difficult to argue that there were any Metropolis residents, either above ground or below, in the third stage of the DMIS, the minimization stage.

Minimization is the final ethnocentric stage of the DMIS (Bennett, 1993). Minimization is characterized by attempts to over-generalize similarities between the emic group (the “*ingroup*”) and the etic group (the “*outgroup*”) (Bennett, 1993). That is, cultural differences are downplayed, or considered unimportant. For people in this third stage, differences are not viewed as threatening. Minimization also comprises the belief that there are universal truths which impact upon all mortals. However, the caveat here is that these values may well originate in one’s own *ingroup* culture (Bennett, 1993). Throughout the first half of the film, nobody in Metropolis could be positioned in this minimization stage, as both cultural groups are almost exclusively unaware of their invisible neighbors. However, even at the very end of the film, where the audience learns that a heart is necessary for joining the hands to the head, cultural differences are emphasized rather than downplayed. After all, few would dispute that a head is quantifiably different from a hand.

The fourth stage of the DMIS, which is the very first stage of the three **ethnorelative** stages, is called acceptance (Bennett, 1993). It is profoundly different from the three preceding stages in that it acknowledges that cultural differences do exist, that they are important, and that they should be respected (Bennett, 1993). To paraphrase, individuals at this stage of the paradigm understand that to respect cultural differences requires an ability to buy into an *outgroup* voice. Therefore, with respect to any implications for education research, the acceptance stage is the one in which the natural comfort zone of the typically open-minded, potentially left-leaning, educational researcher is just beginning to be accommodated. Consequently, educational researchers have to acknowledge this comfort zone, and be vigilant in terms of maintaining objectivity. Ethically speaking, educational researchers need to treat respondents in the three ethnorelative stages with exactly the same

objectivity as more xenophobic respondents in the three ethnocentric stages. Similarly, education researchers need to continually and consistently challenge any pre-existing assumptions that they might have concerning the participants in their research.

With respect to the denizens of Metropolis, it would be tempting indeed to position Freder and Maria in the acceptance stage, or one of the two other ethnorelative stages, although this might not be entirely accurate. After all, one cannot completely discount the possibility that Freder might identify, either consciously or subconsciously, with his own culture more than Maria's culture, and *vice versa*. Although such a scenario might tarnish the on-screen allure and appeal of Freder and Maria's intercultural coupling, such behavior would clearly be less ethnorelative and more ethnocentric.

Adaptation is the second ethnorelative stage (Bennett, 1993). It is also the fifth of the six stages. Adaptation is characterized by an attempt to use an individual's knowledge about cultural differences to improve relationships with people who are culturally different (Bennett, 1993). In this stage, individuals do not simply adopt a different set of cultural beliefs and behaviors to the exclusion of their own beliefs, values, and behaviors (Bennett, 1993). Instead, such individuals strive to integrate both the *ingroup* as well as the *outgroup* cultural beliefs and behaviors. Adaptation is frequently based on a kind of empathy, in which people are able to experience events differently from others in their own, ingroup culture (Bennett, 1993). Adaptation can also entail an internalization of two cultural reference points, which is known as pluralism (Bennett, 1993). In pluralism, individuals experience events in an original way, one based on the mixing of two cultural patterns. Such individuals may use skills or behaviors from either cultural framework, depending on which one would be most helpful in any given situation (Bennett, 1993). In the fictional city of Metropolis, romanticists and other proponents of "pure love" would presumably be eager to place Maria and Freder's culture-crossing relationship in this adaptation stage, or in the final stage of the DMIS, which is

called integration.

Integration is the third ethnorelative stage of the DMIS (Bennett, 1993). It is also the sixth and final stage, and it is characterized by the mixing of various aspects of an individual's identity into a new whole, while still remaining culturally marginal, or fluid (Bennett, 1993). Consequently, people in the integration stage have the ability to communicate effectively with many cultural groups (Bennett, 1993). In other words, individuals in the integration stage can easily alter their behavior to adapt to various cultural landscapes (Bennett, 1993). Such adaptive behavior means that it can sometimes prove difficult to empirically measure this final stage of the DMIS.

If Freder and Maria were ever to produce offspring, one might expect such bicultural, or ethnically ambiguous, individuals to be situated in either this integration stage, or in the adaptation stage. However, while such a plural identity could indeed be an enviable, ethnorelative mixture of more than one culture, it is by no means a given that such individuals would function solely on a higher plane of morality. Regrettably, the more interculturally sensitive or proficient stages of the DMIS do not automatically equate with a stronger moral fabric.

The Conceptualization of Morality in *Metropolis*

Continuing on with this theme of morality, *Metropolis* proffers a clear conceptualization of the preferred course of action for its characters, that is the moral code of conduct. This moral ideal is embodied in the two protagonists, Maria and Freder. Briefly, Freder is a high-born young man who renounces his position to help improve the plight of Metropolis' underground laborers. Freder's father, Joh, is the Master of Metropolis. In contrast, Maria, who shares the same name as Jesus Christ's mother, is a laborer who attempts to better her and her fellow workers' conditions, and she organizes the laborers to this end. Both Freder and Maria work altruistically for the benefit of others, and given the film's

ending, when their aspirations are fully realized, one can assume that the screenwriter envisioned them as embodying the moral code of conduct. Such self-risking service to others is, amongst other things, quite Christian. The theme of Christianity will be examined in more detail below.

In marked contrast to Freder and Maria, Rotwang embodies all that is morally repugnant and bankrupt. Rotwang kidnaps Maria so as to transform her face, and knowledge, into his female cyborg. The audience understands that such conduct is not condoned by the film's creators, since Rotwang plunges to his death at the end of the film. With respect to the film's creators, it is ironic that the screenwriter of this film, Thea Von Harbou, would eventually become, from 1933-1938, the official screenwriter of the Third Reich (Hobbs, 1996). However, Von Harbou's husband at the time *Metropolis* was produced, Fritz Lang, had little tolerance for Nazism, and left both Von Harbou and his homeland in the early 1930s (Hobbs, 1996). Presumably, Lang did not endorse the government of Adolf Hitler.

Political Imagery, and the Ideal Government in *Metropolis*

What kind of government does *Metropolis* appear to endorse? To discern this, one needs to examine the conclusion of the film. The final sentence declares that there can be no understanding between the hand and the brain unless the heart acts as a mediator. Given this assertion, the film does not appear to explicitly advocate rule by the people for the people, apparently implying that despots such as Joh Fredersen should instead be replaced by benevolent, heart-driven, leaders. The way in which the hand is represented as being entirely separate from the brain appears to imply that the working class lacks the mental training, and/or acumen, to govern effectively. Unfortunately, it will be revealed below how such ethnocentric chauvinism may not be solely limited to matters of social class.

Now, another possible interpretation here has to do with the heart being the mediator. It is possible to argue that the heart, in acting as a mediator, would call for a blurring of the

distinction between the elite, above ground citizens, and the underground toilers. If this were the case, however, one wonders why the none-too-subtle screenplay is not more directly, overtly populist. It is perhaps worth mentioning that the Bolshevik revolution of October, 1917, was most likely still fresh in the minds of the newly-minted USSR's neighbors in Weimar (Biro, 1994). Consequently, Von Harbou and Lang might not have wanted to appear overly sympathetic to Russia, their wartime enemy. However, one fault with this argument is that one does not have to be much of a communist, nor affiliated with any particular political philosophy, to advocate a polity in which those who are the means of production have a say in the decision making process.

The final remark that will be made about the political landscape in *Metropolis* concerns Von Harbou and Lang themselves. They both came from privileged backgrounds, and in the rigidly hierarchical European societies of the 1920s, it would, presumably, have been a rare patrician who would argue for a more inclusive, less exclusionary government (Hobbs, 1996).

Gender Issues, and the Representation of Women in *Metropolis*

According to Myman, only two kinds of women are depicted in *Metropolis* (Myman, 1996). The first female representation is that of Maria, the workers' messiah, the person who will lead the shackled oppressed to emancipation (Myman, 1996). The second representation of women is that of the female cyborg created by Rotwang (Myman, 1996). Myman has convincingly argued that even though Rotwang's robot has no soul, she does possess a will of her own (Myman, 1996). Unsurprisingly, Myman views the robot as physical evidence of a patriarchal culture, one that is ruled by Freder's father, Joh Fredersen. She asserts that the robot is the product of "...an over-civilized masculine intellect, a fetish object and external manifestation of an illness endemic to the masculine intellectual spirit..." (Myman, 1996, p.

3). This article will diplomatically refrain from debating the assertion that fetish objects are symbols representing an affliction in the masculine intellect!

An additional insight from the Myman article concerns technology. Myman has posited that technology can be equated with masculinity, whereas femininity can be associated with the affective realm of emotion (Myman, 1996). With respect to the DMIS, such an “either/or,” “us versus them” mentality would most readily fit into the left side of the paradigm. This article would rather advocate less of an ethnocentric worldview, and more of an ethnorelative one.

Religious Considerations in *Metropolis* (Christian Theology)

A final feature of *Metropolis* to be investigated here concerns Christianity. While this was briefly alluded to above in the discussion about Maria, Hawkins has dealt with it in more detail. Hawkins has observed that Joh Fredersen's character has the biblical parallel of the Egyptian pharaoh, enslaving the Jews to build pyramids (Hawkins, 1997). Hawkins goes on to comment that Maria, the messiah figure, addresses the laborers at an altar with crosses on it, whilst hidden in the catacombs, far under Metropolis (Hawkins, 1997). As Hawkins points out, ancient Christians used to hide out and worship in such catacombs to avoid religious persecution (Hawkins, 1997).

With respect to the potential pedagogical implications of this religious facet of the film, if twenty-first century educators, interculturalists, or social justice stakeholders are not comfortable discussing the connection between technology and organized religion, they could at least employ this film to discuss its biblical imagery; or, to discuss the role religion has played, and continues to play, in many cultures around the world. Additionally, they could discuss the factors that have resulted in many cultures around the world becoming largely secular at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

In terms of its pedagogical utility, educators interested in social justice issues could use this silent product of German expressionism to examine how a minority of pleasure seekers in the film live off the labor of a much larger underclass of workers. Moreover, nearly nine decades after the film was made, the objectification of women and heartless, self-serving governments continue to bedevil humanity. Thankfully, however, the objectification of women at present is not quite as literal (e.g. transforming them into cyborgs) as it is in the Weimar era screenplay.

Educators interested in interdisciplinary studies will have already observed that this film could be employed to discuss intercultural communication, politics, economics, sociology, genderization, religion, history, media literacy, not to mention film studies. As but one example of this, history students could research the main issues of the Weimar republic, which had suffered a dramatic devaluation of its currency; a humiliating defeat in World War One; and, an excessively harsh peace treaty at Versailles (Organ, 2011). As a result of Versailles, Germany could not possess an adequate military, and had to suffer the ignominy of foreign troops on its soil (Organ, 2011). Not surprisingly, many Germans were less than content with this status quo, resulting in a public mood of discontent that Adolf Hitler would soon manipulate for his own, nefarious ends.

Furthermore, technology is just as much of an issue at present as it was in 1926, although today's technology shift appears more related to information than machinery. Educators from a variety of fields, then, could use *Metropolis* as a springboard to discuss such technological differences, as well as to discuss the similarities between past and present technology. Educators could also discuss with their classes whether technology has impacted humanity in a mostly positive, or mostly negative manner, and who has benefitted the most from it. Such a discussion could be the starting point for a formal classroom debate.

With respect to the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, the preceding

paragraphs have uncovered how the more interculturally sensitive stages of the DMIS do not automatically equate with a stronger moral fabric. The discussion of the DMIS also revealed how representative samples can contain respondents whose voices are less than appealing, perhaps even morally repugnant, to education researchers. It was seen how these voices must be honored in the same way as less potentially offensive voices. This was predicated on the fact that such morally repugnant voices do not spread, or attempt to spread, hate. Put simply, spreading hate is illegal in many jurisdictions.

Finally, although the DMIS was strictly designed to measure respondents' intercultural sensitivity, educators interested in social justice issues can take comfort in the knowledge that a higher degree of cross-cultural sensitivity can often be associated with increased sensitivity to other social justice concerns, such as those relating to race, socio-economic status, gender, or physical and mental disabilities.

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(Associate Professor, School of General Education, Shinshu University)
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