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Metropolis. Report from China (2006)

Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis*, made in 1927, presents the utopian city "Metropolis" as an awe-inspiring backcloth, but also as a dystopian machine. Machinery plays a crucial role in this city, dictating the rhythm of the workers living below ground, whose task is to keep the cogs ceaselessly turning. And it enhances the lives of the wealthy residents above ground: they profit from the technology, which guarantees such comforts as lifts and electric lighting. These machines are not just mediators between the upper and lower city; they govern the social division reflected in the urban architecture.

With its presentation of an urban organism, in which built environment, work and technology mutually reinforce each other, *Metropolis* depicts a highly complex urban landscape that takes its cue from visions of constructivist architecture, a functional mix of multi-storey buildings and fast highways dominated by a monument called the "New Tower of Babel" and criss-crossed by railway tracks and helicopters. This city is, in the truest sense, a set-up, but one that has retained its fascination until today.

In Fritz Lang's case, New York was the city whose social and architectural fabric so impressed him during a visit in 1924 that it inspired him to make his masterpiece. In 2004, on the other hand, Maya Schweizer and Clemens von Wedemeyer spent a month studying the megacities of China in order to uncover their potential as sets for a remake of *Metropolis*. Their trip was motivated by their fascination for a country under construction, a country redefining itself - China before the Olympic Games and before the first superlative skyscrapers appeared. Their underlying question during the journey was: Will China transform the vision, the "Metropolis blueprint", into reality? Or in more concrete terms: Does the construction of megacities like Beijing and Shanghai, with the bustling energy they radiate, create a contemporary variation on *Metropolis*?

It comes, perhaps, as a surprise that the film they made in no way resembles the silent movie of 1927, with its heavy symbolism and pathos - not as a genre and not in its cinematic aesthetic. In fact, the documentary *Metropolis. Report from China* is more like a counterpiece: a sober

portrait of a country trying to outgrow its own bounds as it edges towards environmental and social catastrophe, for that is what the dystopian images of these hazy megacities suffocating in congested traffic seem to suggest.

Although we are familiar with such pictures, Maya Schweizer and Clemens von Wedemeyer manage to set up a unique tension in their film, notably because there is such a contradiction between what we see and what we hear. In most respects, the imagery clashes with the statements by the interviewees.

How could we explain otherwise that, regardless of the the overwhelmingly unbearable living conditions the film depicts, megacities like Shanghai and Beijing, have become such a Mecca, a place of yearning, for Western architects? No doubt because the building work is taking place on such a huge scale, with architecture used as a status symbol. The old streets are being pulled down and the urban space is being reconfigured. But the outcome of this process has little to do with a "Metropolis"-style utopia. The 21st-century urban Chinese landscape is, rather, an accumulation of over-sized, matter-of-fact buildings made with state-of-the-art technology, bunched together with a density rarely found these days in Europe, or even America. The "utopia" to which China apparently aspires has little to do with the modern utopia in its original sense: this is a calculated, fit-for-purpose approach that draws on paradigms of architecture and urban design long established in the Western world.

Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, explains a Chinese architect in an interview, was born of romantic notions about the new city, quite unlike the changes occurring in Beijing and Shanghai. The story in China, on the contrary, is about "quantities and numbers". But the lofty target of superlatives comes at a high price, illustrated not solely by the living and working conditions of migrant labourers from the Chinese provinces.

Maya Schweizer and Clemens von Wedemeyer contrast the cinematic prototype with present reality, inviting us to consider how much the built environment can influence a country and its people. Whereas Lang exaggerated this relationship in parable form, the two artists choose an interpretation of the "Metropolis"-message more in tune with our own times.

Metropolis is merely the reflective foil against which critical viewers are asked to form their own picture of China today. By juxtaposing the two, questions are raised about what is utopia and what is dystopia, but they remain unanswered, just as the film-makers refrain from commenting on their final glimpse behind the façades and into a world of indulgence.

Maya Schweizer and Clemens von Wedemeyer have not tackled many projects as an artistic duo. Apart from *Metropolis. Report from China*, they have so far worked together on the film *Rien du tout*, screened at the 4th berlin biennale in 2006.

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