

The Boston Globe

By TY BURR

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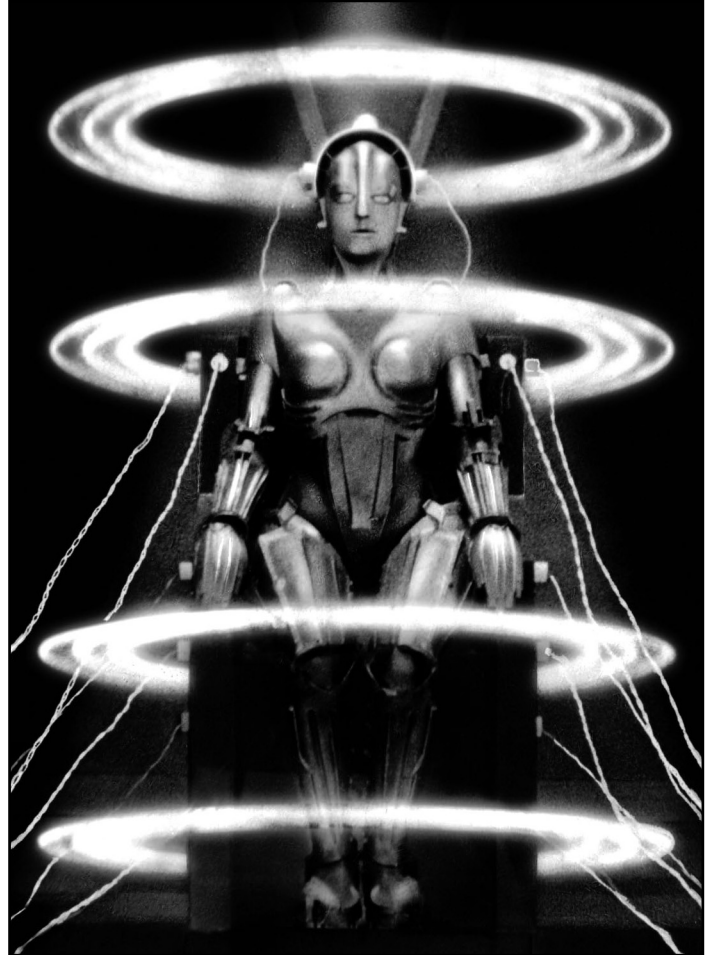
83 years later, 'Metropolis' better than ever

Here's a coincidence: The first must-see movie of 2010 is also the must-see movie of 1927. The difference is that you can actually see it now. Or most of it.

"Metropolis" is back — yes, again — in perhaps the most complete version we'll ever get, thanks to a team of dedicated restorers and a 16mm archival print discovered in a Buenos Aires museum in 2008. Twenty-five minutes, 96 sequences, and a host of subplots and secondary characters once thought lost are back in their proper places, bringing the total running time to 149 minutes, four short of the film's original totality. The result is a fuller, richer "Metropolis," no longer a stunning comic book but a masterpiece of excess — a folly that rightly takes its place as one of the towering works of cinema.

It's tempting to think of the film as the "Avatar" of its era. A sci-fi allegory that nearly bankrupted its studio, Germany's UFA, Fritz Lang's epic tale of a dystopian city-state was created with the express intent of being the most expensive, ambitious film yet made. The art direction and special effects by Otto Hunte and Erich Kettelhut, combined with Karl Freund's groundbreaking camerawork, advanced what the cinema could show and say, even as the film's narrative was dismissed in many quarters as trite. Above the production loomed its director, most assuredly the king of the world of pre-war German filmmaking.

Obviously, it's too early to say whether "Avatar" will be the "Metropolis" of the future (don't hold your breath). For one thing, Lang's film has held its grip on the imagination for 83 years despite being available only in butchered and bowdlerized prints. Debuting at a heroic 153 minutes in Berlin, "Metropolis" was almost immediately cut to under two hours for general release; when the film crossed the ocean, distributor Paramount further whittled it to under 90 minutes, excising whole chunks of plot and rearranging key sequences. The final insult came in 1984, when disco impresario Giorgio Moroder released a color-tinted version scored to songs by Pat Benatar, Billy Squier, and other stars of '80s cheese-rock. I have an acquaintance whose father made her watch that version repeatedly as a child; she still hasn't recovered.



On the other hand, the Moroder version, which has its camp defenders, only proves how hard this movie is to kill off and how influential its iconography has been over the years. Stanley Kubrick based Dr. Strangelove in part on Rotwang (Rudolf Klein-Rogge), the mad scientist of "Metropolis," and "Star Wars" put Rotwang's mechanical hand on Darth Vader and based the design of C-3PO on the scientist's metallic creation. 1982's "Blade Runner" — a movie that had its own run-ins with the scissors — is a virtual update of Lang's film in its mad futuristic cityscapes.

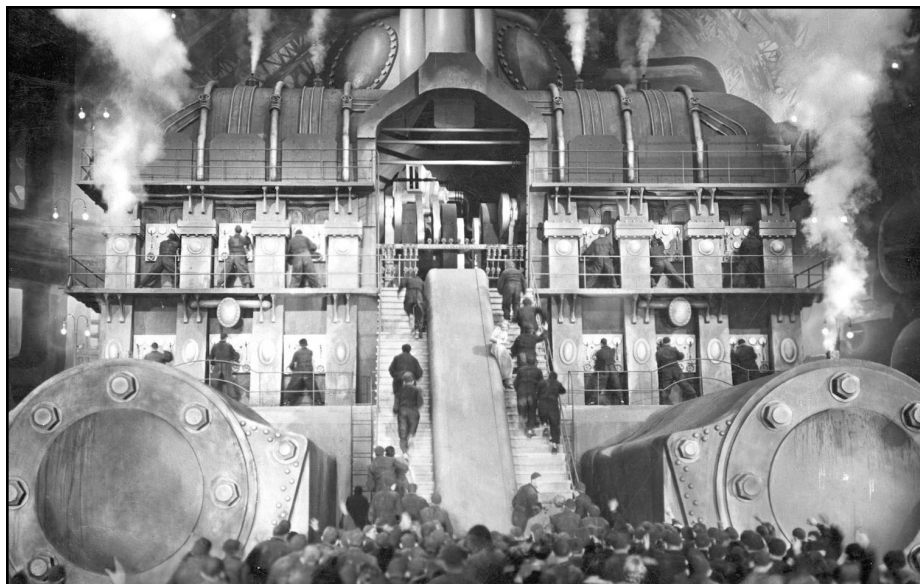
Yet the original remains hard to beat for dizzying effect and sheer nutty ambition. Taking place in a metaphorical Art

Now Playing

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Deco universe of skyscrapers, triumphal architecture, and belching subterranean machines, “Metropolis” pits the elites at the top, led by “master of Metropolis” Joh Fredersen (Alfred Abel), against the dronelike worker-slaves at the bottom. Negotiating the spaces between are Fredersen’s son Freder (Gustav Fröhlich), an upper-class twit who early on experiences a Buddha-like realization of other people’s suffering; Maria (Brigitte Helm), the Virgin Mary of the underclass, urging the workers to peaceful revolution; and Rotwang, the lunatic with a robot in his basement that he makes over into a false Maria.

Has there been a creepier scene in the movies than the one in which the robot-Maria takes her first lascivious steps, one eyelid drooping in an endless carnal wink? The acting in “Metropolis” is extreme yet dreamlike, with all the players seeming to perform in a trance. The restored scenes — scratchy and easy to identify — return several supporting characters to their own story lines: Worker 11811 (Erwin Biswanger), rescued by Freder from his clockwork labors, now repays the kindness by going nightclubbing with his benefactor’s money, and Joh’s disgraced secretary Josaphat (Theodor Loos) more clearly becomes Freder’s friend and assistant.

It’s The Thin One who stays with you, though — the eerie, shark-like thug hired by the senior Fredersen to follow his son. As played by Fritz Rasp, the character’s a forerunner of all those implacable movie killers like Jack Palance (who Rasp resembles) in “Shane” and Hugo Weaving in

“The Matrix.” Other restored sequences clear up the source of Rotwang’s madness — he lost his true love to Joh Fredersen and keeps a massive stone bust of her for private worship and vows of revenge.

But everything tips into gigantism in “Metropolis.” It’s a movie that thinks nothing of zipping back into pre-history for a Tower of Babel sequence and that throws in a cameo appearance by the Seven Deadly Sins — not to mention Death himself — just to keep you on your toes. There are floods and explosions, Christian symbolism and dancing girls, huge crowds arrayed in jaw-dropping geometric formations. No wonder Adolf Hitler saw “Metropolis” and said to Goebbels “There’s our director.” (Several years later, Lang was offered the reins of the Nazi film industry and decamped for Hollywood with all due haste, if not overnight as he liked to tell it.)

In later years, Lang also dismissed as childishly banal the movie’s moral, “The heart must mediate between the head and the hands,” symbolized in the film by Freder leading his father to shake hands with the head of the workers (Heinrich George). As if “Metropolis” was ever meant to be taken seriously as a treatise on the socio-economic issues of post-World War I Europe. No, this is simply glorious visionary overkill, a supreme example of a filmmaker coming into his own and wanting to write on the largest canvas imaginable. A few years later, Lang would direct his best movie, the crime thriller “M,” but “Metropolis” remains in a league of its own. It’s his *most*, and now we have almost all of it.