

The Middleton Family at the New York World's Fair

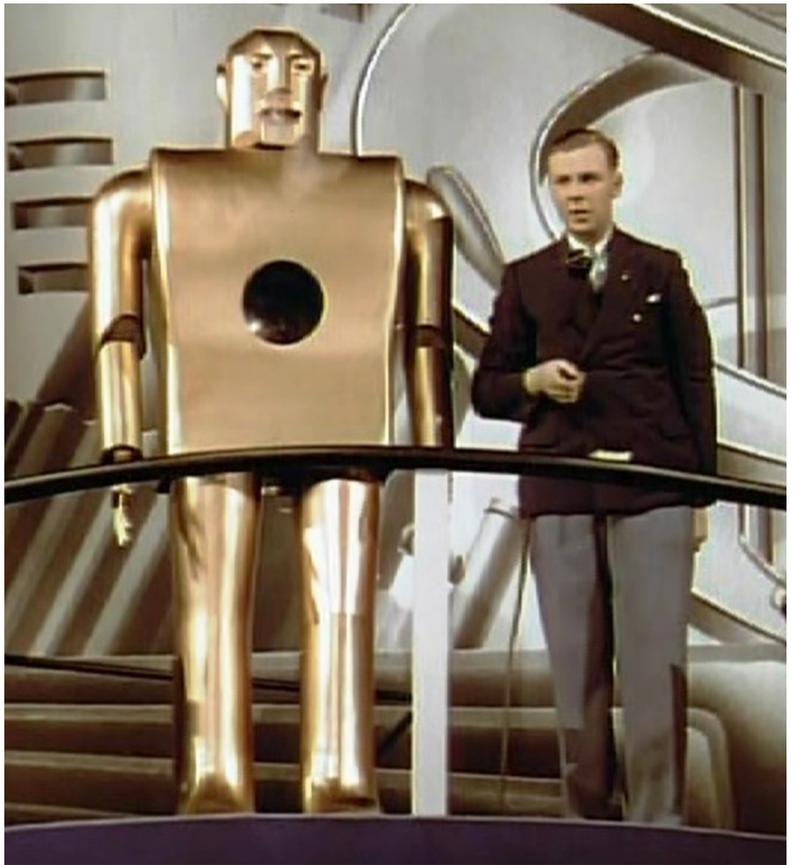
By Andrew F. Wood

“The Middleton Family at the New York World’s Fair” culminated a broader campaign of mass-market magazine ads and radio spots designed to showcase the Westinghouse Electric and Manufacturing Company’s pavilion at the 1939-40 international exhibition. Though more a time capsule of corporate propaganda than cinematic excellence, the film still offers a fascinating glimpse into commercial strategies employed to confront (and, to a certain extent, exploit) America’s late Depression-era anxieties about technology, automation, and the Red Menace.

The Middletons represent Westinghouse’s vision of a typical American family. Father has worked hard for his little piece of middle class comfort, and he sees no reason that the future ought not hold even better prospects for his kids. Mother is a bit more high-strung but no less assured in her family and their prospects. Their teenaged son Bud, though, is less confident. Ostensibly irreverent, Bud’s wisecracks disguise a fear that the world of tomorrow offers his generation little hope, only declining employment and shrinking opportunity.

The threesome has journeyed from Indiana to New York to attend the Fair – and since they are staying with Grandma, they anticipate a reunion with Bud’s older sister Babs. Unfortunately they soon discover that the young woman has begun to affect an overly worldly attitude, one coinciding with her participation in a love triangle pitting two markedly different suitors: Jim Treadway, the hometown hero who works for Westinghouse and dispenses information to Fair visitors, and Nicholas Makaroff, a skeezy looking fellow who teaches art theory at Babs’ college.

Amid this romantic tension, the Middletons tour the Westinghouse Building, stopping first at the Time Capsule scheduled to be unearthed 5,000 year hence. Leading the tour, Jim describes how committees and authorities, the “brains of the world,” have worked carefully and well to ensure that the Westinghouse message to the future will endure. Later he shows off more exhibits, including a television display, the Playground of Science, the Junior Science Hall, and other highlights.



Elektro, the Westinghouse “Moto-Man,” was a popular attraction at the fair. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

At the Playground of Science (where visitors can “play with electricity”), Jim explains his choice to forgo his childhood dream of playing football. It is so much better, he proposes, to work with Westinghouse men dedicated to building the world of tomorrow. Father enthuses: “One can’t help marveling at all the new things they’re inventing every day.” For Jim, this statement offers an opportunity to gird his optimistic rhetoric with an economic appeal: “A company can’t stand still under the American system of private enterprise. It has two ways to go: Back or forward.”

Mother and Grandma take their own tour, stopping to gaze upon the “Battle of the Centuries.” The exhibit features two characters, “Mrs. Drudge” and “Mrs. Modern” who compete in a dishwashing contest. Predictably Mrs. Drudge is splashing through a pile of dirty dishes, cleaning them by hand. Dependent upon her own individualized labor, Mrs. Drudge signifies the past. Standing nearby, serene, Mrs. Modern resides already in the future, a world of gleaming electrical devices epitomized by her Westinghouse dishwasher. This contest demonstrates a similar message to the one learned earlier by Bud: mechanized efficiency triumphs over brute labor.

Bud and Jim catch up with Babs and Nicholas, and

by now the teenager has come around to Jim's way of thinking. In contrast, Makaroff displays nothing less than the Marxist critique of capitalism. He is dour, paranoid, and humorless. He knows of Karl Marx, of course, but has never heard of the Marx Brothers, he teaches modern art (specializing in abstractionism) but possesses a primitive fear of new production modes, and he is determined to critique every exhibit in the Westinghouse Building, which he terms a "temple of capitalism."

As if to cement Makaroff's Marxist standpoint, Jim replies to his question about whether power looms displace workers by first recalling how "a fellow with a red beard asked me the same thing the other day..." Treadway then arrays examples of how labor saving devices ensure increased production that, in turn, necessitates increased employment. Jim's collection of facts and figures leaves Makaroff to sputter in frustration.

In the Home Exhibit the three women pause next to a swinging pendulum containing an hourglass and a reminder that "Electricity Saves Time." As the piece sweeps backward and forward, uniting past and future, Grandma reflects on the utility of the Westinghouse theme, comparing the drudgery of pre-modern labor to slavery: "That's why I like electrical engineers," she says, "*They* signed *our* emancipation proclamation." Viewers cannot know what Elvira, Grandma's African American maid depicted elsewhere in the film, would think of this. The maid does not join the family's fair adventures.

Finally, the group, minus Makaroff, visits Elektro the Westinghouse Moto-Man. Most folks stare at amazement at the giant golden device, but Babs channels her teacher's criticism. When Grandma exclaims, "Why he's almost *human*," Babs retorts, "If he wasn't so big, I'd take him for an *engineer*." At first it appears that Babs is deceived by Makaroff's cosmopolitan veneer. Perhaps Jim is right, that she has hopelessly changed her focus from "science to art."

Eventually with the aid of her crafty Grandma, Babs learns to see past Makaroff's maneuverings. The worldly art teacher is revealed to be a cheap fraud, with his presumed dedication to working class solidarity proving to be little more than artifice. The film concludes, as the viewer would expect, with Jim and Babs together at the Westinghouse building, basking under the glow of tomorrow's technology. "I wonder if the years ahead will be as bright as this," Babs says, clutching Jim's arm. "We haven't seen anything yet," he replies. "Why all this is merely a sample of the *real* world of tomorrow."

Rather than projecting a utopian vision of tomorrow, a fanciful not-place that serves to critique the real world, "The Middleton Family" is best read as heterotopia, a strategic overlap of overlapping, contradictory narratives (past vs. future, human labor vs. machine automation, art vs. science). As such, the film provides a sort of "social safety valve," ostensibly a fair contest that serves ultimately to affirm the dominant narrative.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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