



Metropolis: themes and context

Social and cultural contexts

Metropolis is concerned with wider cultural and political issues, evidenced visually as well as thematically. The film's social preoccupations have been described as a commentary on the political situation that existed in Germany at the time, but also served as a warning of where Germany was heading in the future.

The film was made during Germany's Weimar Republic; the country's first attempt at creating a democracy in the very difficult years following the First World War. The economic and political aftermath of Germany's defeat led to hyperinflation, revolts on the streets and a general sense of anxiety and dissatisfaction with the ruling powers.

For the German people, cinema offered a means of escaping the hardships of daily life. Historical and sci-fi genres were popular at the time for their representations of other worlds and distant times.

For Lang to make a realist film that dealt directly with the troubles of the day would not have pleased German audiences. Instead, he tapped into Germany's power struggles, issues of poverty and conflict, and fears for the future, using an entirely constructed and heavily stylised futuristic landscape filled with symbolism and metaphors to convey political messages.

Activities

1. Consider the opening of *Metropolis*. How are political messages conveyed in the opening scenes of the film? Consider the different cinematic techniques Lang uses to achieve the following:
 - a. the relationship between the machinery and the workers
 - b. the contrast in the way the workers and the sons of the rich are represented
2. Search online for images of Germany during the Weimar Republic to compare and contrast with the images in the film. Are the comparisons obvious? Despite the futuristic setting, in what ways do you think German audiences at the time may have identified with the film?

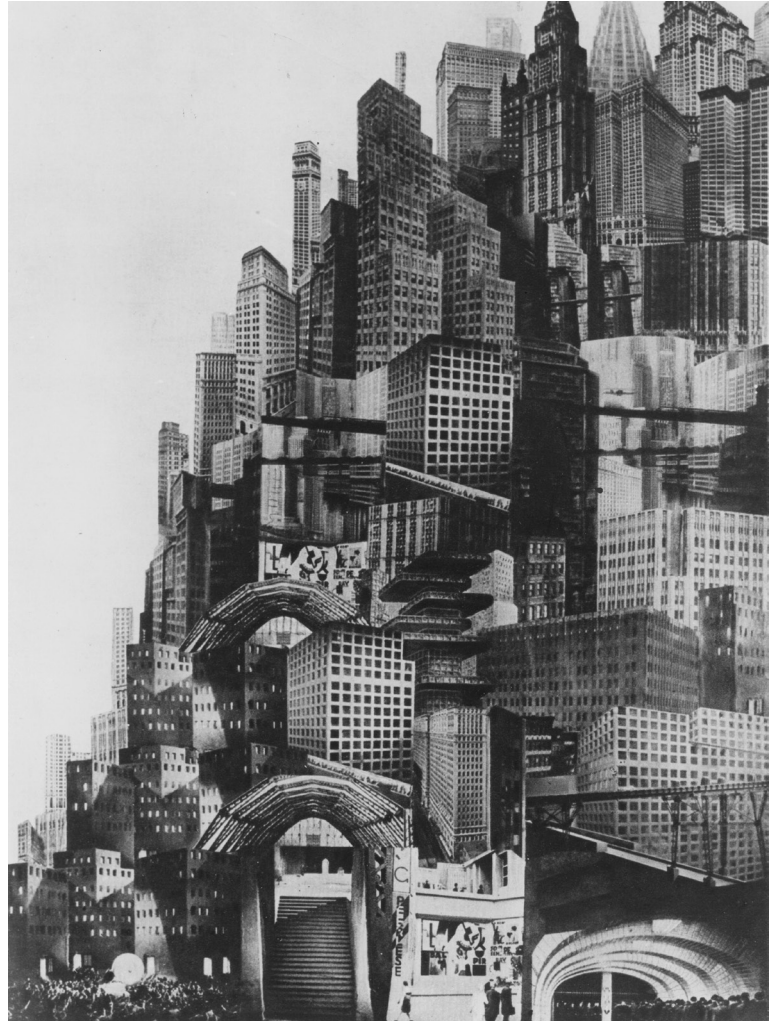


Visions of the future

The anxieties of the time are deeply felt in *Metropolis*, but Lang claimed he was also ‘*looking at Germany in the future*’ when he made the film. The futuristic aspect of the film suggests there may have been a sense of conflict in relation to the state of contemporary Germany, and where the nation was heading on its road to modernisation.

Aesthetically, the thriving, bustling urban space of *Metropolis* was like nothing seen in Germany at the time. However, the futuristic city held similarities to the vast physical dimensions of rapidly expanding cities further west, such as New York and Chicago. The film explores the decadence and delights of modern cities but also the inequality and social problems that exist beneath the glossy surface. The futuristic city of *Metropolis* is built quite literally on inequality; to Lang, the city of the future was synonymous with exploitation, power, corruption and greed:

‘*Metropolis*, you know, was born from my first sight of the skyscrapers of New York in October 1924 [...] while visiting New York, I thought that it was the cross-roads of multiple and confused human forces, blinded and knocking into one another, in an irresistible desire for exploitation, and living in perpetual anxiety. I spent an entire day walking the streets. The buildings seemed to be a vertical sail, scintillating and very light, a luxurious backdrop, suspended in the dark sky to dazzle, distract and hypnotise. At night, the city did not simply give the impression of living: it lived as illusions live. I knew I should make a film of all these impressions.’¹



¹ ‘The Viennese Night: A Fritz Lang Confession, Part Two’, a 1965 interview conducted with Gretchen Berg for ‘Cahiers du cinéma’, translated from English into French, and later back again into English, in Barry Keith Grant (ed.), ‘Fritz Lang: Interviews’ (2003).



Activities

1. In what way does Lang portray capitalism as something to be both desired and feared? Identify the ways in which these ideas are explored stylistically.
2. Compare images of Metropolis with modern cityscapes, for example London, New York or Dubai. What are the most iconic or famous images from these cities? Is the media representation of them fairly consistent and, if so, what are we commonly shown of these cities? Are there aspects of the cities that don't tend to be shown in the media? How can we compare these cityscapes to the image of both Metropolis, and the Worker's City, in the film?
3. The film features recurrent religious and historical iconography juxtaposed with the futuristic image of the modern city and the workers' machines. What is the role of religion in *Metropolis* and what kind of message can we infer from the frequent reference to religion and images of the past?
4. What were Lang's predictions for the future of Germany? Were they hopeful? Or pessimistic? Explain your answer. What do you think may have inspired Lang's futuristic vision?

Strike!

The uprising of the workers conveys a very significant and important political message about inequality in society and the future of modern capitalism. *Metropolis* exposes the very mechanics of capitalism – from the labouring masses at the bottom, to the powerful elite at the top.

Discuss:

1. How are oppression and hierarchy visually represented in the film? In what ways could these visual representations be seen as a comment on the workings of a capitalist system?
2. When the workers go on strike, the machines collapse, the city ceases to function and chaos ensues. The film suggests there needs to be a mediator between the workers and the elite. Thinking of the narrative as an allegory, what might this mean for society?
3. Is this a 'Utopian Vision' that suggests equality between the workers and the owners? Or a way of justifying the inequality that already existed? Explain your answer.



4. At the end of the film, status quo is restored. Do you think this is a satisfactory conclusion to the conflict and power struggle between the workers and the elite?

Another significant silent film of the time was Eisenstein's *Strike*. Made in 1925, the film depicted a workers' strike in pre-revolutionary Russia. There is a famous scene in the film in which shots of the rebelling workers are crosscut with seemingly unrelated images of cattle being slaughtered. This juxtaposition encouraged viewers to associate the treatment of the cattle with the treatment of the workers.



Symbolism is also an important part of *Metropolis*. It has been suggested that Freder can be regarded symbolically as the cinema audience member in Weimer Germany, who has witnessed the horrors of the First World War, the aftermath, and then has observed Germany descend into political chaos.

Activities

Lang uses strong metaphors to explore both this idea and the treatment of the workers in *Metropolis*. Think again about Freder's 'Heart Machine' nightmare sequence in the film.

1. How are tension and anxiety created in this sequence and how does this impact on the meaning behind the sequence?
2. Having witnessed the accident, what kind of realisation does Freder have? What is the significance of Freder's ignorance of the conditions of the underground Workers' City?
3. Think about the metaphor of sacrifice conveyed in the dream. What kind of political message does this suggest?
4. Why do you think Freder's realisation of the *truth* is presented in the form of a *fantasy*?