HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Burak Sevingen, MA

METROPOLIS 1927

Fritz Lang

OVERVIEW

Metropolis was released in 1927, towards the end of the decade known as the Roaring Twenties—a period of relative economic stability in the Weimar Republic. The Wall Street Crash of 1929 and ensuing Great Depression were just around the corner. The Nazi Party was a force to be reckoned with in German politics but it was several years prior to Hitler's ascent to absolute power.

1920s were also a decade of rapid technological progress with airplane, automobile, electrical home appliances, phonograph, radio and many other inventions that transformed life. On the other hand, still fresh were memories of World War I and its technologies of destruction e.g. industrial trench warfare with machine guns and chemical weapons—whose ghoulish visions were depicted by Lang's contemporary Otto Dix. *Metropolis* represented this dual view of technology, a source of joy and a cause of pessimism.

Technically, *Metropolis* was groundbreaking. A large number of extras were employed in conjunction with shots making use of matte paintings and miniatures. Cinematographic innovations included (Leedom) creating multiple exposures on the rewound film and stop-motion animation of miniatures. A particularly cutting-edge technique was the Schüfftan process that enabled creating the illusion of actors interacting with gigantic backgrounds by using mirrors to project them onto miniature sets. Lang's bold envisioning of the city of future continues to fascinate architects and designers. With nods to Bauhaus, futurism and Art Déco, it is a visual treat.

Aurally so as well—that is, as a silent film. Gottfried Huppertz's original soundtrack interrupts a "Wagnerian composition" with the disorienting use of Jazz during the night club scenes (Finacchiaro). After all, 1920s are also known as the Jazz Age, the time of the flapper, bob cut hairstyle, unique fashions, cabaret dancing and above all assertive presence of modern women in public.

Metropolis had a lasting legacy and influenced science fiction genre for almost a century now. Representation of state as a tyrannical corporation was a major inspiration for dystopias like *Bladerunner* (1982), *Fifth Element* (1997*)* and *Brazil* (1985)*.* As a cornerstone of expressionism in cinema, its dim and misty settings inspired Film Noir. Homage to Metropolis and its robot (or gynoid for a female android) can be encountered in various fields of popular culture such as *Star Wars'* (1977) C-3PO and music videos of Queen, Madonna and others.

The script was co-authored by Lang and Thea von Harbou who was his wife at the time. It was based on von Harbou's 1926 novel. Following their divorce, Lang carried on his career in the USA while von Harbou stayed in Germany and worked for the Nazis—which bring up the question of ideology in *Metropolis*. According to an anecdote recounted by Lang himself, Joseph Goebbels himself was a fan of the film. In his interview with director William Friedkin, Lang said that he became political after *Metropolis* and by then leaned more towards the left (Mangione). The ending, with its abrupt reconciliation between the classes supports the argument that the film shows an affinity to fascism—and the issue is still open to speculation.

Luis Buñuel remarks that he views *Metropolis* as two films, an underwhelming plot intertwined with an extraordinary visual narrative (Bunuel). With an ambivalent approach to Modern city, technology, class politics and gender identities, it eludes attempts at a definitive interpretation. One could say that changing perspectives of each era could discover something new in it—the dreamy and whimsical *Metropolis* never fails to reward rewatching and rethinking.

CHARACTERS

Freder. The son of the most powerful man in Metropolis, Joh Fredersen.

Joh Fredersen. "The ruler of Metropolis" is a corporate overlord.

Rotwang the Creator. Eccentric and malicious scientist whose Gothic residence and high-tech laboratory is located at the center of the city.

Maria / The Machine Human. The saintly and demure Maria is an inspiration for the workers and comforts them. The android impersonator of Maria is a wanton and promiscuous character who preaches destruction.

Other characters:

Some of the following had negligible parts in the standard versions of the film up until 2010 when a newly restored version was released thanks to substantial footage discovered in Argentina in 2008. This makes it possible and interesting to consider Lang's original in light of their noteworthy contribution—it was mostly their parts that were left out in the previous re-edits.

Slim. The henchman and spy of Joh Fredersen who represents the darker side of the state.

Josaphat. Fredersen's personal secretary.

Georgy (Worker #11811). For a while, Georgy and Freder willingly exchange positions—laborer becomes the wealthy young man and vice versa.

Grot. The foreman of workers and operator of the "heart machine". He assumes the role of a leader during the later stages of the rebellion when it turns into a mob riot.

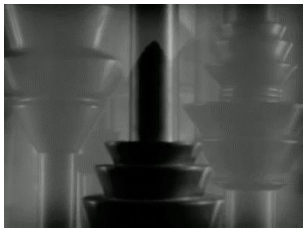
SYNOPSIS

Metropolis is a bustling modern city with sophisticated architecture and transport systems. Below the surface, workers in drab uniforms walk rigidly, clearly exhausted and dispirited. Large elevators take them underground where they head to their apartments in bleak and massive concrete blocks. Higher up, Freder Fredersen, the son of 'the Ruler of Metropolis' playfully chases a flapper amid exotic animals and water fountains. Suddenly, a young woman surrounded by several impoverished children approaches Freder. Freder is so touched by the encounter that he dashes after them; the pursuit takes him to the machine chamber of Metropolis where workers are desperately struggling to keep up with machines. Freder makes a run for his father's headquarters to relate the horrific conditions of the workers. The stoic Joh Fredersen is barely moved by the news; he summons his secret agent Slim to follow Freder and fires Josaphat. Freder enters the machine chamber and relieves an exhausted worker—named Georgy—and proposes that they "trade lives". Shortly after, he receives a tip about a clandestine meeting of the workers scheduled to take place after work. Meanwhile, Georgy heads to Yoshiwara club, a cosmopolitan and vibrant cabaret in the entertainment district.

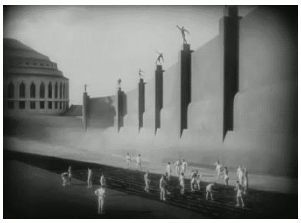
Joh Fredersen has decided to carry out his own investigation about the suspicious maps. He seeks the guidance of Rotwang the inventor, whose latest creation is an android named the Machine-Human. Rotwang takes Fredersen to the catacombs to let him peep at workers listening to their saintly leader, Maria, who preaches moderation. Observing Maria's powerful oratory and sensing a threat, Fredersen hatches a plan to destroy her reputation. He asks Rotwang to give his machine-human her appearance. Then the gynoid is dispatched to both the subterranean city and to the Yoshiwara club to wreak havoc. As a result of her provocations, the rebels set out on a destructive rampage and ultimately reach the gate of the machine chamber. Here, in spite of Grot the foreman's pleas, the heart machine is wrecked, initiating flooding and gradual destruction of Metropolis. Meanwhile, the real Maria escapes captivity and saves the children of the workers from drowning. Enraged workers seek the false Maria for retribution and raid the

Yoshiwara club. The robot is captured and burnt at the stake. Rotwang makes an attempt to seize Maria but is confronted by Freder and dies after falling from the roof of the cathedral. With Maria's encouragement, Freder steps up as the promised mediator and reconciles the workers with their boss. The film ends with the reiteration of the motto "the heart is the mediator between the hands and the brain".

SCENES

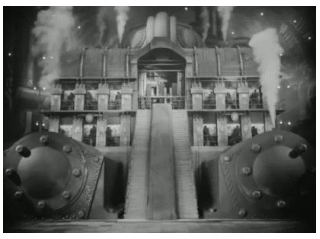
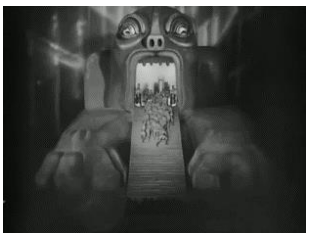



First shot introduces the futuristic Metropolis as a bustling modern city with sophisticated architecture and transport systems. Following sequence shows state-of-the-art machinery seemingly in perpetual motion with cogwheels in revolution and blades spinning. The dynamic turbine looks like an admirable metal sculpture—it is the driving force of the vibrant city.

A Vertical City. From the get-go, uniqueness of space and time is established as a ten-hour clock face signals the end of the shift. We now see the operators of the vigorous machines. Workers in drab uniforms walk rigidly, clearly exhausted and dispirited. Large elevators take them underground where they head to their apartments in bleak and massive concrete blocks. Unlike this grim world, next setting above the ground shows energetic young men competing in tracks at a bright and humungous stadium. In close proximity—in a pastoral Eden called the Eternal Gardens, women prepare for a quick audition to entertain one of the athletes. Enter Freder Fredersen, the son of 'the Ruler of Metropolis'. A playful chase with a flapper ensues amid exotic animals and water fountains.



Sabotage. The party is abruptly interrupted when unexpected guests arrive. A young woman surrounded by several impoverished children approaches Freder. She tells the kids to meet their brothers. The young woman—Maria—has brought workers' children to the Eternal Gardens just as the privileged were enjoying the party. The intruders are led outside but Freder is profoundly touched by the encounter—he dashes after them. The pursuit takes him to the machine chamber of Metropolis where workers are desperately struggling to keep up with machines. The centerpiece is the 'Heart Machine, a large and elevated structure that resembles a ziggurat. Freder is shaken and starts hallucinating about Moloch, the Canaanite god associated with child sacrifice. He envisages the heart machine to have anthropomorphic features.



Formations of workers duly walk up the stairs and are pushed inside a 'mouth' by guards. At the Machine chamber of Metropolis, workers desperately struggle to keep up with the machines. Suddenly, an explosion rocks the machine room, workers are scattered in all directions, and many of them are seriously injured. Fritz Lang regular actor Georg John appears as the worker who causes the explosion.



The appalled Freder makes a run for his father's headquarters located at the skyscraper called "the New Tower of Babel". He seems to be confident that Joh Fredersen will be equally upset when he learns what he has just witnessed and will rectify the situation. The stoic Fredersen is barely moved by the news; instead he harshly reprimands his right-hand man Josaphat for failing to inform him about the explosion. The foreman of the workers Grot arrives to reveal that the incident was an act of sabotage and maps of a secret location were found on the saboteurs. Fredersen, presumably concerned about losing his grip on his son as well as city, summons his secret agent Slim to follow Freder and fires Josaphat. Freder enters the machine chamber and witnesses worker #11811 being overwhelmed by a machine that looks like a man-sized clock face. He relieves the exhausted worker—named Georgy—and proposes that they "trade lives". Accordingly, Freder proceeds to toil at the workstation and instructs his new friend to leave and wait for him at Josaphat's flat. Shortly after, he receives a tip about a clandestine meeting of the workers scheduled to take place after work. Meanwhile Georgy settles in Freder's limousine. The sight of a flapper and finding lots of cash in Freder's garment tempts him to have a taste of the high life at the City of Sons. The car heads to Yoshiwara club, a cosmopolitan and vibrant cabaret in the entertainment district.

The Machine-Human. At the highest echelon of Metropolis, Joh Fredersen has decided to carry out his own investigation about the suspicious maps. He seeks the guidance of Rotwang the inventor, a scientist who looks more like a sorcerer in his Gothic abode. We learn that the two men have a complicated history: They were once in love with the same woman named Hel, who eventually married Joh and died while giving birth to Freder. Rotwang has never forgotten Hel and the shrine he has built to her keeps his contempt for Fredersen alive. His latest creation is an android named the Machine-Human. This robot in female form is designed to look like Hel and obey only Rotwang. As a result of an accident, Rotwang has lost his right hand while working on the machine-human, but he feels his creation is worth it.



What Lies Beneath. Despite their animosity Fredersen obviously takes the inventor seriously and turns to Rotwang "when his experts fail" him. Indeed, the mad scientist is able to reveal the mystery of the plans and explains that they indicate the subterranean city known as the Catacombs. He takes Fredersen there, just in time to witness workers conglomerating. His son Freder is among the workers who have arrived to hear Maria speak. Maria's oratory grips the workers and gives them hope.



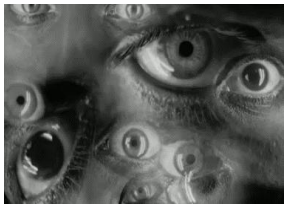


The Maria is the beloved and saintly leader of the workers. She preaches patience, understanding and moderation. She tells them the tale of the "Tower of Babel". According to her account, elites of Ancient Babylon conceive a monumental architectural project but cannot realize it by themselves. These "dreamers hire hands" but fail to accurately convey their ideals. The workers, strained under harsh working conditions cannot comprehend "the brain". Ultimately, they rebel and leave the spectacular tower in ruins. Maria explains that without the heart to act as a mediator, the hands and the brain could not communicate properly. The brief sequence does not depict violence but implies it with an intertitle showing blood dripping from the word Babel.



Agent-Provocateur. Observing Maria's powerful oratory and sensing a threat, Fredersen hatches a plan to destroy her reputation. He asks Rotwang to give his machine-human her appearance. The mad scientist is delighted to hear this as he reckons that the sinister scheme will end up costing Fredersen not just his city, but also his son. Rotwang captures Maria and at his laboratory, her body is transposed onto the machine-human with high-tech wizardry. He dispatches the gynoid to Fredersen who instructs her to go to the

subterranean city and wreak havoc. Freder arrives just in time to see his father together with the lookalike of his sweetheart and has a nervous breakdown.










Death Descends upon the City. Ten days have passed and the recovering Freder is informed that while he was sick, the gynoid was responsible for chaos in both worlds of Metropolis: At the *Yoshiwara* club, her extrovert sexuality turned men against each other with deadly consequences. She seduces the upper city's men at Club Yoshiwara—special effects depict lustful gazes.

At the Catacombs, she instilled hatred in the workers against the machines. Workers rebel and for a moment they are jubilant and truly joyful. As a result of her provocations, the rebels set out on a destructive rampage and ultimately reach the gate of the machine chamber. "Let's watch the world go to the devil"—the false Maria leads the elites who continue the party on the streets.

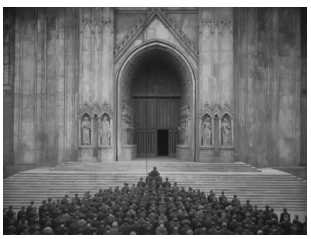
Fredersen orders Grot the foreman to cease resisting the rioters and let them inside. Underscoring his high-tech omniscience, Fredersen communicates with his foreman using an intercom phone and television—several decades ahead of their widespread use.

Here, in spite of Grot's pleas, the heart machine is wrecked, initiating flooding and gradual destruction of Metropolis. Meanwhile, the real Maria has escaped captivity and realizes what flooding will entail: The children are left unattended at the workers' city and will be drowned. She manages to ring an alarm and children cluster around her. At this point, Freder comes to her help and they lead all the kids to safety through the air shafts.



A Reactionary Mob. Grot chides the workers and makes them realize that they themselves put the lives of children in peril. Enraged, they seek the false Maria for retribution and raid the Yoshiwara club. The robot is captured and burnt at the stake like a medieval witch. Rotwang makes an attempt to seize Maria but is confronted by Freder and dies after falling from the roof of the cathedral. With both of the disruptive influences on society having been dealt with, rebels calm down. Fredersen arrives at the scene flanked by Josaphat and Slim—he now realizes that his actions may cost him his son.

Just like the workers, Fredersen is relieved to find out that his son wasn't hurt during the flood. His demeanor also suggests the experience has humbled him.



A Mediator Between Classes. At this point, the leader of the workers is indisputably Grot. There is a stalemate as he and Fredersen come close to shaking hands but can't seem to bring themselves to do it. With Maria's encouragement, Freder steps up as the promised mediator and reconciles the workers with their boss. The film ends with the reiteration of the motto "the heart is the mediator between the hands and the brain". The finale brings political—and geometric—order)

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

FREDER

Character Youthful and naïve, Freder is transformed after he falls in love with Maria and starts his quest to ameliorate the social position of the workers.

Illustrative moment

Compassionate. As a privileged young man, Freder leads an idle existence up until the moment Maria out of nowhere shows up at the Eternal Gardens. Freder falls in love with the Madonna figure. He is also moved by her message of fraternity—the workers' children accompanying her being the brothers of the upper class youth. Maria points out to him as the messiah destined to fulfill the role of a mediator between the classes. Guided by an understanding of society as a brotherhood of men, he bonds with distinct individuals. Freder tries to build a faithful following by proving his benevolence. At the end, he saves Maria from Rotwang and facilitates a hand shake between the workers and their employer. By the finale, he has matured and acts unlike the jumpy young man at the beginning,

JOH FREDERSEN

Character The master of Metropolis is a successful and tough administrator.

Illustrative moments

Visionary. "Your magnificent city, father… You the brain of this city—and all of us in the city's light". Freder's characterization of his father is accurate, Fredersen is not just a wealthy and powerful man; he is a gifted leader. When he is supervising the clerks, he seems to lead on a whim by poetic inspiration—orchestrating the work like a conductor. He is essentially a creative mind who bestows light on others. Even the abstractions on the ticker display, prices and symbols flow in accordance with his gestures. Fredersen is not only a master of men and goods but time and information as well.

Omnipotent and omniscient. Fredersen likes to control the city just like he likes to keep his son under control. To this end, he uses state of the art surveillance technology such as video phones, CCTV screens and switchboard control panel with flashing lights that connect him to the nerve centers of Metropolis. His power largely rests on advanced technology, although his agent Slim suggests that a capacity for coercion is not lacking.

Joh Fredersen's signature is on the checks of the Central Bank of Metropolis. To be fired by him means being condemned 'to the depths' of the city and is dreaded by his employees. There is a limit to his power however—which becomes apparent with the emergence of Maria. It turns out that Fredersen was uninformed not only about the subversive activities but he was totally ignorant about the existence of the catacombs deep down in his own city.

Aloof. Fredersen clearly doesn't share his son's compassion about the working class residents of Metropolis. When Freder tries to get him to show some lenity, he responds by saying that workers belong to 'the depths'. He is selfish and merciless. Freder seems to be the only soft spot in his heart. Fredersen's indifference is checked by Slim who cautions him that people are distraught because their children are in peril—just like his son.

Cunning. Fredersen is a manipulator and prone to using deception tactics. He gets Rotwang to turn the robot into an agent-provocateur in order to get a pretense for crushing the workers' resistance. He risks the destruction of the entire city just to discredit the resistance movement and turn workers against their leader Maria.

ROTWANG THE INVENTOR

Character Rotwang is a genius scientist—even though with his Gothic dwelling and preoccupation with the occult he looks more like an alchemist.

Illustrative moments

Obsessive and Self-serving. Presumably Rotwang engineered some of the marvelous technology we get to see elsewhere—before the fall out with Fredersen over Hel. He is a narcissistic and vindictive person whose contempt for the Master of Metropolis seems to be the driving force in his bizarre and irrational actions. Rotwang has lost a hand while working on the android replica of Hel and wears a prosthesis. Expressionism is most explicit in the sequences with him lurking creepily in the shadows.

Early on, Fredersen the ruthless capitalist appears to be the villain of *Metropolis*. That changes as Rotwang's Machine-Human impersonates Maria to create chaos in the city. As events unfold, the eccentric inventor and his gynoid are eventually established to be the true villains.

Parallels

Without Rotwang, our conception of a mad-scientist would surely not be the same. With a single stroke, he successfully creates:

- *An automaton*: A self-sufficient machine that has fascinated inventors since the age of Enlightenment i.e. E.T.A. Hoffman's *The Sandman* and E.A. Poe's *Maetzel's Chess Player*.
- *A human being*: He made a major contribution to defining the archetype of mad scientist in the tradition of Doctor Victor Frankenstein. His lab feels familiar because its details—funnels holding mysterious liquids, fuming flasks, flashing electrical discharges and light beams have been copied so many times.
  The actor Rudolf Klein-Rogge had starred as the nefarious mastermind Dr. Mabuse in 1922 and would later play the part in two more films released in 1933. His "mechanical hand" recalls Stanley Kubrick's Dr. Strangelove.
- *A subservient female*: Pygmalion myth associated with creating an 'ideal woman': The android will be a woman of his design which puts him in league with James Whale's Doctor Pretorius in *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935).

The climax shows Rotwang on the roof of the cathedral among gargoyles, alluding to the *Hunchback of Notre Dame*—rooftop chase sequence also being a favorite of Alfred Hitchcock in *Blackmail* (1929) with *Saboteur* (1942) and *Vertigo* (1958) to follow.

MARIA / HEL

Character Motherly and gentle. Maria is depicted as a Madonna. The faux Maria looks like a caricature of a 1920s flapper and her brazen sexuality is toxic.

The Master of Metropolis employs Rotwang to give the Machine-Human Maria's appearance in order to lure the workers with the agent provocateur and let them ruin the movement's reputation themselves—so that he will be able to get rid of it easily.

Illustrative moments

Attractive. They are both magnetic: Children are seen flocking around Maria twice, when she enters the Eternal Gardens at the beginning and as she saves them from drowning near the end.

The moment he becomes aware of her existence, Fredersen is annoyed and perceives her as a threat. The exact reason for his apprehension is not specified, it might be that he is wary of her influence on his son and/or the workers—yet it is more likely that he simply feels threatened by her femininity.

Her robotic counterpart has a similar effect on the workers when she tells them that the machines are responsible for their misery. When the damage is done at the machine chamber, the femme fatale moves on to Yoshiwara club and seduces the wealthy.

OTHER CHARACTERS

SLIM

Character With all the social tension, we surprisingly don't get to see any police in Metropolis. Slim is Joh Fredersen's agent for security and covert surveillance missions. Dispatched to tail Freder, he bullies both Georgy and Josaphat to provide him with crucial information. Physically overwhelming, sinister looking and menacing, Slim's demeanor vaguely recalls Count Orlok of F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu*.

Illustrative moment

Prudent. As a complementary character, his presence underscores the limits of Joh Fredersen's wisdom and trustworthiness.

Slim doesn't hide his disappointment when it becomes clear that Fredersen's actions are guided only by personal motivations. Close to the climax, the boss orders that the rebellious workers be allowed to destroy key machinery and consequently the entire city. The dutiful functionary rebukes and sets him on the right track by reminding him of Freder—since the reckless decision will entail his son's death as well. Fredersen is powerful thanks to Slim who personifies a facet of bureaucracy.

As enforcer characters in cinema go, Slim is a remarkable prototype for future villains—if we could call him that, given his positive presentation by the side of Fredersen towards the end. The tall palace guard also bears an uncanny resemblance to the Hitler's SA and SS. The Nazis were apparently fond of the motto "the heart mediates between the brain and hands"—we can speculate that they might have also liked details such as this one.

JOSAPHAT

As a minor character, Josaphat is significant because he comes closest to a representation of middle class in Metropolis—which is otherwise nowhere to be seen.

Illustrative Moments

Intellectual. The secretary is a conscientious thinker, not a simple executioner of Fredersen's will. He is aware of social issues and seems to struggle with the implications of management decisions. It is not clear if he merely finds them unfeasible or if he is genuinely concerned about injustice. Whichever the reason, he is repeatedly shown strained under mental pressure and noticeably sweats—like the blue collar employees down below.

Loyal. Even though Fredersen fires his right-hand man, Josaphat's deference to him is unshaken. He moves on to become a trusted friend and selfless ally for Freder in his quest to become a mediator between the workers and their employer.

GEORGY, WORKER #11811

Freder first comes across Georgy at the machine chamber and relieves the staggering worker.

Illustrative Moment

Seduced. While Freder works Georgy's shift the latter enjoys the life of luxury and exuberance in the City of Sons. He promises to meet Freder at Josaphat's flat. However, he is tempted to go to Yoshiwara club instead and misses the appointment. Although Georgy fails Freder once, he makes up for

it during the workers' revolt by making the ultimate sacrifice—he is killed protecting 'the Mediator' from a knife attack.

Parallels

Metropolis has strong religious symbolism with Freder as a Christ like figure, Maria as Virgin Mary and Rotwang as devil. The Legend of the Tower of Babel and the story of the Seven Deadly Sins are alluded to at length, with the respective implications that hubris and lust would bring about devastation.

This character contributes to the religious subtext by supporting Freder's claim to become a messiah. "I must have a person faithful to me, otherwise how will I be able to fulfill my destiny?" Freder asks. Georgy proves his claim to be Freder's first truly 'faithful' follower despite initially letting him down.

THEMES

Social and Economic Inequality. Classes are explicitly demarcated in Metropolis. Workers are segregated from the elites while middle class seems nonexistent (perhaps with the exception of Josaphat).

Above the ground, the city offers all the amenities of modernization with parks, clubs and stadiums to promote the happiness of its residents. There is no question about the source of this wealth: "Fathers, for whom every revolution of a machine wheel meant gold, had created for their sons the miracle of the Eternal Gardens". In stark contrast, the despondent workers down below lead a dreary existence in gloomy settings.

Early on in the story, the naïve Freder articulates a question that might have occurred to others as well: 'what if one day those in the depths rise up?' What follows is an exploration into this possibility and the legend of the Tower of Babel provides a blueprint. According to Maria's account, Enraged Babylonian workers rebel and storm the tower brilliantly conceived by their employer. This recurring visual trope will be used three times in the film.

First, the rebellious workers attack and wreck the monstrous 'heart machine' that too has a long flight of stairs. Next, similar mise-en-scène is staged at the Yoshiwara club as the lustful upper class men swarm towards false Maria who dances seductively on an elevated platform. Finally, as the rebellion turns sour, slouched and confused workers are reduced to a faceless mass—which almost brings them full circle back to the beginning. In a neat geometric spearhead formation with the foreman at the tip, they walk up the stairs of the cathedral for the denouement.

The finale suggests that we are back to square one. The social positions of workers and women are unlikely to be any different. Despite its recklessness, the revolt had promised a possibility of radical change and emancipation. It would be interesting to speculate if things would look differently if the ending was among the missing footage of *Metropolis*.

Metropolis shares common visual motifs and themes with Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and *Strike* (1925), particularly the latter's depiction of workers' struggle to seize the machines of the factory. In *Metropolis* the rebels act foolishly and can be easily manipulated. The uprising quickly turns into an anarchistic riot and it ends up as nothing more than a vengeful reactionary mob.

Modernity. With its brightly lit, vibrant urban center with aircraft circling a valley of majestic skyscrapers, Metropolis is a spectacular city. Then again, there are other spaces. The dismal work space of the workers is matched by the residential area with massive blocks of flats with tiny windows. Efficiency seems to be the only concern in designing these nightmarish spaces.

Added to these two insights into modernity is a third alternative: Its outright denial in the murky settings of the Catacombs, cathedral and Rotwang's house which look pre-modern.

Lang takes us on a tour of worlds envisioned by these three perspectives, mostly contrasting and at times blending them—for the bedazzled audience to ponder.

Ambivalence Towards Technology. In a scene that Charlie Chaplin alludes to in the *Modern Times* (1936), Fredersen picks up a phone to have a two-way video call with the foreman—an astounding concept considering that the composite innovation became widespread not too long ago.

Various similar novelties in Metropolis amaze us today and we can only imagine how exciting it must have been for Lang's contemporaries to see them on the big screen in the late 1920s. All these inventions hint at technology's enormous potential to transform daily life. Similar to Ferdinand Léger's 1924 *Ballet Mécanique* (Mechanical Ballet), it is clearly the opening sequence's machines in rhythmic movement that make possible the glamour of the city.

Alongside such display of confidence in progress and cheerful optimism, same technology can cause of anguish. The hands of the arduous 'clock machine' control the body of the worker—not the other way around. The heart machine devours laborers in Freder's daydream and in reality leaves them drained to the point of exhaustion.

There is also the dominating presence of the ghastly and egocentric Rotwang who represents science. As the false prophet, his gynoid incites the workers for rebellion. Rather unexpectedly, she channels their fury not against the capitalists but the machines:

> *Who is the living food for the machines in Metropolis?*
> *Who lubricates the machine joints with their own blood?*
> *Who feeds the machines with their own flesh?*
> *Let the machines starve, you fools!*
> *Let them die - ! Kill them - the machines!*

In his essay "The Vamp and the Machine" Andreas Huyssen posits that *Metropolis*' ambiguity is fueled by two modernist movements of the time, New Objectivism and Expressionism (Huyssen) with their opposing views of technology. He argues that the ingenuity of the narrative is its attempt to solve the tension generated by a fear of technology by projecting it to another—of female sexuality, which brings us to our next theme.

Gender and Sexuality. The plaque on Rotwang's shrine to Hel reads:

> *"Born for my happiness*
> *Lost to Joh Fredersen*
> *Died giving birth to Freder"*

Here, we have a woman who is identified solely with regard to her relationship with the three men in her life: The suitor, the husband and the son. Rotwang's reception invitation for the gynoid's first public appearance reads "the most perfect and obedient tool mankind ever possessed".

Let's now look at another invitation, which has references of a different nature. The following is from the ad that leads Worker #11811 Georgy to Yoshiwara club. There is an Omar Khayyam quatrain:

> *"In Paradise, they tell us, Houris dwell,*
> *And fountains run with wine and oxymel:*
> *If these be lawful in the world to come,*
> *Surely it is right to love them here as well.*

What do these tell us about gender roles of the time and the film's view of female sexuality? The only major female character and her replica can provide a clue. Played by the same actress Brigitte Helm, both women are charismatic and irresistible. The Master of Metropolis fears Maria and can't fully control

her gynoid version as he had initially predicted. She manipulates the rebels but then for no apparent reason, seduces upper class men—just because she can.

The cabaret invitation also has a quote from Oscar Wilde: “The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it”. Perhaps we can use apprehension interchangeably with temptation. For fear seems to be as palpable as sexual attraction.

The notion of male anxiety about women and technology does indeed provide coherency. Those who like to enjoy *Metropolis* as a messy narrative could take relief in the fact that the question of ambiguity would sooner or later resurface—despite her reckless indecency, the false Maria had actually represented a moment of liberation for both the workers *and* women.

Discussion questions

1) Compare and contrast the uprising scenes in Metropolis with similar scenes in Sergei Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* and *Strike.*

2) One could argue that with its spotlight on a corporate dystopia, *Metropolis* has stood the test of time better than some of the other science fiction blockbusters. Pick a genre classic such as *Space Odyssey: 2001* (1968) *or 1984* (1984) and compare its contemporary social relevance with *Metropolis*.

3) In *Metropolis* Brigitte Helm doubles as two characters, Maria and her robot impersonator. One can also argue that male characters also have doppelgängers: The Master of Metropolis has comparable traits with his rival the crazy inventor. Likewise, the young Freder trades places with worker #11811 who looks very much like him. There is also Slim the agent briefly doubling as a monk. What function and purpose do these pairings serve in the narrative?

4) The notorious Yoshiwara club and its tuxedo clad elites (presumably liberal capitalists) recall the fat cats in the art of George Grotsz. The Cabaret imagery is richly symbolic and has a surreal quality: Flappers, semi-nude black male dancers, prostitution, gambling, dancing, close-up shots of male eyes, etc. By referring to specific images discuss your interpretation of the three sequences associated with Yoshiwara.

5) In his interviews, Fritz Lang recounts that Joseph Goebbels had named Lang’s *Die Niebelungen* as one of his all time favorite films. According to this anecdote, Goebbels and Hitler also had a favorable opinion of *Metropolis*. So much that at one point an offer was extended to Lang to become an official Nazi movie mogul. Researchers have recently questioned the accuracy of Lang’s account of his explicit refusal of a title by the Nazi minister (Werner). Still, what aspects of Metropolis could have made such a positive impression on the Nazis? Imagine a different ending for the film and speculate how that might make a different political reading possible.

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