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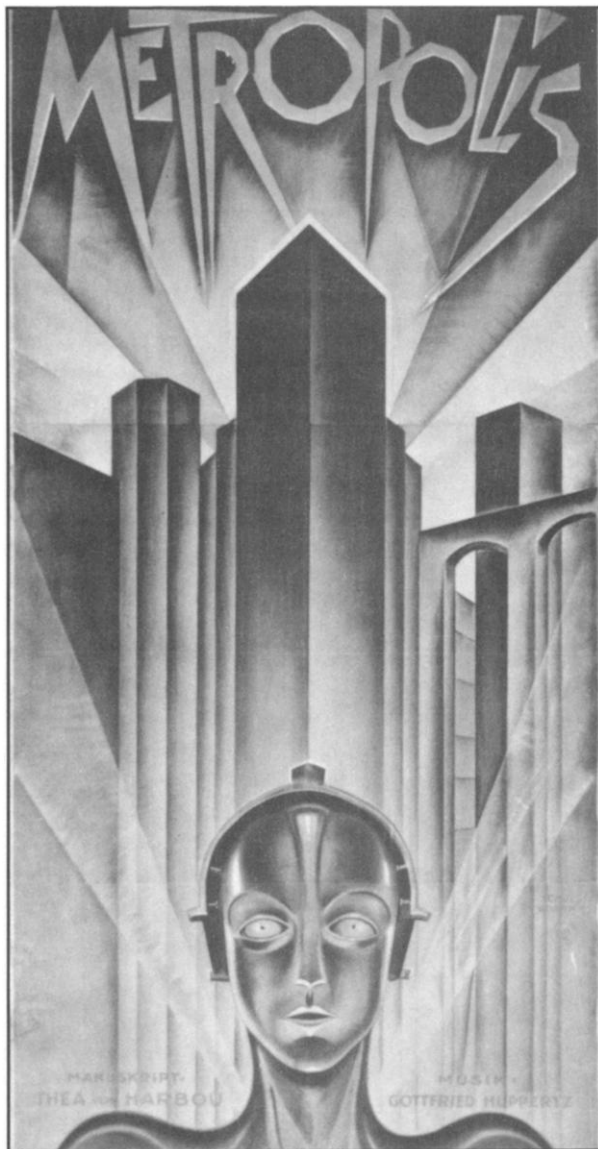
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Using Film in the Humanities Classroom: The Case of *Metropolis*

Kenneth Jurkiewicz



Metropolis (1927) was Fritz Lang's visionary expressionist masterpiece, a nightmarish allegory on the exploitation of a faceless working class by a hedonistic technocracy. Its visual design has inspired filmmakers as diverse as Leni Riefenstahl (*Triumph of the Will* 1935), Charlie Chaplin (*Modern Times* 1936), Ridley Scott (*Blade Runner* 1982), Tim Burton (*Batman* 1989), and the directors of contemporary television commercials and rock-music videos. Thematically, however, *Metropolis* is a heavy-handed hodgepodge of Teutonic mysticism, anti-bourgeois fascism, and right-wing fears of the urban proletariat as a mindless mob. (H. G. Wells called it "the most foolish film. I cannot believe it would be possible to make a more foolish one" [qtd. in Eisner 1976, 84].) Yet, as a reflection of the paranoiac hysteria and ideological schizophrenia of the closing days of Weimar Germany, *Metropolis* is without equal. As outlandish as the plot is, the film has been reincarnated as a musical play on the London stage, and just as in the film the visual and technical elements of the production were dazzling.

For these reasons, the film deserves exploration and analysis from a number of scholarly perspectives and academic disciplines. But to high-school and college students, *Metropolis* holds an even more peculiar fascination and contemporary charm, especially in its latest incarnation as a film, a carefully restored version incorporating long-lost footage and subplots, prepared by the technopop/film music composer Giorgio Moroder, with a soundtrack incorporating new songs written and produced by Moroder and performed by then-popular rock groups. (Given minimal national release in 1984, this MTV-style *Metropolis* is now available on cassette from Vestron Video.)

Although harshly criticized for its synthesized rock score, Moroder's reconstruction does have the virtue of clarifying a muddled plotline, since most versions of the film available today for the big screen or on video are taken from the heavily abridged American release print. Thus, for film buffs who believe they already know the movie, Moroder's new version provides some illuminating changes in narrative continuity and character motivation, while still preserving the integrity of Lang's extravagant satiric vision.

The story still focuses on Freder Fredersen, the son of John Fredersen, the technocratic Master of Metropolis in the year 2026, and Freder's fateful love for the working-class Maria. The world of the future is indeed divided into a literal upper class and lower class, with the affluent children of the managerial elite leading lives of pampered decadence, while far below ground toil the faceless masses of exploited workers, ceaselessly operating the machinery that powers the entire super-city. While frolicking one day in the Eternal Garden of Pleasure, the effete Freder spots a young working-class woman and immediately falls in love with her. In attempting to find her in the underground world of the machines, Freder witnesses an explosion at the city's power plant, during which he envisions the machinery dissolving into the huge stone visage of the pagan god Moloch, whose yawning mouth opens as a furnace into which are fed hundreds of slaves as human sacrifice. Much to his father's dismay, Freder wants to learn more about the lives of these underground drones, so he trades places with a young worker and assumes his ten-hour shift at the ever-demanding machines.

Exhausted after just one day of unremitting drudgery, Freder nevertheless follows a group of workers to a catacomb cathedral and a secret meeting presided over by the almost ethereally beautiful Maria, the girl Freder has been searching for. In her role as a kind of futuristic John the Baptist, Maria promises the angry and frustrated workers the hope of a redeemer, a Mediator who would unite in a common bond of love and understanding the vaunting ambitions of the elite and the humble aspirations of the proletariat. Also secretly observing Maria's sermon are Freder's father and the mad scientist Rotwang, whom Fredersen has enlisted to help stamp out any signs of worker rebellion. The elder Fredersen and Rotwang were once rivals for the affections of the same woman, Hel, who chose to marry Fredersen and died giv-

ing birth to Freder. In an attempt to reproduce Hel's beauty, Rotwang has created a robot, but Fredersen convinces Rotwang to kidnap Maria and give the robot Maria's likeness, so he could use the robot Maria to manipulate the workers. But their plans go awry when the false Maria, once unleashed, uses her coldly inhuman, carnal sensuality to inflame both the frustrated lusts of the upper-class men and the nihilistic rage of the workers. She convinces the proles to destroy the power plant, which not only brings Metropolis to a halt but floods the workers' underground city. Fortunately, Freder and the real Maria, who has momentarily escaped from Rotwang, rescue the workers' children, while the enraged mob turns against the false Maria and burns her at the stake. After a climactic fight to the death between Freder and Rotwang, witnessed by both the now-subdued mob and Freder's father, Maria convinces Freder to be the Mediator between the technocrats and their underlings, because as she puts it, "Without the heart there can be no understanding between the Hands and the Mind."

To demonstrate how useful this particular version of the film could be in the humanities classroom, the following is a brief study guide to stimulate student curiosity and facilitate further interest in Lang's bizarrely (and uniquely) Germanic dystopia.

1. Books and films about the future are often about negative trends of the present. Although *Metropolis* was released in Germany and the United States in 1927, what elements of the film's critique of modern society are still relevant today? For example, what is the film saying about the impact of industrialism and technology on individuals and social groups? How are social and economic classes depicted in this film, and do you find any correspondences to present-day social reality in the way class conflicts are portrayed in this film? What is the solution to the conflict between the social classes in this futuristic society? In your opinion, is such a solution as presented in this film a valid one?

2. How does the film reflect, comment on, exploit, or challenge the political and social attitudes, values, and trends of Germany in the mid-twenties? Why do you think that *Metropolis* was one of Hitler's favorite movies? (Duff n. pag.)

3. Compare and contrast this film to other films and books of its type (i.e., dystopian literature and movies like *Blade Runner*, *Brave New World*, *1984*, *Robocop*, and the like). How has this film specifically influenced later stories and movies of its type?

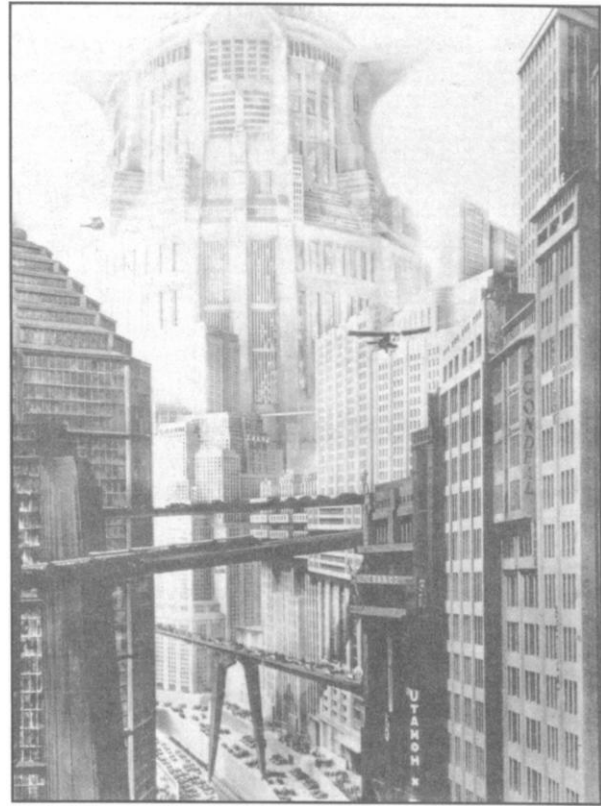
4. What sorts of religious images and symbols does the director use in *Metropolis*? What is the thematic point of all this religious imagery?

5. Expressionism was an artistic movement during the twenties in German (and European) theater, painting, architecture, sculpture, and film. The basic elements of cinematic expressionism were fantastic sets, exaggerated acting styles, extreme (and often morbid or grotesque) narrative situations, elaborate use of light and shadow, and protagonist subjectivity (i.e., perceiving the events of the film from a character's point of view). *Metropolis* has been called an expressionist masterpiece. How does the film use the elements of German expressionism? What other films that you've seen use expressionist elements or techniques, and why were they used?

6. Often, film directors depict certain recurring themes, conflicts, character types, and moods throughout their careers in various films. Judging from your viewing of *Metropolis*, what sorts of concepts and techniques do you think Lang dealt with in his other films in Germany and America? Try to find other Lang films on video and watch the ones that you think might interest you. Although he made a very large number of different kinds of films in many genres, his thematic interests and concerns, as well as his visual style, remained remarkably consistent throughout his long career. As film critic Richard Duff maintained,

Metropolis embodies all the themes that Lang worked with throughout his life—mob violence, insanity, seduction, good and evil, love and mysticism, the innocent hero, the master mind, religion, magic and science. But it is remembered not so much for its content, which is at times naively sentimental, but for the way Lang's vision and directorial genius manages to transcend such limitations. (N. pag.)

7. Note how Maria, the heroine of the film, is characterized. When the mad scientist Rotwang kidnaps her and creates her robot duplicate, note the diametrically opposed contrast in their attitudes and behavior. How exactly is the "good"



Maria characterized in this film, and what sets her apart from the "bad" Maria? What do you think the film is saying about the role of women in a technological society through these starkly contrasting characters?

8. Lang collaborated on the script for *Metropolis* with his then-wife Thea von Harbou. She subsequently wrote a novel based on the script which has been recently republished (1988). If you can find it, read the book and compare its themes, structure, characterizations, imagery, and symbolism to the film's use of these elements.

9. In 1984, composer Moroder (who wrote the music for such popular films as *Midnight Express*, *Cat People*, *Flashdance*, *Over the Top*, *Top Gun*, *Scarface*, and many others) wrote and produced a new soundtrack for *Metropolis*, using the talents of many then-prominent rock musicians and performers. Most reviewers felt that the new songs and the entire music score detracted from their enjoyment of Lang's 1927 film. In your opinion, does the synthesized rock score add or detract from your enjoyment and understanding of this film?

10. Compare and contrast the reviews of Moroder's version of *Metropolis*. (For a cross-section of the critical response to this version of the film, see Jerome Ozer [1985]. For excerpts of newspaper reviews of the film's original release in 1927, see Frederick W. Ott [1979].) What are the implicit and explicit criteria that each reviewer applies in evaluating this film? What evidence do the reviewers provide to support their judgment of the film? In each case, do you find the reviewers' critiques valid and their observations relevant?

11. Write your own review of this film. What criteria do you think are important in evaluating a film of this type, and how do you show your reader that the film measures up or doesn't measure up to your criteria? Come to think of it, what kind of film is this version of *Metropolis*? Keep in mind that it can be evaluated as a silent film, an early science-fiction film, a German expressionist film, a political film, and an MTV-style rock musical.

12. Finally, would you agree or disagree with Lang's own assessment of his film, from a 1969 interview:

[A]fter I finished the film I personally didn't much care for it, though I loved it while I was making it. When I looked at it after it was completed I said to myself, you can't change the social climate of a country with a message like "The heart must be the go-between of the head (capital) and the hands (labor)." I was convinced that you cannot solve social problems by such a message. . . .

In the later years of my life I have made a point of speaking with a lot of young people in order to try to

understand their point of view. They all hate the establishment, and when I asked them what they disliked so intensely about our computerized society they said, "It has no heart." So now I wonder if Mrs. von Harbou, my scriptwriter on the film, was not right all the time when she wrote that line of dialogue for *Metropolis* a half century ago. Personally I still think that the idea is too idealistic. How can a man who has everything really understand a man who has very little? (20)

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