

Versions and Adaptations

- ▶ Science fiction writer H. G. Wells stated that *Metropolis* was “the silliest film” and “there [was not] a single new idea... in the whole pretentious stew.” He felt that the plot contained elements from his own story “The Sleeper Awakes.” Wells also criticized the unimaginative use of outdated fashion and current vehicles in *Metropolis*. Most importantly, Wells believed that advancing technology would eliminate manual drudgery rather than create it. Seemingly in response,



Wells wrote the screenplay for the 1936 film *Things to Come* (left), which, like *Metropolis*, takes place exactly 100 years in the future. In this film, however, it is the underground technological society that pulls humanity out of the dark ages it falls into following a great war. For the design of *Things to Come*, Wells approached architect Le Corbusier, whose work was considered so antithetical to Art Deco that when it was exhibited at L'Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes, it was hidden behind a giant wall. The architect rejected the offer.

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- ▶ Music producer Giorgio Morodor created a new restoration and edit of *Metropolis* in 1984, using a pop-rock soundtrack. The “Morodor version” is still debated as either a brilliant re-visualization or a terrible insult to the purity of film.

- ▶ Japanese manga artist/writer Osamu Tezuka used the film as the inspiration for his 1949 novel of the same name. This in turn spawned an anime film adaptation in 2001 (right).

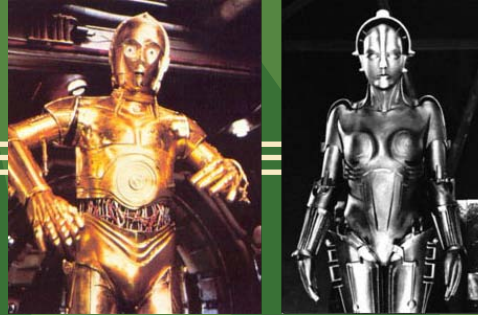


- ▶ The most complete version of *Metropolis* to date is the restoration by Kino International in 2002. It includes the original music score and title cards describing the action in the missing sequences. Lost clips were gleaned from museums and archives around the world.

- ▶ In 2008, a complete copy of the film – long thought to be nonexistent – was discovered in the archives of the Museo del Cine in Buenos Aires. The print was in poor condition but has been restored and will be available in 2010.

Some of the Most Famous Cultural Influences

- ▶ George Lucas asked Ralph McQuarrie to base the design for the Droid C-3PO on Rotwang’s robot (below).



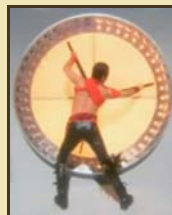
- ▶ The Tyrell Building in *Blade Runner* is based on the New Tower of Babel in *Metropolis*.

- ▶ Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster borrowed Fritz Lang’s city name for the setting of *Superman*.

- ▶ Much of the design for Tim Burton’s *Batman* was influenced by *Metropolis*, and the climactic cathedral scene parallels almost exactly the cathedral scene from the older film.

In Music

- ▶ Queen’s video for the song “Radio Ga Ga” (below left) uses extensive footage from the film.



- ▶ Madonna’s video for “Express Yourself” (above right) was inspired by *Metropolis*.



Metropolis: An Introduction

There are over 60 versions of Fritz Lang's 1927 film *Metropolis*. You have probably heard of it, quite possibly have seen images from it in clips and music videos, and maybe even have seen one of the film versions. However, unless you were an adult in Germany in the first months of 1927, you have never seen the original, uncut movie.

The original film was 153 minutes long, but most movie theatres refused to play a 2 1/2 hour film. *Metropolis* was the most expensive movie of its time, and since world-wide distribution was essential to its economic success, the film immediately began its long history of cuts, edits and re-edits created to suit different audiences.

The film you are about to see is a 90-minute American version published in 1989 by Kino International. It retains much of the 1927 work of playwright Channing Pollock, who was the first to edit the film for American consumption. His edits changed parts of the plot that were considered too controversial for American audiences (for example, most of the scenes from the nightclub were cut because the film was released during Prohibition). Pollock simplified the story, left out major plotlines (for one, the backstory of Freder and Rotwang the mad scientist is completely eliminated), added an original American Jazz score, and changed the inter-titles at will. But no matter how the film was edited, the plot has always been considered the weakest part of the film.

However, *Metropolis* is famous for its imagery, not its plot. The film presents a future dystopia, both beautiful and frightening. The city – for the upper classes – is a gorgeous pleasure dome, where everything runs like clockwork and leisure is the occupation of most of the occupants. Beneath the ground, the lower classes toil away in endless drudgery, working the huge machines that make the city run. Fritz Lang's triumph is in the stunning visual imagery he created – imagery so iconic that it has been embedded in modern culture and has re-appeared in works from *Star Wars* and *Blade Runner* to music videos by Madonna and Queen.



Notes on the Film

It helps to know a few things before viewing the film:

- ▶ When Freder first encounters the underground machines and witnesses an explosion, he cries, "Moloch!" Moloch is an ancient concept, sometimes associated with an evil god. But in 1921, an excavation in Carthage (Tunisia) uncovered a fiery pit and the remains of thousands of burned infants and children. Otto Eissfeldt, the archeologist, decided that the phrase "moloch," which appeared on the walls of Carthage referred not to the god, but to the practice of sacrificing children. Freder's outburst is a direct reference to the discoveries at Carthage, which were a recent news event.



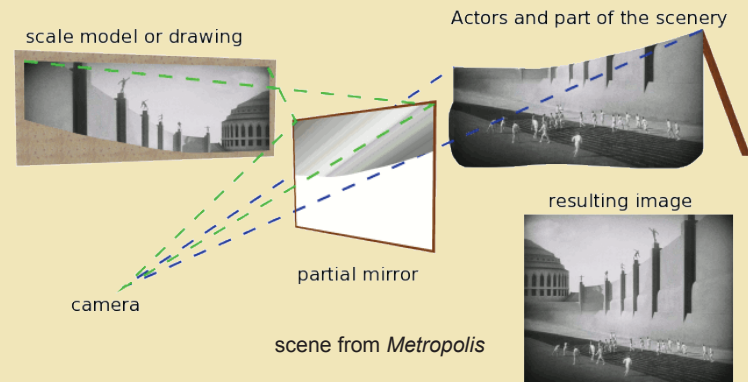
- ▶ Fritz Lang's movie is based on the novel *Metropolis* written by his wife, Thea von Harbou. As you watch the film you may find yourself thinking of Nazi Germany, and indeed, Lang said that during a meeting with Goebbels that took place shortly after Hitler's rise to power, Goebbels said that Hitler had seen the movie many years before, and wanted Lang to make films for the Nazis. Hitler was attracted to the film's promotion of class collaboration (the essential hierarchy of classes) which is a foundation of fascism. The notion of working for the Nazis terrified Lang, who soon left Germany. His wife Thea, on the other hand, became a passionate member of the Nazi party in 1933. The two divorced in 1934.



- ▶ *Metropolis* makes extensive use of the new Art Deco style of architecture (simply called Moderne in the 1920s). The style had only recently come into popularity due to the Paris exhibition in 1925, L'Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes, and was still associated mainly with the upper classes in Germany at the time the film was produced. Thus, this style of architecture is seen in the upper, wealthy levels of the city, and the New Tower of Babel has been adapted to embrace the geometric style. The year after the film was released, construction began on the Chrysler Building, not only one of America's most recognized examples of Art Deco architecture, but also one that has been said to look like something straight out of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*.



- ▶ *Metropolis* utilized a number of new film techniques that enhanced the visual impact of the film. Among the most famous is Lang's use of the Schüfftan process, also known as Spiegeltrickverfahren (mirror trick process). This elaborate use of mirrors allowed the possibility of combining models with live action. The Moloch machine and the scenes in the cathedral both utilized this technique. Cameraman Günther Rittau also used the painstaking technique of stop motion, most famously in the long shot of the main street full of pedestrians, cars and airplanes. Finally, Rittau's team took the more traditional technique of superimposition and employed it ingeniously to create light rings by which the robot is turned into the "false Maria."



The Schüfftan Process

Image courtesy of Stephan Walter