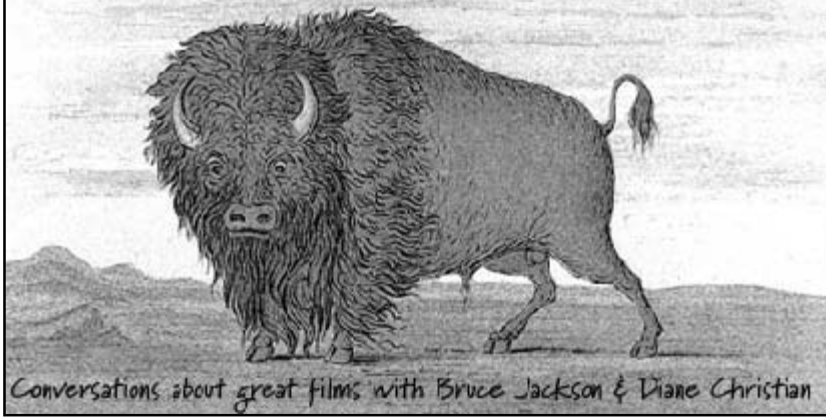


The Buffalo Film Seminars



FRITZ LANG (5 December 1890, Vienna, Austria—2 August 1976, Beverly Hills, Los Angeles) directed 47 films, from *Halbblut* (*Half-caste*) in 1919 to *Die Tausend Augen des Dr. Mabuse* (*The Thousand Eye of Dr. Mabuse*) in 1960. Some of the others were *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* (1956), *The Big Heat* (1953), *Clash by Night* (1952), *Rancho Notorious* (1952), *Cloak and Dagger* (1946), *Scarlet Street* (1945). *The Woman in the Window* (1944), *Ministry of Fear* (1944), *Western Union* (1941), *The Return of Frank James* (1940), *Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse* (*The Crimes of Dr. Mabuse*, *Dr. Mabuse's Testament*, *The Last Will of Dr. Mabuse*, 1933), *M* (1931), *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler* (*Dr. Mabuse, King of Crime*, *Dr. Mabuse: The Gambler*, *Inferno* 1922) and *Harakiri* (*Madame Butterfly* (1919). He appears in a number of interesting interview films, among them Jean-Luc Godard's *Cinéma de notre temps: Le dinosaure et le bébé, dialogue en huit parties entre Fritz Lang et Jean-Luc Godard* (1967). And he plays a movie director making a film in Godard's classic, *Le Mépris* (*Contempt*, 1963). The BFI site has the 1962 National Film Theatre interview with Lang on line at <http://www.bfi.org.uk/features/lang/interview.html>. Michael Grosz's excellent critical bio of him is on line at <http://members.aol.com/MG4273/lang.htm>. There's a good deal of Lang material on line at the British Film Institute web site: <http://www.bfi.org.uk/features/lang/>.



from *World Film Directors Vol.1*. Ed. John Wakeman. The H.W. Wilson Co., New York, 1987 entry by Philip Kemp

Lang always deprecated references to his films as “expressionist,” maintaining that he never restricted himself by conforming to a single artistic fashion. Nonetheless, expressionism—the visual distortion and stylization of reality to express psychological states and heighten emotional response—undeniably influences many of Lang’s films, if never to the extremes of Wiene’s *Caligari*, with its contorted, aggressively two-dimensional sets.

“Every serious picture that depicts people today,” Lang once remarked, “should be a kind of documentary of its time.”

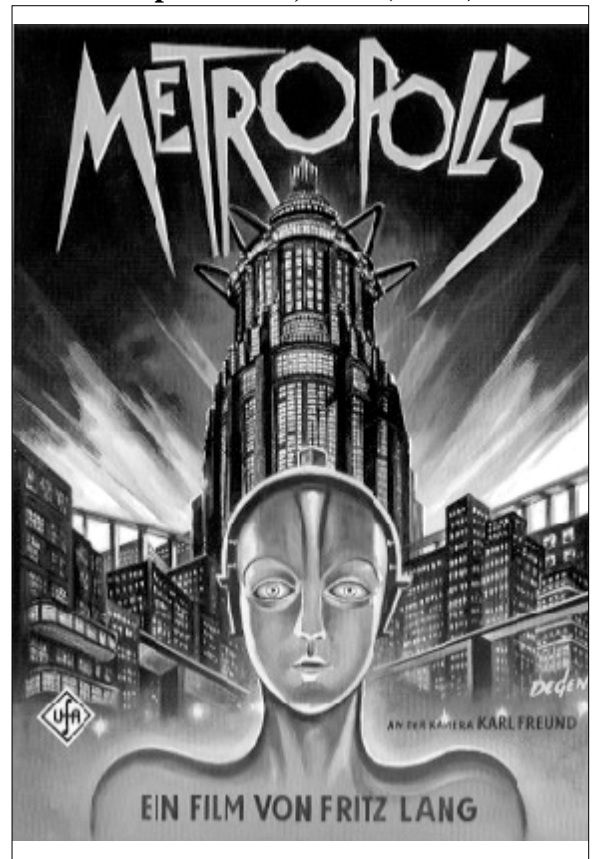
From the mid-1920s until 1933, Lang was recognized as the greatest director in Germany, and perhaps in Europe. By the time he arrived in the States, he was no more than one of the many distinguished European refugees; by 1950, he had become just another directorial hack and politically dubious at that.

... Lang regained his status as one of cinema’s greatest artists. Pauline Kael rated him with Eisenstein, Gance, Griffith, and Welles as one “whose prodigious failures make other people’s successes look puny.”

from *Metropolis* Thomas Elsaesser. BFI Film Classics, 2000.

Critics quickly picked up on architectural debates and housing issues, labour laws and film politics. Despite its lack of realism, the film is something of a psychogram or fever-chart of the late 20s which across its tale of technology run riot and industrial regimentation, is obsessed with rising temperatures, pressures coming to a head, bubbling liquids on the boil, imminent explosions and inundating floods: in short, it records

all manner of forces welling up from the deep. It also opposes to America’s perceived optimism of



METROPOLIS (1927) 118 minutes

Directed by Fritz Lang

Writing credits Fritz Lang, Thea von Harbou (also novel)

Cinematography by Karl Freund, Günther Rittau

Art Direction by Otto Hunte, Erich Kettelhut, Karl Vollbrecht

Sculptor Walter Schulze-Mittendorf.

Special effects Ernst Kunstmann

Trick photography Erich Kettelhut

Special photographic sequences

Konstantin Tschetwerikoff

Universum Film A.G. (UFA)

Alfred Abel....Johhan (Joh) Fredersen

Gustav Fröhlich....Freder Fredersen

Brigitte Helm....Maria/The Robot

(AKA Futura)

Rudolf Klein-Rogge....C.A. Rotwang

Fritz Rasp....Slim

Theodor Loos....Josaphat

Heinrich George....Grot

unlimited progress and Fordist pragmatism the self-consciously European clamor for spiritual values, embodied in Weimar Germany's defensively hesitant, sentimentally pessimist, but also stoical or even cynical takes on modernity.

Theodor Heuss (later to become the first President of the Federal Republic in 1948) noted that in its *mélange* of Christian symbols, archaic motifs and sub-literary stereotypes *Metropolis* illustrated 'the cramped spiritual atmosphere of our age, when the banal is blown up to heroic dimensions, the heroic is transformed into mysticism, and the mysticism is passed off as tragedy'. Yet although it may take the moral(ising) high-ground, Lang/vonHarbou's film is none the less rife with anxiety, which at the depth-psychological or fantasy level makes *Metropolis* all too coherent, a fact not always recognised at the time, but one of the key points brought out by structuralist and feminist critics in the 80s, when *Metropolis* once more returned to prominence.

The director set out to create a populist idiom for his vision of modernity, rather than following the avant-garde and deploying the film-language of Eisenstein, Pudovkin, or Ruttman, certainly well-known to Lang.

The impact of *Metropolis* in 1927 was enormous: hardly an article in the papers that year did not make reference to it, including a fair number of cartoons and parodies.

from Fritz Lang. His Life and Work. Photographs and Documents. Edited by Roif Aurich, Wolfgang Jacobsen & Cornelius Schnauber. Jovis. 2001. Berlin

Lang himself often expressed the idea that two aspects [artistic & personal] converging in one person still had to be viewed separately. His discretion and the legends he invented about himself make it all the more essential to proceed from his biography, to step back a bit from the personage of the film director so as to obtain a 'complete' view of Fritz Lang. From there we can focus on the various periods of contemporary history: the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, the Weimar Republic, the early Hitler era, emigration, remigration.

His on-screen commitment in the fight against Nazi Germany was a known fact. Unknown until now was how intensively Lang interceded personally for his colleagues in exile—for example for Kurt Pinthus, Hans Sahl, Egon Erwin Kisch, and Berthold Brecht—or how Lang cultivated contacts with both [Born Vienna on December 5, 1890 Baptized 'Friedrich Christian Anton Lang' December 28th, 1890. His godfather was Christian Cabos, purveyor to the Austro-Hungarian imperial court. Parents agreed at ceremony to raise the child as a Catholic. In 1900 his mother Pauline Schlesinger Lang converted from Judaism to Catholicism at the rectory of a town near Salzburg.

Stayed in Paris 1913-14, took painting courses, left in July 1914 as anti-German sentiment rose after the murder of Jean Jaurès—a socialist who had worked toward French-German rapprochement. Lang joined the army on January 12, 1915, voluntarily enlisted. Russian front, reconnaissance, bravery citations. Wounded in trench warfare, shrapnel splinter probably in eye, declared unfit for troop duties 5/18.]

On May 15, 1924 the 'Conference for Cinema Reform' was opened at the 'Urania,' Vienna's adult education center. The conference saw film as 'a great cultural feat and a first-rate medium of popular entertainment.'

The former head of the Film Department of the Foreign Ministry in Berlin, Robert Volz, spoke out in favor of film censorship. Lubitsch's *Die Flamme* was shown as was

What was new about the making of *Metropolis*—and another lesson possibly picked up from the Pommer/Lang US trip—was the extensive pre-screening publicity, the work-in-progress reports, the constant leaking to the press of stories, the arranged interviews and on-site visits. . . . Billy Wilder claims to have watched Lang at work, as did Curt Siodmak. Hitchcock is known to have visited the set, though hardly as the major director he was to become. Eisenstein let himself be photographed with Lang and the *Metropolis* crew, as did other national and international celebrities. In Berlin in 1925, it was a sign of belonging to the smartest in-crowd to have seen Lang and von Harbou at work.

One definition of a classic is that it is a work which receives, or rather, provokes ever-new interpretation. By this definition, *Metropolis* amply qualifies: whether because of the over-explicit moral, the inconsistencies of the plot, or the lacunary form by which the film has survived, each generation has proposed a reading, and in each case it has been as much a barometer of a period's own preferences and ideological preoccupations as a statement about the film.

Perhaps one reason why Lang's film weathered so well the contradictory treatment it received across the decades is that it has the robustness of a fairy-tale.

left-wing and conservative German exiles. His chief concern was to strengthen resistance against Nazi Germany. No matter how we evaluate his nostalgic and conservative political attitude in Germany during the 1920s and early 1930s, exile appears to have altered Fritz Lang. And this change suggests itself not only in his anti-Nazi activities. Many years later he did not fail to express his indignation at the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy; and he also felt compelled to make sarcastic comments about the conservative Governor of California, Ronald Reagan.

He wrote that he was finished with Germany: "I'm unable to rid my mind or heart of the Hitler era."

Lang's *Die Nibelungen*. Lang attacked what preceding speakers had said "bringing forth very bold and biting views. . . and indulging in tales of his own personal difficulties with the film industry and censorship.

Lang spoke very clearly and loudly against the very existence of film censorship, saying he did not believe a people,

to whom the state had documented its belief in its political maturity by giving it the right to vote needs a guardian just because some claim it is not mature enough to know what might be good or bad for it. The situation is unacceptable, for example, when a censorship board objects to a poster for the *Nibelungen* film because Siegfried is shown skewered by a spear, while a poster for *Blaubart*, the circus pantomime, can be seen on an advertising pillar, and shows skulls, naked women and blood merging in a lovely still life. I have nothing against the state introducing restrictions for youths, it's fine

with me, but it should not dictate for adults the kind of relaxation, regeneration and fortification their nerves need.

And now, ladies and gentlemen, I have arrived at the point of departure for the artistic development of a film drama. People who have experienced something as ghastly as a world war, people who are busy working and dealing with life have different views from those snobbish commentators who just go along with events, who sit in their club armchairs—not that I have anything against club armchairs—and try to force their artistic outlook on their fellow beings, while their own highest moments probably amount to the helpless stammerings of a bundle of nerves numbed by cocaine. The working person, is, thank God, too healthy not to feel a longing in his blood, the recurrent longing for the primeval ideal of humankind, for the vigorous man, the virginal girl and the virtuous woman. Proceeding from these components, this is where regenerating our people's strength starts and along with it film dramas. . . .And please, do not condemn the sensationalist films of earlier years, for they made the rational development of the film drama possible; we saw the errors of this genre and based on them learned new forms of this novel art. . . .

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And against this background, Lang finished his talk in a fashion which could hardly have astonished his audience. He cried out two words to them, two words "that during the two years it took to produce the *Nibelungen* my colleagues and I **J. Hoberman, in The Village Voice:**

...Metropolis was profligate in every sense—Lang's attempt to top his previous Wagnerian epics and a German bid to challenge American primacy. A year and a half in the making, it wound up costing 10 times as much as the average Hollywood production and like its descendant *Titanic* was a continual source of journalistic copy....Unlike *Titanic*, however, *Metropolis* effectively bankrupted its studio—if not an entire national industry. The German consortium UFA had to be reorganized and recapitalized, bailed out by Paramount and MGM.

Lang's cut ran over two and a half hours. After its premiere, the movie was trimmed by 40 minutes, then shortened again and re-edited for American release. For 75 years, it has existed as a magnificent ruin. (Commercial cuts acted on *Metropolis* "as winds, rain, barbarians, etc., do upon classical edifice," Stan Brakhage once observed.) In a suitably epic archival undertaking, all the surviving material was culled to create this restoration, which represents about 80 percent of Lang's version and returns his narrative structure (reintegrating lost subplots and extending familiar sequences) while it revives the original score.

Even in 1927, *Metropolis* was recognized as the most ambitious spectacle in the decade since D.W. Griffith went broke with *Intolerance*—as well as the craziest. (Stroheim's *Greed* is a close second.) *Metropolis* evokes the most extreme view of a class society. The rulers of this world-dominating city cavort in gardened palaces higher than the Sears Tower while the proles are confined to quarters somewhere below the subway. Freder, the pampered son of the Metropolis autocrat, has a revelation and joins forces with the saintly Maria (17-year-old Brigitte Helm) to liberate the workers; their efforts at reform are confounded when Freder's father enlists the resident mad scientist, Rotwang, to replace Maria with a robot double (Helm again, flinging herself around in a dance of demonic arabesques) who leads the workers to destruction.

Metropolis's colossal scale was realized with a process using mirrors to place thousands of extras in the same frame as vast miniature sets. *Deco* is too tame a word to describe the design. Arnheim complained of Lang's mad medieval-

Americanist-Old Testament amalgam, but the film is even more eclectic in its aesthetic progeny. After *Frankenstein* and *Flash Gordon*, Leni Riefenstahl and Stanley Kubrick, *Star Wars* and *Apocalypse Now*, and the complete works of comic-book artist Jack Kirby, Lang's mother city seems the mother lode of 20th-century iconography. (Indeed, thanks in part to the 1984 rock-scored reissue engineered by Giorgio Moroder,

Roger Ebert, Chicago Sun-Times: *Metropolis* "does what many great films do, creating a time, place and characters so striking that they become part of our arsenal of images for imagining the world.

had constantly envisioned, two words which I rediscovered at the premiere of the *Nibelungen* about ten days ago in London, that were in German on the coat of arms of the Prince of Wales: 'Ich dien' ('I serve')."

Metropolis remained a living part of pop culture long after silent cinema was consigned to oblivion—inspiring Whitney Houston's bondage costume in *The Bodyguard* and Madonna's video "Express Yourself," as well as *Blade Runner* and *Batman*.)

On one hand, *Metropolis* celebrates its own mechanism. The movie revels in cinematic might, as manifest in its spectacular set pieces—the opening gear-and-piston montage, Freder's hallucination of the machine as Moloch, and the flooding of the underground city (not to mention the studio). On the other hand, this is a movie in which every detail is subordinate to the overall effect—most notoriously in the ways Lang deploys the decoratively arranged suffering masses. (The restored print carries this sense of absolute ornamentation over into the titles, which drip sweat or "descend" along with the workers.)

This design is not without ideological implications. While Lang's Mussolini moderne predicts the totalizing aesthetic of Nazi Germany, the movie itself seems haunted by the Russian Revolution as expressed by Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, which opened in Berlin as *Metropolis* went into production. The workers are a naturally destructive force; the false Maria could be construed as Bolshevism personified. Not surprisingly, the Weimar left attacked *Metropolis* even as the right endorsed the idea that technocratic billionaires and brainless workers might be reconciled by an idealistic spiritual leader. Hitler and Goebbels were among the movie's fans, and although Lang left Germany when Hitler came to power, his wife and collaborator, Thea von Harbou, co-author of the *Metropolis* screenplay, enthusiastically joined the Nazi Party.

There's no denying that much of *Metropolis* is absurd—and always was. The young Luis Buñuel was particularly straightforward, writing in a Spanish newspaper that the narrative was "trivial, bombastic, pedantic," and redolent of "antiquated romanticism," but if the story was ignored in favor of the movie's "plastic photogenic basis," *Metropolis* had the power to "overwhelm us as the most marvelous picture book imaginable." A similar law governs Lang's politics. Metaphor rules: Image trumps text.

No movie has ever more vividly visualized the industrialization of social relations. The metaphor of a dehumanized urban proletariat buried alive beneath the city it built is worthy of Marx. Calling for his father while crucified on the clock that balefully regulates the Metropolis time-space, Freder is the ultimate worker—a sacrificial wage-slave as 20th-century poster boy.

Join us next week, Tuesday September 9 for Paul Muni's great performance in

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