



## Metropolis: Further study

### Cinematic Style

German Expressionism is often defined by a distinctive, heavily stylised, artificial aesthetic, resulting in surrealist, subjective imagery that convey characteristic themes such as confusion and madness. *Metropolis* was shot on an entirely constructed set, specifically designed with abstract and disproportionate dimensions. This allowed Lang to manipulate a highly subjective and psychological space altogether resulting in a nightmarish vision of distortion and chaos. The style and methodology of German Expressionist film has consistently influenced many forms of cinema to this day.

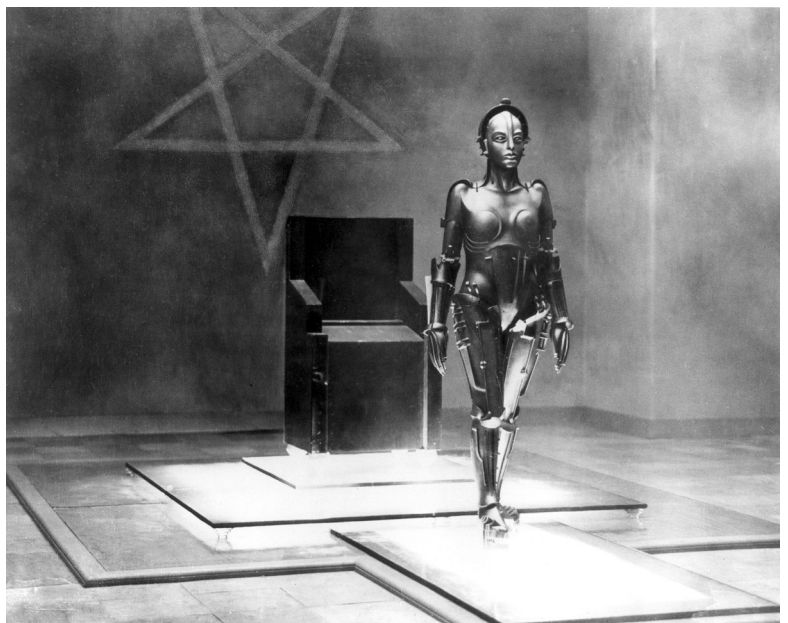
### Suggested activities

Lang's vision in *Metropolis* influenced many later filmmakers, and the visual codes of German Expressionism are visible in a range of cinema from Film Noir, to American genre cinema, to recent auteurist traditions and experimental, avant garde filmmaking.

1. The official press pack for the cinema re-release refers to *Metropolis* as: 'The mother of all sci-fi films and a major influence on *Ridley Scott (Blade Runner)*, *George Lucas (Star Wars)*, and *pop culture in general (referenced by Madonna, Beyoncé, and countless others)*.'

<http://www.metropolis1927.com>

- Consider the references to *Blade Runner*, *Star Wars* and pop culture, exploring these with an image search if you are not familiar with the visual links between these and *Metropolis*. Why do you think the phrase 'mother of all sci-fi films' is used in this context?
- Consider the use of the 'Robot Maria' image in contemporary popular culture. For example,





both Beyoncé and Lady Gaga have recently worn gold metallic corsets during their performances. How might the associations of this image be perceived as representative of female empowerment? Explain your answer. Consider also the similarities between the Robot Maria figure and the Cybermen characters in the Doctor Who television series. What visual or other similarities or differences can you find?

2. Lang's film style had a significant impact on Film Noir, with similarities including the use of high contrast lighting, the tilted camera to show the world out of joint, and a tone of anguish and abstraction. Film Noir appeared as a popular cinematic movement of the late 1930s, predominantly in Hollywood cinema. These films tended to deal with similar cynicism and anxieties to the ones felt in Germany, during and following wartime, when national identity was shifting and a nation was dealing with changes to its social infrastructure.
  - Using specific examples from *Metropolis* and other films you have studied, compare and contrast the use of cinematic style in German Expressionism, with a Film Noir of your choice. Use the similarities in style as a starting point to comparing the social, historical and political contexts in which both films are positioned.
3. The cinematographer Gordon Willis, crowned 'The Prince of Darkness' for his use of lighting and shadow in *The Godfather*, is evidently influenced by the style of German Expressionist film. Willis was also cinematographer on Woody Allen's 1979 'Manhattan'.

When asked how the idea for *Metropolis* came about, Lang replied: 'I first came to America briefly in 1924 and it made a great impression on me. The first evening, when we arrived, we were still enemy aliens, so we couldn't leave the ship. It was docked somewhere on the West Side of New York. I looked into the streets – the glaring lights and the tall buildings – and there I conceived *Metropolis*.'<sup>1</sup>

- In what ways is the sequence (featured on the 'Style' page of the *Metropolis* web resource) similar to the dramatic opening of Allen's film in portraying the cityscape? What meanings can be applied to the way in which both films use images of the city?

**Extended research task:**

Exploring the use of editing and symbolism, compare and contrast a scene from *Metropolis* with a scene from another German or Soviet film from the 1920s.

Consider the subject matter, cinematic style and socio political context of each.

You may wish to use Film Education's study guide on Battleship Potemkin

[www.filmeducation.org/pdf/film/potemkin.pdf](http://www.filmeducation.org/pdf/film/potemkin.pdf) to provide further background and to extend your thinking in this area.

<sup>1</sup> Fritz Lang, in a 1965 Peter Bogdanovich interview, 'The Director's Copyright', collected in *Who the Devil Made It: Conversations with Legendary Directors* (1997)

**Bibliography and Further Reading**

Bogdanovich, Peter, 'Who the Devil Made it?: Conversations with Legendary Film Directors', (Arrow Books, 1998)

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