

The Influence of Fritz Lang's 'Metropolis' on Future Films

adapted from sjfilmhistory

First film of futurist film movement in 1920's

Futurism began in the mid-1910s in Italy, to promote modernism. The Italian futurists celebrated advancing technology, and the transformation of the city through architectural futurism. They believed in a new machine age of speed, novelty, dynamism, modernity, and scale. It was their ideals that began much of the ¹**avant gard** thinking of future cities in the 1920s.

Here is a fun fact. Before futurism came to cinema, the cinema had an intellectual bias against the city. Inner city life was presented negatively by the use of gangster and crime movies, it had a bad reputation. Therefore, the futurist film movement had to construct sets to give future fiction that gave hope for, or conveyed nightmares about, the urban future.

Metropolis was the first film created to fit the **futurist film movement** of the 1920s. This *silent German expressionist science fiction film* is considered a masterpiece by Fritz Lang and has influenced many western directors in the way future cities are portrayed visually.

Where did Lang get his ideas from?

Fritz Lang got his inspiration for the model of the future city from several places, including literature and experience.

- Film critic Paul Brenner states, "Lang's Metropolis is based on his initial impressions of New York City upon sailing into New York Harbor".[2]
- Other critics say that Oswald Spengler's book *The Decline of the West* used powerful romanticism which stimulated Lang and developed his fascination for the city.

Lang's film is an exaggerated version of New York full of skyscrapers stripped from all reality.[1] Though Metropolis may be unrealistic, some skyscraper scenes in the upper city of Metropolis look similar to skyscrapers seen today in New York or Dubai.

Influence of Metropolis on future films

While some critics may say that Lang's Metropolis only had a visual impact over other science fiction movies, the story line of *High Treason* was altered under the influence of Metropolis. The futuristic setting and the opposition of war by the female lead in the plot was not included in *High Treason's* original play, but were added to the plot of the film version. The graphic influence is also evident - the future city includes elaborate skyscrapers with airplanes and helicopters flying in between the buildings, groups of workers, tunnels, and a female figure (known as Evelyn Seymour) provoking the workers to revolt.[3] These are all part of Metropolis; the beautiful, fake and seductive Maria trying to wage a war against the machine in a time period far ahead of Lang's.

At first, Metropolis was not received well by film critics, who said it was "a technical marvel with feet of clay".[4] Close to a century later, the term "technical marvel" can be seen through the innovations of other science fiction films that were inspired by the elaborate cities from this artistic work of *Metropolis*

¹ new

Influence of Metropolis on *Just Imagine*

Just Imagine was a 1930 film by David Butler for Fox Films. The plot involved space travel and had a scene of New York in 1980 which was heavily influenced by *Metropolis*. The set's use of light gave it an unearthly feel similar to Lang's. The movie had very tall skyscrapers, airplanes, high above the ground bridges, and urban motorways.[1] Though visually the future city in both films share an incredible resemblance, the plot is not similar. The American Film Institute however, stated that *Metropolis* set the design vocabulary for the science fiction/fantasy genre. Many film critics see the inspiration from Lang in futuristic films, but some believe the inspiration for futurist films has come from from the later classic *Just Imagine*.



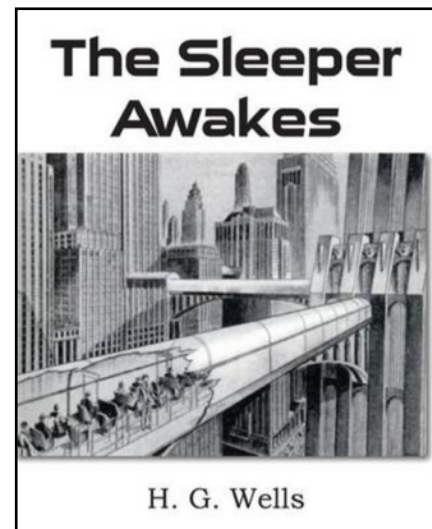
Influence on H.G. Wells' *Things to Come*

Author H.G. Wells was not a big fan of *Metropolis* when it came out. Less than a decade after the release of *Metropolis*, Wells wrote the screenplay for the film, *Things to Come*, based on his novel, *The Shape of Things to Come*. Though many critics compared the two productions, Wells thought *Metropolis* was a "foolish film". He did not like the robots, skyscrapers, lack of individuality, and the servitude of the people. Wells said he wanted his movie to be the opposite of *Metropolis*, but there were many parallels between the films:

- *Metropolis* began with machinery working, *Things to Come* began with a city being built.
- Both films used the montage effect
- Both films had a rioting mob, mad scientists who are stuck in a time lapse and refuse to advance
- both films depicted a war against machines (guns in the case of Wells' production)
- both films had characters who take after each other (Oswald Cabal bears a striking resemblance to the mayor of the future city in *Metropolis*, Joh Frederson).
- The architecture city of Everytown is what Alexander Korda, the producer, referred to as an "elaborated *Metropolis*"

It is possible that Lang developed some of his ideas for *Metropolis* from Wells' novels, specifically *The Sleeper Awakes*, in which comes the idea of a future society dominated by a proto-fascist superman, Ostrog, who rules the workers in a slave state and arranges for the rich to disport themselves in pleasure cities, and the revolt of the workers after the Sleeper, alerted to what is happening by a young woman, goes among them in disguise." [3]

All these components are present in the plot of *Metropolis*, which supports that *Metropolis* was so influential it stimulated a writer that had originally impacted the movie plot itself. The correlation between the two great films demonstrated *how similar the German and British science fiction films were during the war era*. Wells wanted to create his own masterpiece apart from Lang, but he failed to stand apart visually and from the literary scheme of *Metropolis*.



Influence on *Blade Runner* (1982)

Years later, the movie *Blade Runner* (1982) was created. One of Lang's characteristic shots is the airplanes flying through the canyons created by the skyscrapers, *Blade Runner* uses the same shot to demonstrate the police hovercrafts piloting through cityscapes. The magnificent beginning of the 1982 movie leaves one awe-struck as they realize that what they are watching is yet another translation of the *Metropolis* dystopia.



The Tyrell Corporation Building in *Blade Runner*, set in Los Angeles to watch over the 2019 future city, was surely inspired by the Tower of Babel in *Metropolis*, which also served the purpose of guarding the city[4].

Lang's masterpiece visually motivated *Blade Runner* and also used social classes in the storyline. The clash of the classes is parallel as the mediator for the problems turns out to be from the upper-class, yet his inspiration stems from a (lower class) love interest. The doppelganger and robot exists in both films. The doppelganger represents the dark side of a character and the fear of emotions (essential to *German expressionist cinema*).[7] The doppelganger is seductive and evil, while the real character is a pure, virgin-like figure. This demonstrates an evil twin effect (it can either be true such as in *Metropolis*, or not, such as in *Blade Runner*.)

The Schufftan Effect

Metropolis sets the example for what viewers visualized when a movie was set in a future city. The visuals were an inspiration and captivated many directors, especially Alfred Hitchcock; he used a specific type of effect created for *Metropolis* in his 1929 production *Blackmail*. The effect is called the Schufftan process and was created by Eugen Schufftan.

Here is how the Schufftan effect worked: The entire future city was built as a miniature model so that the camera could pan through it. Afterwards, mirrors were placed at a 45 degree angle in front of the camera lens to place images of the characters into the miniature city. This tricked the eye into seeing the actors in between large buildings or in magnificent gardens and the stadium.[8] This effect saved time and money; they did not need to build more expensive sets. Partly due to poor lighting inside the British Museum, Alfred Hitchcock used the Schufftan process in many scenes of his movie *Blackmail*. [9] This effect is still so successful and effective that it was even used by Peter Jackson in 3 *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Hobbit* (2012).

Influence on Music/Pop culture

Metropolis has had a large influence in the music world and pop culture of today. Singers such as Beyoncé, Lady Gaga, and Kylie Minogue have all worn robot costumes that resemble the



Maschinenmensch robot, while Freddie Mercury put in his face instead of Maria's during the transformation from robot to human for Radio Gaga. Madonna copied the scene of the evil Maria at Yoshiwara portraying Babylon in her music video Material Girl. In her music video, *Express Yourself*, Madonna borrowed much of the imagery from *Metropolis*, and even reworded the main theme of the story "*the mediator between head and hands must be the heart*" to "*without the heart there can be no understanding between the hand and the mind.*"[10]

The fashion world has also been heavily impacted by the Maschinenmensch robot, giving inspiration to collections by designers and brands such as Tom Ford, Max Mara, and Givenchy.

In Summary...

The innovations created by Fritz Lang for *Metropolis* span from architectural to technical.

Metropolis:

- began the futurist film movement of the 1920s
- inspired films such as *Things to Come* in 1930's
- Lang's vision of a future city began a trend in the science fiction genre
- used the Schufftan effect, a special effect copied in future successful productions
- most influential with its architecture and form
- the film's plot helped shape the plots of other films such as *High Treason*
- The idea of the robot may have shaped movies like *Blade Runner*
- inspired a fashion trend for singers and in pop culture.
- the robot inspired the look for characters such as C-3PO in *Star Wars*.

Although *Metropolis* was not well-received when released, it has inspired the entire definition of science fiction movies, and moreover, it has become iconic in more than just its architectural marvel. The influence of Lang's masterpiece can be seen today, and one does not have to look far to see the heavily borrowed ideas and appearances of the spectacular future city of *Metropolis*.



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