

Discuss the link
between the past and
the future, in 1984
and metropolis.



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Both texts highlight and effectually foreground, the need for humanity to learn from its mistakes for its ultimate survival. The social, cultural and historical milieu of a composer's era, significantly molds construction of their text and the ideals, values and attitudes that they choose to address within it. These influences offer a unique distinction between different texts, however, also highlighting notable commonalities. Through the implementation of dystopian fiction, in which they depict a post-apocalyptic future, arising from cultural realities that enable tyrants to exploit periods of adversities and tribulations, both texts offer didactic and implicit cautionary warnings of what will occur should present trends endure. Fritz Lang's expressionist and overt surreal silent film, 'Metropolis' (1927), can be interpreted as a reaction to the rapidly fluctuating, economically unstable social milieu of Germany during the immediate post WWI era, in which the newly emerged, controversial Weimar Republic gave birth to new individual freedoms and consequent cultural diversity. Lang's physical depiction of the segregation and dichotomy between the upper and lower classes of Metropolis prompts his audience to question the distribution of power and authority, subtly highlighting the flaws in Germany's new government system and asserting the need for compassion in the rebuilding of a thriving society. Contrastingly, George Orwell's dystopic novel, 'Nineteen Eighty-Four' (1949), is a pessimistic vision of the future, responding to the horrific totalitarian and authoritarian regimes witnessed in the years following WWI and during WWII. Orwell provides an unsettling warning of the capacities of dictatorial control systems and their ability to extend control over all aspects of an individual's life; stifling their freedoms, dignities, morality and subsequently dehumanizing the population. Through the comparative study <https://assignbuster.com/discuss-the-link-between-the-past-and-the-future-in-1984-and-metropolis/>

of both texts, we observe an evident series of commonalities and diversities in their construction, contextual influences and explored themes.

Furthermore, we discern the fundamental correlation between a text and its contextual origins and how the exploration of similar content in both texts highlights their fundamental significance.

Oppressive capitalist plutocracies can abuse and dictate individual freedoms; employing terror, surveillance and other corrupt devices as a means of stifling their citizens and stripping them of their dignity. Fritz Lang's expressionist, black and white film 'Metropolis' is a distinctive, artistic commentary on the Weimar Republic of Germany during the 1920's; depicting the façade of superficial economic abundance during this time that cloaked the deeply ingrained flaws in the new democratic system. This can be seen in the physical depiction of the brightly lit, art-deco inspired, glamorous city of abundance that is Metropolis, reflecting the German period of industrialization and modernization, built upon the foundations of the deprivation, inequality and scarcity of the worker's city. In Lang's film, similarly to the unjust power structure in '1984', absolute, authoritarian control is held singularly by Joh Fredersen, who is motivated primarily with ensuring a city of wealth and lavishness to the benefit of the aristocratic upper class, in ignorance and indifference to the deprived workers or 'hands' who toil below to achieve his vision. Frederson achieves and maintains his power through the use of fear and terror as a means of controlling his robot-like workers, stifling their individuality and freedom. A black and white long shot depicts a rigid formation of workers with heads pointing downwards moving listlessly, uniformly and expressionless through

the mise en scene's prison-like tunnels of the underground city of Metropolis; reflective of the nature of production line labor in Germany during this time. This image exudes connotations of enslavement, deprivation and indolent conformity, contrasting starkly to the opening images of sky-scrapers, spotlights and luxury inspired by the highly modernized, architecturally innovative city of New York. Frederson's son, Freder, the Christ-like hero of the film, watches in horror as a worker's factory explodes and transforms into the barbaric, gold-faced God of Fire, Moloch. Moloch, a biblical character alluding to the Greco-Roman tradition of child sacrifice, consumes the fatigued workers offered to him, reinforcing the fear-induced methods of power and control. The dehumanizing, repetitive and physically demanding nature of work depicted in these scenes are indicative of the reality of assembly line production common-place during the industrial revolution of Weimar Germany post WWI, resulting in the re-introduction of the 12 hour working day with a two-hour break. Lang provokes us to question the corrupt and abusive utilization of power and its repercussions on an individual's sense of dignity, humanity and entitlement, simultaneously making comparisons and connections to his own social, cultural and historical context. Lang's text was considered as a ground-breaking German expressionist, silent film; providing a crucial source of inspiration for the later development of the 'film noir' genre. Lang's innovative use of special effects, multi layered sets, stop motion film and his visual dichotomy between the two inner worlds of Metropolis are seminal to later dystopic, sci-fi texts, simultaneously creating a strong conceptual link to Orwell's '1984'.

Individuals must place inherent and fundamental worth in their essential rights to freedom of speech, thought and individuality. If the values of these fundamental rights are neglected, then societies are prone to the all-encompassing, complete manipulation, tyranny of totalitarian control systems and subsequent dehumanization. This is clearly elucidated in George Orwell's iconic dystopian novel '1984'. Similarly to Lang's film, Orwell depicts a futuristic, dystopian setting, exploring the dangers of oppressive control systems. However, Orwell's vision, inspired by the dictatorship of Joseph Stalin and his 'great purges' in Soviet Russia, and Adolf Hitler and his eradication of 'inferior' races in Nazi Germany, is a significantly bleaker, more pessimistic prophecy. Orwell immediately situates us in the austere, harsh setting of urban decay; 'Airstrip One', the parallel image of degraded, rubble-ridden London, post WWII. The clocks are 'striking thirteen' and the omniscient, invasive image of Big Brother 'watching you', is strikingly reminiscent of the image of Joseph Stalin. The anti-hero, Winston Smith is 'smallish, frail' and has a 'varicose ulcer above his right ankle'. The hopeless, weak and sickening image of Winston contrasts strongly to Lang's hero, Freder, the picture of Aryan perfection. Winston works in the 'Ministry of Truth', an oxymoronic title for a place that houses the constant re-writing of history to ensure that the party is always correct; 'Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past.' Language is oversimplified and 'cut down to the bone', resulting in a new language, 'whose vocabulary gets smaller every year', 'Newspeak', rendering 'thoughtcrime' or unorthodox thinking 'literally impossible'. Perhaps the most frightening aspect of Orwell's haunting vision is the attainable, realistic future that is depicted. Many of the party's policies

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and means of control are drawn from the strategies of Hitler and Stalin in their fanatic dictatorships; Stalin himself would airbrush photos for 'vaporised' persons, rewriting history and frequently changing alliances with Germany, claiming to have always maintained this relationship. Orwell demands us to reassess the capabilities of totalitarian rulership, warning of the horrific possible extent of control that the rapid development of technology would allow. Both Orwell and Lang convey a genuine fear of the future in their texts, however both the medium through which these ideas are explored and the historical contexts that inspired the composers are significantly diverse and distinctive. Whilst Orwell was a critical essayist at heart, one may argue that Lang's primary purpose was to create aesthetically innovative artistry and entertainment. Hence, though both exploring complementary concepts of power and control and the dehumanization that can emerge from them which lead to subjugation, suppression of rights and degradation of one's human qualities, these two iconic texts differ.

Societies built on foundations of inequality and deprivation are prone to a growing discontent among citizens and eventual destruction. The continued oppression of an individual's entitlements to freedom and expression can only be tolerated to certain extents, after which the spark of resistance and rebellion is ignited. Lang's film was unique as it confronted the conservative German audience with the rapid change in previously rigid class structures, addressing the growing potential for a Russian-like communist rebellion.

Following the signing of the humiliating Treaty of Versailles, in which Germany was forced to accept entire responsibility for the destruction of

WWI and agree to pay indefinite reparations to the allies, the German public retaliated in severe division, revolt and strike. The seeds of discontent and revolution are evident in Lang's film in the ongoing subjugation of the workers. Lang depicts Maria as a virginal symbol of purity and compassion who prophesies that 'the mediator between the head and the hands must be the heart'; a message that extends as an ongoing motif throughout the film and elucidates the fundamental need for understanding in achieving equilibrium amidst this severely divided society. Lang's depiction of Maria's robot 'doppelgänger', who performs absurdly dramatic gestures and facial expressions, clad in dark, devilish eye makeup, offers a stark dichotomy to the pure, virginal, innocently dressed Maria. Lang's continuous utilisation of juxtapositions; 'light' and 'dark', 'blessed' or 'damned' and 'upper' and 'lower', serve as representations of the severe divisions within German society during this period. Dramatic, pulsating drum beats and climactic violin notes are heard as the workers, ironically conforming in thoughtless mob-mentality, pack tightly into the elevators that escalate to the upper-city of Metropolis, pumping their fists violently. Lang explores the unthinking, conforming mob-mentality of rebellion, highlighting the ironic substitution for simply another means of control, complementing Orwell's description of 'the two minutes hate', in which the working class are mindlessly united in the hatred of Big Brother's enemies. Lang depicts the pure, compassionate love affair between Maria and Freder, who unite in the depths and desperately attempt to protect the grappling, fearful children from the flooding city. The film concludes optimistically with the unification of the 'head', Frederson, and the 'hands', the workers, through the mediation of Freder, 'the heart'.

Lang offers an alternative to the oppression of Frederson's capitalist

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plutocracy through warm, compassionate mediation. Lang's ending has been criticized as being abstruse and unrealistic; that despite this shaking of hands, the tyrannical rule of Frederson may well continue under a different guise. The workers still march in perfect synchronization and uniformity, the only variance is that their heads are now lifted. This could be said to reflect the 'Stresemann era' of Germany, in which the nation established a secure place on the global stage, once again participating in international trade and affairs. However this was merely a façade for its desperate reliance upon the American economy for its success, leading to Germany's severe downfall during the depression. Lang draws our attention to the nature of resistance and rebellion; how the oppressive abuse of power and control and the stifling of freedoms result in this, also highlighting the chaos that can be wrought if not orchestrated in a calculated manner of one's own accord. Lang's unique cinematic style and exploration of fundamental themes of power and control served as an iconic source of inspiration for many artists who followed him, bringing to the fore the central importance of 'Metropolis' and illuminating its vital link to the time period in which it was created.

Resistance and rebellion arise due to discontent and dissatisfaction with one's reality; their rights, their freedoms and their distant memories of more prosperous times. Orwell's '1984', elucidates the intrinsic characteristic of humanity that provokes one to question the nature of their world and the distribution of power and control within it, even if this attempt is accepted and recognized as futile. Lang explores this inherent desire in his film, however, one may argue that his representation of the oppressed class possess a far more promising capacity to rebel and to succeed in

establishing a better society. Contrastingly, Orwell's anti-hero Winston knowingly accepts that his life is doomed from the moment he opens his diary and marks its pages; 'the decisive act'. Every trait considered human is stripped from the citizens of Oceania; their humanity, their family, their dignity, their sexual instinct and their individual will to live. This is replaced by the all-encompassing fear and love of Big-Brother, elucidating the mass extent of infiltration, control and suppression of any possible rebellion. Orwell depicts Winston's somber psychological state; he feels 'lost in a monstrous world where he himself was the monster' and hence his only potential resistance is his own internal contemplation. Similarly to Lang's depiction of Rotwang's house as 'a relic of the dim, forgotten, past', Orwell depicts motifs in his novel that serve as reminders of a time brighter than Winston's present reality, elucidating the extent to which knowledge has been concealed and withheld. These motifs occur in Winston's frequent dreams of the 'Golden Country', the glass paperweight and the image of the 'St Clements Church', which ironically is utilized as a concealed party surveillance device. Winston attempts to intellectually engage with his love interest Julia, however she is purely interested in fulfilling her own sexual pleasures in resistance to the party. Orwell frightfully illustrates a world where the totalitarian regime even orchestrates its own resistance, as another guise through which to ensnare 'thought criminals' and maintain ultimate control. The novel concludes pessimistically, with Winston indefinitely awaiting a bullet that shall end his life; having been destroyed physically and mentally. Winston occupies his remaining days sitting in the foreshadowed 'Chestnut Tree Café', drinking 'Victory Gin', practicing 'doublethink' and believing that '2+2= 5' because the Party says it does; '<https://assignbuster.com/discuss-the-link-between-the-past-and-the-future-in-1984-and-metropolis/>

He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother.’ Whilst Lang elucidates the power of the individual to overcome their oppressive rulers, Orwell highlights any attempt at resistance and rebellion devoid of purpose from the beginning. His didactic, hopeless vision serves as a haunting warning of the capacities of totalitarian rulerships that suppress the individual. Both texts are written in post-war periods, depicting a fear of the future, however whilst Lang’s film depicts a limited German experience, Orwell’s primary concern was reaching a global audience with a strong political message of democratic socialism. Both texts complement each other in conveying themes of power and control in a highly-technological society, however, they starkly differ in form, time of composition and the overriding tone with which their messages are conveyed.

Hence, through the comparative study of Fritz Lang’s expressionist film, ‘Metropolis’ (1927) and George Orwell’s dystopic novel, ‘Nineteen Eighty-Four’ (1949), we note the fundamental link between the two texts and the time period in which they were composed. This study illuminates the unique qualities of both texts but also brings to the fore the complementary similarities between them. Whilst Lang’s film is an artistic commentary on the Weimar Republic during the 1920’s and the overwhelming divisions within German society, Orwell’s text serves as a crucial warning of the dangers of totalitarian systems witnessed post WWI and during WWII. Therefore, we decipher the vital importance of these two iconic texts and their complementary overriding themes of power and control.