

# Dystopia in film | metropolis vs utopian art deco



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The 1920s in Germany were a transition time, World War I had recently ended, and it was precisely the war that showed the destructive potential of modern technology. Invented and first used by the Germans in 1915, machine guns and poison gas showed the deep split between technology and humanity, it was the first modern war in which machines decided the outcome. In this time in history, it was the embracement of technology in other parts of the world, the Art Deco movement was the Utopian new way of living. After the war in Germany, American modernity became a powerful agent in the economic and cultural modernisation. America represented the New World, since Germany had a lack of national identity, the idea that mass culture might be a secret American weapon, one that would enslave the world by distracting it made sense according to Isenberg (2009, p. 182-183). Combining these two facts, the German loss of dignity during the first World War, and modernity rising, it created a certain comfort for the German culture to accept the modern movement, since it represented the ideal of living in the present which made it easier to forget about the harsh past. At first America was seen as a good idea, but by the mid-1920's Germany faced a stability in politics and economy, which questioned American way of living, its technological progress began to be seen as inhuman. Germany was beginning to feel threatened by America, with its focus on materialism and mechanisation of life, seeing it as a way to kill the human side of humankind. In 1927, the German film director Fritz Lang, created a movie analysing just that, our future with machines and its possible outcome. It was a film created to show the comfort Germany first took in accepting modernity but in a way where humanity would lose it all to it. The Art Deco movement at the time,

stood for the modern world and the evolution of people through the new inventions of machines. Metropolis, still believed in this Utopian life but created its own, showing how human and machines can work as long as one important factor is not forgotten, which the modern world seemed to have already done.

In comparison to the Art Deco modern views, Metropolis created its own view, which can be seen as its own naïve Utopian world, but also showed the Dystopia that could occur from this fast modern movement.

In order to see how the two go hand in hand, one must look at important elements which happened at this time, the introduction of new technologies which affected almost all the aspects of life. From architecture to fashion, people and their ways were changing, since freedom was now praised upon, everything that used to be taboo or conservative was now in the open. Taking into consideration that the major elements, which make up Art Deco, are present in the film; this is to show how they were used to portray the negative side of this modern vision. We all believe in a Utopian way of life, in perfection, but the consequences are most of the time overlooked, and the film Metropolis was that vision, showing the effects of the new technologies people were praising and how it would forever change people, life and the world. Without further ado, let's see how the film has proven itself to be a masterpiece but most importantly how a purely imaginative vision may have foretold our future, from began as a Utopian idea to what may have changed the fundamentals of humankind.

The late teens and early twenties in Germany was a time of rampant inflation, decadence, personal liberty, violence and insecurity. It was followed by the unfortunate rise of the Nazis during the late twenties and early thirties, which saw a severe clampdown on freedom of expression in all walks of life, especially the arts and politics according to Organ (2009). The central theme of *Metropolis* is that of a separation between working class and higher-ups and the need for a mutual understanding of each is presented both abstractly and directly through the image rather than the word. This theme of workers revolting against domination by exploitative management, their soulless machines, and new technologies, also struck a chord with reviewers and the general public, though many critics in America and Britain objected strongly to this anti-Fordism / anti production-line tale. As such, *Metropolis*, with its many themes and sub-texts, including the almost obligatory 'boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy finds girl' - was a controversial film from day one. It garnered both positive and negative comment wherever it was shown, and generated much critical discussion in the press upon release according to Organ (2009).

In order to understand the importance of the visual work accomplished in the film, one must look at different scenes from the movie where this is proven, such as the opening shot of line upon line, file upon file, of workers marching down the hallway towards the elevator that takes them down into the depths of the city's machines and inner workings. Each worker wears the same uniform, shuffles their feet in the same manner as if they were a military unit, and each slouch and hold their heads down in unison according to Simon M (2010). Such images as workers being fed to a giant monster,

masses upon masses of slave labor building the biblical Tower of Babel, and Death itself swinging its scythe indicate the possible fall of this turbulent society in a stark and shocking way not possible through ordinary images or even the written word. They give this story something of a mythic and fantastic property, portraying its message through symbolism rather than realism, exaggeration rather than realism according to Simon M (2010). The pleasure garden in which Freder (the main character) indulges in the most hedonistic of pleasures, providing a stark contrast with the metallic, grimy world of the workers. This fluid and happy-go-lucky world is immediately interrupted by the entrance of Maria and the worker children. Here is the direct conflict and contrast between workers and elites, high and low, heaven and hell. Later on in the film Freder witnesses one of these machines at work, each worker mechanically pushing buttons and pulling levers in uniform, fixed motions. It is as if these workers are themselves machines, as Lang uses the image of uniform, unnatural motion to represent a lack of humanity, hopefully inspiring repulsion in the audience according to Simon M (2010). Such exaggeration is arguably necessary in the case of a silent film in order to make up for the lack of proper dialogue, but it also may add to the raw symbolism of it all, going to every last length to show the divide between worker and elite. This exaggeration practically defines "Metropolis" in many instances. Along with the aforementioned portrayals of Freder and Maria, there is the near-comically evil Rotwang, who inspired just about every mad scientist portrayed in popular culture since then according to Simon M (2010). Another important factor is the characteristics of the appearance and behaviour of Rotwang which does not fit the stereotype of a modern scientist, and there are indications that he may be in league with the

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devil. The personality of the scientist Rotwang belongs to one of the most interesting antagonists of the screen. The possibility of an ambivalent interpretation of his character, he is a scientist, but also something of a sorcerer allied with satanic forces, which gives him greater complexity according to Urgosíková (2009).

In 1924, Fritz Lang visited New York City, where the big-city architecture struck him, and the luminous cityscape influenced the visual design and electrifying energy for the film. Originally an architect, Lang was a man of unusually sensitive visual perceptions. His films of those years show an expressionistic sense for the plastic and the lighting, which emphasized architectonic lines and conveyed a sense of geometric construction that not only extends to the sets and the depicted milieu but even influenced the positioning of the actors in individual shots. In keeping with the conventions of expressionism, the inhabitants of the subterranean city have no individuality, and the crowd represents a compact mass from which personality projects only as a stark exception and only in a definite rhythm according to Urgosíková (2009).

The introductory sequences present this social organization in a very attractive light. In a magnificent, gigantic city with gleaming skyscrapers, suspension bridges, and bustling street, people live in comfort and plenty, with every possibility for intellectual and physical development. However, Metropolis is not a city of freedom and equality. Below ground, working for the chosen elite, are masses of nameless workers who have no more value within the social order than a cog in a machine or a tool or production. It is for this reason that the workers revolt and almost destroy the city; only then

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is there a reconciliation and an equalization of rights for the two strata, the elite and the workers. Lang honestly believed in this idea of reconciliation, and his attitude to a certain extent reflected the German reality, in which there were growing indications of stabilization and attempts to resolve social problems. The uneven lines, contrasts of light and dark, half-shadows and silhouettes, which serve to suggest mysterious and menacing actions, events, and emotions. Lang applied these techniques effectively and successfully to one of the varieties of the fantasy genre, what he created to be utopian work, or in modern words influenced the genre of Science Fiction according to Urgosíková (2009).

What can also be factored is the importance of architecture in the Art Deco movement, where the advanced of technology was introduced, which made the construction of skyscrapers possible. This new way of building up rather than out, gave the illusion that we could reach the sky, giving a high expectation for our future. In the film *Metropolis*, the main building is the Babel tower, where the legend is told that it was made to reach the stars and on the top it would be written "Great is the world and its Creator! And great is Man!" but in the sequence of the film where this is explained, it shows how in order for a building or any structure to be built, one must first think of the idea, which is not always possible. Once the idea is put on paper or into small scale, it needs labour to be produced and this is when the hands come in, and it is shown that in order for the Babel tower to be built, it would take a lot of man power and therefore some blood would have to be shed in order for the man who had thought of this building, could see it built. This is *Metropolis's* view on the built of skyscrapers, since they were using new

techniques, which were not already perfected, and what it would take to build such things, the cost of human lives? That it is great for such ideas to ever be thought up, but is it necessary? At the time yes, since it showed the greatness of man and what he could achieve.

When a director creates a film, its main purpose is to communicate a message through visuals and dialogue, which can be expressed in different ways, such as speech, facial expressions and written words. Its main focus is to make the audience feel exactly what the director has in mind, therefore when Fritz Lang created this film, these elements could not be forgotten or not be taken seriously, or else the film would have not gotten so much attention or gained so much success. In a way if unprofessional work had been done, we would not even talk about this movie today, but the push for a different genre in film and the motivation to build a realistic set and using the right lighting, made this film not only a work of art but a movie that will continue to affect people in generations to come.

## **Interiors**

How does one judge another's financial status? by the furniture and interior of their home, it is not always true, but when exposed to someone else's lifestyle and home, one can easily put a social status on the other. In Metropolis, the interiors of both the upper and lower worlds are very distinct. The upper shows a high usage of Art Deco elements and the lower is very cold and style-less. The Art Deco elements showed the high class, therefore representing the people who could afford such extravaganzas. The Utopian concept is very much present, from using such interiors, which were very popular with the American style of the time, showing how the "exploiters"

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can manage to hide the bad and only show the good, or in other words the output. As seen in the office of Joh Fredersen and in Freder's bedroom, all the highest technology was available for their usage. From the bed shape to the lamps, as well as the desk, all the geometric elements can be seen. This was done to show how the upper class were able to live, compared to the lower class, which lived under ground, with not much to rely too, since their living space was limited to brick walls and constant work, were the luxurious Art Deco furniture would serve no purpose to them, since they did not have the time to appreciate it.

All these elements were to show, the Utopian life lived by the people who ran the city, compared to the Dystopia it created by asking such a request from other human beings, it analyses the two points of society and how people live. Based on the concept of capitalism and materialism, where it can only be reached by the officers and not the workers, which tends to be a common theme in any point in history. The main point of using such distinct style or interiors and exteriors, was to show the freedom and lack of appreciation from the upper class, since they had everything, they forgot to think about what it took to give them this luxury. It is an important factor in the film, since the whole point is to show, how and why workers would revolt against their superiors, and making such a big contrast between the quality of life between the two made the impact of the worker's revolt more powerful, since it showed what they were deprived from and how it affected them. Running a city and taking all the profits can only generate unfairness, therefore creating a created desire of unneeded things to people who do not possess them. If the interior design had not been considered for this movie

the different views of both classes would have not been so powerful, and taking into consideration that the film depended a lot on visual and not words, such things needed to be accentuated to create its full point, to be clear to the viewer, what people were being targeted and illustrated.

### **For her all 7 deadly sins**

Many biblical references can be seen in this film, one of the most important element in Metropolis is the robot version of Maria, which carries on her all 7 deadly sins. This image of the woman can be interpreted on many levels, one can be to show how women were acting in the 1920's since it was a time where more open behaviours were accepted, their dresses got shorter, they started to smoke and drink in public and freely exposed their sexuality, a way for them to celebrate the modern woman. The emergence of emancipated and sexually liberated women, as well as organised feminist activities in the mid-1920's. The robot Maria, stylised as the “ New Woman,” rips the social fabric asunder, inciting the workers to rebel and seducing them into self-destructive acts. Her punishment, once she is uncovered as an agent provocateur, is to be burned at the stake according to Isenberg (2009, p. 181). The most important scene is when the robotic doppelgänger of Maria , with her twitchy eye, sexually dances in front of the upper class men, this behaviour was meant to distract and manipulate them, done in an exaggerated way, when all the men's eyes are seen, their mouths are open, they become more violent to the point where they all run to the podium on which she dances, she tricks them to be a temptress who is out to deceive those who fall for the illusion of a replica. This nexus of technology, visual pleasure, and fantasy also lay at the core of modern American mass culture,

which, according to some cultural critics, had seduced Germany into renouncing its classical canon of high culture according to Isenberg (2009, p. 181). This robotic Maria was meant as metaphors, one being the threat the modern woman would have on men and community with her new sexual manipulating techniques, second she represents America and how it first seduced Germany into mass culture, through the same kind of pleasurable ways. The artistic beauty which Lang made the robot, with its glittering female body, stylised breasts and inhuman mask instead of a face perfectly represents this theory, it was made on purpose to be sexual, since it needed to represent the power of woman's new sexual behaviour and how it could impact communities. She is treated as being a witch when she is discovered to be an imposter, which again shows how this new act is unnatural and dangerous to the evolution of people and if practiced a woman is as good as dead and should be burned alive for her sins of manipulation. The beauty of woman was openly recognised, therefore women seemed to take advantage of this new attention they were getting and getting away with it, showing how soon women could have the same rights as men, since they could manipulate them, showing an unbalance to how people use to live and statuses between men and women were already established.

## **Visual Communication – Typography and movie poster**

Art Deco typefaces are composed of geometric forms, an influence from the geometrical formal language of the Constructivists, but the love for elegance at the time gave it a decorative touch. With this new style of type design, readability sometimes wasn't too clear, since the letters seemed flat and ornamental, where they received additional spacial and graphic

embellishments. One characteristic change was type going from narrow to wide, sometimes the lower cases were completely ignored to embrace the thin, long stroked capital letters, but antique and fractured scripts remain the standard despite the era's prevailing tastes. At times they were the mouthpiece of twenties modernism, with its technology, communication, transportation and its dynamism; at other times, of mundane elegance and luxury transposed into a fantastical world of unadulterated glamour that takes precedence over typography according to Stawinski (2009, p. 131). This became a graphic language of exotic cultures, which embodied themes of modern technology and ways of life. One distinct font of the Art Deco movement, is Broadway; designed by Morris Fuller Benton in 1925: (show type)

Comparing it to the font used for the Metropolis title, one can see where the Art Deco elements of type are visible but how they have been altered to create the feel for the movie. This obvious alteration, created a sort of horror feel, but how? The descenders of the M, T, R, P and S have elongated, the bowls of the O have been evenly distributed, the I, L and E have been distorted, an also distorted dot has been added to the I, but all the most important factor is that each letter finishes with a point as can be seen in all the descenders and the arm of the T. These strong angles, visible in all the letters, even on the O since it not perfectly round but mostly choppy lines formed into a circle, have given this title its unique character, where it is only composed of angles, no smooth lines are present, respecting the geometric language of the time but going against elegance.

Taking into consideration that Fritz Lang's 1927 film *Metropolis* is a silent film, the written word used in intertitles played a large role in story comprehension. Intertitles are important in silent films, since they need to give the audience information through text, which should be both appealing and readable, to clearly express to the audience what is being visually shown. *Metropolis* would be particularly hard to understand without the on-screen narration, since the actor's faces and movements can express only so much. The font chosen for the *Metropolis* intertitles is very artistically stylized, which goes against the futuristic city storyline, where a more straight-lined font may have been more appropriate. Even though *Metropolis* inspired the Science Fiction film style, it was not meant to be one, but rather an art film, therefore it makes sense to use artistic intertitles, as a way to make the movie balanced in the style it was creating. Throughout the film's city the same stylised font it used as well as numbers, which indicate the style used throughout *Metropolis*, which shows that typography played a big part in the film's mood, it was carefully placed and used to make sure all the information needed was clear and stylised accordingly.

All these traits put together have created an abstract version of typical Art Deco font, but on purpose, in order to catch someone's attention, one must stimulate that sense, the way to promote the art form of film was through making a poster for it, what better way to give it an identity and a feel. When a poster is designed, it is composed of information for its viewer, which is also targeted, to inform them of what is happening, this information is read through the usage of words, which is where typography comes in. This powerful tool of type design, is the cherry on top of a poster design, since it

is also composed of imagery to trigger another kind of feel, but type when used correctly can automatically create the ambience to describe the art form as a whole. In the case of Metropolis, this alteration of type was used just for that purpose, to trigger the imagination of its viewer, to show something different than the typical Art Deco posters created at the time of its production. Since the film's theme was also an alteration of the life views of the time, if a typical Art Deco font had been used, it would have not shown the effect the film as a whole was trying to reach.

So going back to 1927, as someone is walking in the streets and sees the Metropolis poster advertising the film on a wall, one can imagine the attention it must have gotten, since everything else around was produced to support positivity and evolution, here comes something scary and negative, therefore triggering the curiosity of people to see why it was so different. In order for a poster or any other sort of advertising elements to be successful, they need to properly represent what it is symbolising, which the one of a kind font used for the title of Metropolis did, it was the introduction to the movie before someone went to the theatre to see.

Going to the next visual element, posters are a very powerful advertising tool, since they can be placed literally anywhere, therefore making them reachable to any eyes and to any audience. Typography as said before is one of the most important elements of a poster, since it makes the audience aware of what the poster is about, since it will surely carry a title. The other element is imagery, which is usually the background, and is used to go along with the title, to create a unified theme and helps the viewer reach a conclusion of their own to what the poster may mean. Posters are an art,  
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since they need to work in a way where they need to be noticed at first glance, and briefly inform the viewer with all the important information in a couple of minutes. For such a film as Metropolis, which is in fact a two hour viewing of moving images, the poster had to illustrate all of that into one image, basically giving away the whole movie in a single view.

Typical Art Deco posters were colourful, vibrant, energetic, showed a lot of movement, basically they illustrated and embraced the new technologies being introduced. They were drawn and printed with the latest techniques invented, showing people living in this new modernity, such as travel, fashion, drinking and smoking. What used to be taboo, was now in the open and people were showing off this new lifestyle full of luxury and advancement, which had never been seen before. This perfect lifestyle, mostly only affordable by the higher class, was praised upon, everyone had to be part of this new movement, exposing their inner desires, or letting all hell break loose. This new freedom of expression, and new possibilities had to be reflected, mostly through abstract views, such as people were usually drawn through geometric forms, almost not real, like this movement was too good to be true, in a way it showed the fear of people, since it used fantasy images to show what was really going on, things were moving too fast and the population did not really have time to digest all of this, therefore showing people through geometric elements, was an easier way to accept it.

The imagery of the Metropolis poster distributed at the time, was duotone, illustrating only buildings in the background and the robot in the foreground, the title of the film at the top and all the information at the bottom. The duotone, was against all the colourful posters at the time, since the movie <https://assignbuster.com/dystopia-in-film-metropolis-vs-utopian-art-deco/>

was showing the dark side of the Utopian philosophy of Art Deco, the robot in the middle represented the most important part of the film, but also to show people how they would evolve, but the answer to how lied in watching the movie. The information at the bottom, gave the regular film info; who directed it, the main actors, music composer, production house and writer. The drawing of the robot used a lot of curved lines, and showed an emotionless face, making it obvious that humans were being interpreted as robots.

## **Conclusion**

Let's start with the quote " The mediator between head and hands must be the heart" taken from the film Metropolis, from this analysis it can be said that Art Deco is the head and the hands and Metropolis is the heart. The Utopian idea of Art Deco was a way to celebrate the new world and its technologies whereas Metropolis was the Dystopian view hidden behind this philosophy. It can be seen through all the elements stated, as a warning or a reality to what the world may evolve to be, that without the heart a life cannot function, but without the head and the hands a world cannot evolve. Therefore they both go hand in hand, but never one without the other, that humans may never forget their real values. This is the message that the film portrayed, that there is beauty in evolving, but we must never forget who we really are and our true powers, that if we rely too much on machines (technology) then what is left of us? Art Deco, was a time when everything was changing, the excitement of a new life, the embracing of a freedom given to people by machines doing jobs for them. These two art forms, have proven themselves through history and have shaped the world we now live



in, but without art, how could anyone in the future know how a community evolved or lived, this is why it is important to analyse all the details of one element and how it fits into the time period it was produced, to better understand its message and value.

The naïve way people were living during the 1920's, was in a way beautiful and pure, they had no worries except live and explore their new identities, Metropolis showed the difference between the high class or in other words the heads versus the lower class, the hands, and how they would live in two different worlds, one above and one below. This shows, that once an idea is conceived, the inventor takes all the credit, whereas the hands who built it, are never recognised for the hard work and risks it took to construct it.

People in the higher class would be the only one to appreciate the hand's work, since they would be the only ones who could afford it, they would be the only ones who could have the luxury to live in such buildings reaching the stars and afford such extravaganzas in their homes. But where did the workers fit in, in all of this? This is what Metropolis, was showing, that for such a Utopia to exist fairness should be placed between the heads who conceive ideas and the hands who built them, and yes in order to do that, the only power is our hearts. When speaking about art, the philosophy behind it must always be talked about, since it explains why it was created and what it was meant to represent, without one, you can't have the other, which is also another strong point about the quote, since people tend to concentrate on the most important facts but forgetting how it became important.

Metropolis also created its own Utopia, where as long as the heart is present and the human side in humankind is never lost, we can live in an harmonious world. The hand shake in the end, also could represent the labour giving in again to capital. Metropolis inaugurated a series of utopias on film that attempted to resolve the difficulties of the contemporary state of society by projecting them into a story with a futuristic setting according to Urgosíková (2009).