

# **Metropolis Film Summary**

## **Metropolis by Fritz Lang**

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



# Contents

<a href="#">Metropolis Film Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Context.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Summary and Analysis.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">17</a>
<a href="#">Style and Cinematography.....</a>	<a href="#">19</a>
<a href="#">Motifs.....</a>	<a href="#">21</a>
<a href="#">Symbols.....</a>	<a href="#">23</a>
<a href="#">Essay Questions.....</a>	<a href="#">26</a>

## Context

The director of *Metropolis*, Fritz Lang, was born in Vienna in 1890. His father was manager of a construction company. Immediately after high school, Lang attended a technical school, but soon after decided to train as a painter. From 1910-1914, he traveled throughout Europe, studying painting in Paris from 1913-1914.

In 1914, Lang returned to Vienna. In January, 1915, he enlisted in the army and began fighting in World War I. He was severely injured in June, 1916. After two lesser injuries, he was sent home shell-shocked in early 1918. He briefly took up acting in Vienna, but soon took a writing position at a production company in Berlin. Lang wrote screenplays and eventually began directing, still living in Berlin, but for an American-owned film company. By the mid-1920s, the technical proficiency of the German film industry surpassed any other in the world. The state gave artists and directors almost limitless support, financing the largest and best-equipped studios in the world, including Ufa, near Berlin.

While living in Berlin, Lang met Thea von Harbou, an actress who helped him write the scripts for which he is best known, including *Dr. Mabuse der Spieler*, *Die Nibelungen*, *Metropolis*, and *M* (for which von Harbour is often given sole credit). They married in 1922 and divorced in 1933.

In 1924, Lang visited New York City, which, with its magnificent skyline and lights that shone all night, inspired the city in *Metropolis*. "I saw the buildings like a vertical curtain, opalescent, and light, filling the back of the stage, hanging from a sinister sky, in order to dazzle, to defuse, to hypnotize," Fritz said of the city. After visiting New York City, he traveled to Hollywood to study special effects technology and purchase camera equipment. Soon thereafter, he returned to Germany and began filming *Metropolis* on May 22, 1925. Filming lasted an astonishing 310 days.

On January 10, 1927, Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* opened at the Ufa Palast Theatre in Berlin. The film almost bankrupted Ufa: costs for filming exceeded five million marks, an amount far in excess of any other film of that time. It was duly noted as a wildly ambitious, hugely expensive, fictional allegory of alienated labor and dehumanizing technology, filial revolt, and romantic love. It was the first science fiction film.

Most critics gave *Metropolis* an excellent rating. All agreed that the special effects were phenomenal, particularly considering the time period in which the movie was filmed. There are huge buildings, explosions, flooding, picture phones, transformation sequences, robots, and more. No movie has ever before pulled on the limits of special effects the way this one did. For many decades to come, films like *Star Wars*, *Blade Runner*, and *Frankenstein* would mimic the special effects from *Metropolis*.

Although *Metropolis* became one of the touchstones of 20th century cinema and has been exhaustively studied and endlessly imitated, the movie as Lang made it has never really been seen again since its brief run in Berlin. A few weeks after the premier, Ufa

pulled it from theaters and cut out seven of the original 12 reels. Paramount, the American distributor, engaged playwright Channing Pollock to compose English title cards and to reshape the story. While Pollock tried to return *Metropolis* to what he thought was closest to the original filming, Fritz was so appalled that he swore he would never return to the United States, not even to visit. (He broke this vow a few years later when Hitler proved to be a much graver threat to his art, and even his life, than Hollywood could ever be.)

Much of *Metropolis* has now been retrieved. Thanks to four years of painstaking work by Martin Koerber, a German film preservationist, and Alpha-Omega, a Munich company specializing in digital restoration, more than 1,300 feet of the original film have been restored and added. At long last, there is a *Metropolis* with a legitimate claim to being definitive.



## Summary and Analysis

*Metropolis* takes place in the year 2026. Joh Fredersen rules over the huge city of Metropolis. He is referred to as the Master and has absolute control. The futuristic city of Metropolis is populated by a privileged class who live in luxury in spectacular, towering buildings that reach to the sky. Their lives of luxury and leisure are the result of the huge labor force who endlessly toil below the city, in the dark and impoverished underground. The needs of these workers are unimportant to Fredersen; he expects them to work grueling ten-hour days without complaint or further expectation, all to fuel the machines and allow the elite their beautiful city of leisure.

The son of Master Fredersen, Freder Fredersen, is frolicking in the Miracle of Eternal Gardens when, by mistake, he sees Maria. Maria is the daughter of a worker who is tending other workers' children, and she opens the door leading to the outside, on the outskirts of the Miracle of Eternal Gardens. Freder, who has been chasing a girl, immediately stops and forgets all else when he sees Maria. Never having been aware of the workers who slave underground, and struck by Maria's beauty, he follows her back to the underground. He is appalled by what he sees.

Most workers have the grueling task of continually moving the hands of a huge clock. The hands are heavy and the shifts are always ten hours, everyday. There are a few workers who have even more difficult tasks, also for a ten-hour stretch. One, in particular, must monitor many levers and gauges at once. Each lever is difficult to pull and he must constantly pull on each of them, intermittently. Freder is watching as this particular worker, exhausted and unable to continue, allows the main gauge to reach alarm level. He struggles for a long time, trying to keep up with the task, only to fail and the plant blows up. There is a large explosion and many workers are hurt.

Freder, overwrought, immediately goes to find his father. Joh Fredersen is unconcerned about the workers' conditions. Freder is flabbergasted, unable to believe his father has no compassion for those who fuel the city and allow it to run. "It was their hands that built this city of ours, Father. But where do the hands belong in your scheme?" Freder asks. Joh Fredersen replies, "In their proper place, the depths."

Freder runs from his father's office. The thin man, Joh's security man, is called forth and told to track Freder's every move. Freder returns to the underground and tries to help one of the worker's: he exchanges clothes with him and they trade places. As the last hour of the shift draws closer, Freder can hardly keep going. Another worker approaches him and tells him "she" has called another meeting to be held at the end of their shift.

Grot, the foreman from the underground working class finds a map in the pocket of one of his workers and takes it to Joh Fredersen. Unable to understand the map, Joh takes the map to Rotwang, a strange scientist who has earned Joh's respect because of his intellect and abilities. Rotwang immediately shows Joh his latest invention, Machine Man. According to Rotwang, Machine Man can be perfected so that he is



indistinguishable from a real man within 24 hours. Finally, Rotwang gets to the business of decoding the map Joh brought, which tells them about the meeting. Rotwang leads Joh to a passage inside his house that takes them through a tunnel and then to a small alcove nestled just above the worker's meeting place in the underground.

Joh and Rotwang watch from the alcove as Maria tells the workers the story of The Tower of Babel, comparing it to their situation in Metropolis. She finishes the story and tells the workers "There can be no understanding between the hand and the brain unless the heart acts as mediator." She encourages them not to revolt or resort to violence, but to wait for a mediator. Maria tells all the workers that a mediator will come and that he is the answer to their situation.

Freder and the other workers reluctantly agree to wait for a mediator, but the workers admit they are growing restless and want a remedy soon. The entire time Freder has been listening to Maria, he has been mesmerized by her beauty. He also knows he is the mediator they have been waiting for, since he is in a position to mediate between his father and the workers. He and Maria kiss and agree to meet the next day in the cathedral.

Meanwhile, Joh and Rotwang have been watching the meeting. Realizing that the workers consider Maria their savior, Joh tells Rotwang to make Machine Man into the image of Maria. Then, Maria can lead the workers astray and do Joh's bidding.

Freder goes to meet Maria in the cathedral the next day, but she is nowhere to be found. After he leaves the cathedral and is walking down the sidewalk, he hears Maria screaming. He follows the sounds to Rotwang's house. He finally manages to get inside, but the house is a maze of rooms and he is not able to get to Maria before Rotwang transfers her image to the Machine Man.

The real Maria remains in Rotwang's custody, while the Machine Man disguised as Maria wreaks havoc. She tells the workers to revolt, to use violence, and to destroy the machines. The workers are more than happy to comply and a massive riot ensues. Once Freder hears of the revolt, he knows something is amiss. He runs to find Maria and encounters the Machine Man. He immediately knows it is not the real Maria, but he can not stop the riot already underway.

The workers run to destroy the machines. The foreman, Grot, tells them that the machines not only control the city above (Metropolis), but their community as well. However, there is no reasoning with the workers at this point. They push Grot out of the way and destroy the machines. They then dance merrily about until Grot regains consciousness and tells them the city is flooding as a result of destroying the machines and their children will drown. This makes them angry and they realize they have been tricked by Maria (the robot). They reorganize the riot to find and kill Maria.

When the underground begins to flood, the real Maria manages to escape Rotwang and runs to get the children. She is trying to push back the levers that control the water and



pull all the children to safety on a platform. Freder sees her and tries to help, but they both finally realize they must run with the children to higher ground.

Maria and Freder somehow get separated. The rioters find the robot Maria and burn her at the stake. Freder thinks the robot is the real Maria until the outside burns and the robot is revealed. He then runs to find the real Maria, who has been captured by Rotwang. Freder struggles with Rotwang and finally, Rotwang falls to his death. Joh Fredersen watches the struggle in horror, afraid he will lose his son.

Once Rotwang is destroyed, Freder (with Maria at his side) and Joh Fredersen come together. Grot comes forth and attempts to shake hands with Joh, in an effort to settle both sides' differences. Joh refuses at first. Maria then reminds Freder of his role as negotiator. Freder positions himself between Joh and Grot, taking the hand of each and bringing them together. All smile as the film comes to an end.



# Characters

## Johhan Fredersen, played by Alfred Abel

### Description

Johhan Fredersen (Joh) is the master of Metropolis. He is literally the living mind of the city. All decisions go through his office. When Freder goes to find his father in his office, Josephat, his father's right-hand man is copying figures off a huge screen, evidently some kind of statistical data, as it pours in. There are at least four other employees, seated at a conference table, who are trying to keep up with Joh's dictation. None of them seem to be doing too well; they are all flustered and exhibiting signs of extreme stress. Joh does not even seem to notice his employees; he just keeps on going at his usual rate, oblivious to those around him. In turn, his immediate staff seems to have no real loyalty to him, either. They are only too happy to be dismissed so that Joh can talk to his son.

Joh's son rushes in, completely distressed about the workers' conditions, their living conditions, and their lack of relief. Again, Joh is completely unconcerned with his son's passionate display about the workers' conditions. Even when Freder asks specifically about the men who built his father's city (Metropolis), Joh claims the workers are where they should be. He has no remorse for the way he treats people. His son has been totally unaware of the workers in the underground, but his father has always known about their existence. In fact, he designed their grueling, meager existence.

### Analysis

Grot, the workers' foreman, brings Joh a map found in one of his worker's pockets, the second map he has found and brought to Joh's attention. Joh does not even utter a "thank you," to Grot for his loyalty. Later, Grot attempts to hold the rioters back, but eventually joins them. Thus, even his loyalty to Joh is short-lived.

When Joh can find no answers within his company, he goes to see Rotwang. Evidently, they have known each other for a long time. However, Rotwang double-crosses Joh. Joh told Rotwang to make a robot Maria who answers to Joh. While Rotwang turns his robot into Maria, he programs the robot to answer to himself. Rotwang thus has complete power over the robot Maria.

Joh dismisses his right-hand man, Josephat, without a moment's thought when he decides Josephat is not doing a good job. Joh has no loyalty to anyone except his son. He does love his son deeply. As soon as Freder runs from the office, he calls in the thin man, ordering him to keep up with Freder's whereabouts. He is concerned when Freder becomes ill, and when Freder is fighting Rotwang, he is terrified Freder will be killed.





Freder's role as mediator, as established at the end of the film, is possible only because his father does love him. Joh would never have considered mediation otherwise. It is his love for Freder that saves Metropolis and the workers of the underground.

There are many religious undertones in *Metropolis*. The mostly flat characters represent religious allegories. Joh's character parallels the Egyptian pharaoh who enslaved the Jews to build pyramids. Even the conversation Freder has with Joh parallels the pharaoh's conversation in the Bible, when the pharaoh's son asks why his father treats the workers so badly when it was their hands that built the city.

## Freder Fredersen, played by Gustav Frohlich

### Description

Freder is the son of Johhan Fredersen, although they are nothing alike as far as temperament goes. Freder has grown up with in a perfect environment, where all his needs and desires have been provided. His father, a shrewd and merciless businessman, has kept him shielded from the real world and so Freder knows nothing of what it takes to run the city of Metropolis. He is completely unaware of the depths of the underground and the conditions of the workers.

Freder's life has been nothing but luxury. However, one day he is chasing females in the Eternal Gardens when one of the females leads him a short way past the normal boundaries of the gardens. Maria opens the doors where she has emerged from the underground and is telling the children (those belonging to the workers) that these people are their brothers and sisters. Freder is at once stunned by Maria's beauty, and when she and the children are ushered back inside, Freder decides to follow her. His descent into the world of the workers is his first inkling as to their existence.

Freder watches as the workers toil endlessly, exhausted, but with no choice except to continue their labor. The main machine is manned by a worker who is having difficulty keeping up. As Freder watches, the gauge reaches the red zone and there is a massive explosion. Freder is so horrified by what he sees that he begins hallucinating and sees a giant mouth where one after another of the workers is sacrificed. He eventually comes back to reality, but is tortured by what he has witnessed.

After trying to talk to his father about the workers' conditions and realizing his father is not only unmoved by their conversation, but has no compassion whatsoever for the workers who have built the city, a disillusioned Freder flees the office and returns to the underground. He trades clothing and positions with one of the workers and begins his first shift on the clock, where he is responsible for moving the heavy hands of a huge clock to a new position each time the lights flash. It is a continuous effort to keep up with the flashing lights and Freder finds himself barely able to finish his ten-hour shift.

Freder finally meets up with Maria after his shift when all the workers are called below to their man-made cathedral, built as a place for them to worship since they are not



allowed to worship in the beautiful cathedral in the city above ground. Maria is their spokesperson. Freder is mesmerized the entire time Maria is speaking. However, when she begins talking about the need for a mediator between the workers and Joh, Freder knows he is the mediator she speaks of.

## **Analysis**

Freder hardly has the business sense his father has. In fact, he is anything but ruthless. He is portrayed as completely sensitive to the plights of others. He cannot tolerate seeing another human being suffer; it is deeply disturbing to him. It hardly seems possible he came from the same family as Joh Federsen.

Despite his past life of leisure, Freder is capable of handling the jobs of the workers. This is obvious when he takes over and trades places with another worker. The work is difficult for him, but it is equally difficult for the workers, who barely tolerate their ten-hour shifts. Freder is also quite capable of relating to both the workers and the elite. He sees himself as part of humanity, no better and no worse than any other individual, regardless of social rank. When Freder falls in love with Maria, he does not give it a second thought that she is from a lower social class than he. Freder is primarily a humanitarian, so much so that he hardly even notices divisions of social class.

Although Freder is horrified that his father refuses to treat the workers with respect or to improve their working and living conditions, he does not ever consider uttering a word of disrespect to his father. He certainly does not agree with his father's viewpoint, nor can he accept it; however, he does not exhibit anger or contemplate using violence to achieve a more desirable response.

Freder loves everyone. He is kind and loving to everyone he comes into contact with and does everything he can to make positive changes, without force or violence. The religious allegory for Freder is one of savior, like Jesus Christ. He is willing to sacrifice himself for the good of mankind. Like Christ, Freder radiates love and acceptance and seeks to save everyone who can be saved. He also acts as mediator between the workers and his father, master of Metropolis, just as Christ mediated between mankind and God, his father.

## **Maria, played by Brigitte Helm**

### **Description**

Maria is described as the "daughter of some worker" in the film. She watches over the children of the workers while they are working. One day she decides to show the children the life of the rich and in so doing, she attracts the attention of Freder.

Maria is the workers' spiritual leader. She diffuses the revolutionary tendencies of the workers and teaches nonviolence through a mediator whose coming she is certain of,



promising the mediator will promote understanding between the classes. Maria is portrayed as kind, loving, pure, and promotes patience and peace.

The scene after the catacomb meeting, where Rotwang is pursuing Maria in an attempt to follow Joh's orders and steal her image to put on the robot, is very effective in portraying Maria's fear. Rotwang toys with Maria as he slowly closes in on her with a flashlight. Her terror is evident. The scene is impressive enough to make the viewer feel uncomfortable, silently rooting for Maria's safety. The scenery only adds to the conveyed fear; there are the remains of workers from the past and their skeletons lie among the dreary ruins of the catacombs. Maria discovers these as Rotwang lures her back into the depths of the catacombs, surreptitiously shining his flashlight on the bones as he works his way toward her.

## Analysis

Maria falls in love with Freder as quickly as he does with her. When she tells the workers about the Tower of Babel, Freder realizes that his destiny is to be the mediator she has asked the workers to patiently await. After the meeting, Freder tells Maria he is the negotiator she has been waiting for and they kiss intimately. They make plans to meet at the cathedral the following morning, but these plans are interrupted by Rotwang's capture of Maria.

Freder tries to rescue Maria when he hears her screams, but he is no match for the evil scientist's abode, featuring doors that open and close mysteriously by themselves. Freder finds himself trapped in one of the room's in Rotwang's house while Maria changes identities with the robot.

When Freder falls ill, his illness coincides with Maria's who is still in Rotwang's captivity. He is certain something bad has befallen Maria, although he has no way of finding out the truth. Finally, Josephat comes to Freder as he is recovering, telling him of Maria's crusade to lead the revolt of the workers who now plan to destroy the machines and Metropolis.

Freder and Josephat run to the catacombs where the meetings are held. Freder at once realizes the robot is not the real Maria. However, no one listens to him. Freder only begins to understand what has really happened later, after Maria escapes from Rotwang and they reunite to save the children.

Like Freder, Maria represents all that is good and pure. Even when she is captured and forced to give up her image to the robot, she does not act irrationally or violently toward Rotwang. Like Freder, she cannot promote ill-will and can only radiate love, understanding, and hope to all those with whom she comes in contact. She and Freder are the saviors of the children and they both seek to establish negotiations between Joh Fredersen and the workers. The biblical allegory for Maria is the Virgin Mary.



## C.A. Rotwang, played by Rudolf Klein-Rogge

### Description

C. A. Rotwang is the strangest of the strange, a recluse who lives alone in a spooky little house in the middle of the city. Legend claims the house was built by a master wizard. Rotwang is a scientist who rarely leaves his weird house; he remains inside developing gadgets of every kind, including his newest invention, a robot he calls Machine Man.

Rotwang's house is filled with books, vials and jars, skeletons, and a huge laboratory. The laboratory is a mess of electrical and chemical equipment that, when set up to work, flashes with bolts of lightening and volatile liquids that would frighten the most evil villain.

Rotwang also has a monument he built to his true love, Hel. Hel is Freder's deceased mom and Joh's former wife. Rotwang and Joh had a rivalry for Hel, who married Joh and died while giving birth to Freder. Evidently, Rotwang holds a grudge. When he shows Joh his monument during their visit, Joh suggests both he and Rotwang must get on with their lives, since they have lost Hel and have no control over such events. Rotwang and Joh were good friends before their rivalry, and although Joh has moved past it, Rotwang still has the urge to seek revenge on Joh.

Rotwang had planned to turn the robot into Hel, but once Joh learns of the workers' allegiance to Maria, he orders Rotwang to use Maria's image for the robot so that he can control Maria's actions and thus, control the actions of the workers.

### Analysis

Rotwang despises Joh, mostly because of his past connection with Hel. He follows Joh's orders and transforms the robot into Maria (at least visually), but he retains control over her. However, the robot seems to develop a mind of its own. Eventually, no one can control the robot, as it seeks nothing but destruction.

Rotwang must keep the real Maria captive while the robot does its damage. Maria escapes, but the scientist eventually finds her and they struggle as he tries to get her back. Freder sees them struggle and goes to help Maria. Joh watches as his son and Rotwang fight on a high walkway above the city. He is terrified that his son will be thrown over on the landing and die. However, Freder prevails and Rotwang is thrown over onto the landing, to his death.

Rotwang is full of hate and bitterness. He cannot forgive Joh or anyone else. Hel has been dead a long time, given the fact that she died during childbirth and Freder is at least 20 years old. As a result of his loss, Rotwang has become a recluse; he has removed himself from the rest of mankind and allowed his bitterness to grow.



Allegorically, Rotwang represents Satan, whose only purpose is to create havoc and destruction. He creates Machine Man to destroy mankind, and when he is instructed to use Maria's image for the robot, the robot's actions only mirror his. Rotwang is out of control, like the robot. They are both evil and nothing good can come from either of them.

## **The Thin Man (Slim), played by Fritz Rasp**

### **Description**

The Thin Man is Joh's top security person, similar to the Secret Service. When Freder realizes his father plans to do nothing to change the workers' conditions, he runs from his father's office and returns to the underground. The moment Freder leaves the office, his father calls the Thin Man and tells him to follow Freder and keep up with where he goes.

The Thin Man watches over Josaphat from outside his apartment, certain that Freder will try to return to his friend. Finally, Josaphat dons a disguise and gets out his apartment without alerting the Thin Man. This allows him to get to Freder and they, along with the real Maria, save the children during the flood.

### **Analysis**

Once the city is flooding, the Thin Man goes to Joh and asks him if he is aware that his son is with the workers. Joh demands that he must know where his son is. The Thin Man replies, "Tomorrow thousands will ask in fury and desperation: Joh Fredersen, where is my son--!"

This is the statement that sends Joh over the edge, and is the defining statement for the Thin Man. Up until now, the Thin Man served only to do as Joh has ordered, without commentary. Now, the Thin Man is telling Joh that there will be many sons lost in this useless war between the classes and that other parents will feel as devastated as he does now. The Thin Man knows there is no one else Joh feels so deeply for, and he can use the one strong feeling Joh has left to elicit empathy for others. This statement truly serves as a turning point for Joh, who is consumed with the guilt he feels, not only from his own loss, but also the losses of all the others.

## **Josaphat, played by Theodore Loos**

### **Description**

Josaphat is Joh's right-hand man until Freder arrives in the office and tells his father of the explosion below. Joh immediately asks Josaphat why he had to learn of the explosion from his son instead of from him. Next, Joh tells Josaphat to go and find out the details of the explosion, but as Josaphat starts out the door, he runs into Grot. Grot



is bringing Joh a map he has found in the clothes of one of the workers. Again, Joh asks Josaphat why he does not know what is going on with the workers and why, again, Joh has to get his information from another.

Since Josaphat has no answer for Joh, Joh fires him. Josaphat is devastated. On the way out of the building, he takes out a gun to kill himself. Freder sees him and stops him, telling Josaphat he can work for him. This gives Josaphat something to live for and he makes plans to meet up with Freder later.

## Analysis

Joh has no use for Josaphat or the rest of his staff if he decides they are ineffectual for any reason. He feels no loyalty to anyone. Freder, on the other hand, cannot stand the idea of Josaphat completely losing his self-image to the point that he is ready to commit suicide when he loses his job. Freder is the savior and Josaphat is another person he saves from his father's tyranny.

When Freder is recovering from his illness, Josaphat sneaks into Freder's home (he lives with his father) and tells him of the rumors that Maria is leading the workers to revolt. Freder leaves with Josaphat and eventually, after the real Maria escapes from Rotwang, Josaphat helps them save the children from the flood. During the final scene when Joh is watching the struggle between Rotwang and his son, Joh is tormented by the possibility that Freder will fall to his death. He drops to his knees until the fight is over and his son is safe. Josaphat and the Thin Man, one on each side of Joh, help raise Joh to his feet. Josaphat remains loyal, even though he has been treated horribly by Joh in the past.

## Georg (worker No. 11811), played by Erwin Biswanger

### Description

Georg is the worker who is furiously tending the clock when Freder comes in to trade places with him. He collapses in Freder's arms because he is so exhausted. Freder says he will take over for Georg. They trade clothes, including the worker's hat that bears the number 11811. Freder gives Georg the address for Josaphat and tells him to go there and asks that the two of them wait there for him. Georg agrees.

Georg gives the cab driver Josaphat's address, but on the way, he finds a lot of money in Freder's clothes. He cannot resist the temptation to spend the night on the town. Georg never makes it to Josaphat's and neither does Freder, since he falls ill. This delays Freder's meeting up with Josaphat until much later in the film.

The last time we see Georg is once Freder is recovering from his illness and Josaphat sneaks into his home to tell him about Maria leading the workers to revolt. Freder and Josaphat run to the catacombs and see the robot Maria telling the workers to kill the machines. Freder immediately realizes the robot is not Maria and yells to the workers to



disregard what she says. The workers look at Freder and one yells that he is Johhan Fredersen's son. The workers then attack Freder. Josaphat and Freder fight the workers, but it is hardly a fair fight since there are many workers and only two of them. During the fight, Georg, recognizing Freder and knowing he is a good person, steps in front of Freder to protect him. Just as he steps in front of Freder, one of the workers pulls out a knife and stabs George, although he had intended to stab Freder.

## Analysis

Although George originally betrayed Freder by failing to go to Josaphat's after Freder took his place at the clock, he certainly makes up for it later by giving up his life so Freder can live. None of Georg's actions are intentionally malicious. It is certainly understandable that, given the chance to go out on the town, Georg succumbs to temptation. Like Freder, Georg is young. However, he has most likely never had the money or the clothing to do as he pleases. He has also never been allowed to go above ground and live the life Freder has. In fact, it is likely Georg has never even seen Metropolis. It only stands to reason that the first time he sees the beautiful city with its tall building and alluring, blinking lights, he feels he must see more. His desire to experience Metropolis is pardonable by anyone who could imagine being in his shoes.

Freder certainly feels no animosity toward Georg. After Georg has been stabbed, Josaphat and Freder stay with him after all the others have left. Freder and Josaphat desperately want to stop the workers from rioting and destroying the machines, but their first concern is for Georg. When Georg dies in Freder's arms, his last words are "Faithful, after all...." Georg wants to communicate that although he betrayed Freder by not going to Josephat's house when Freder took his place at the machine, Georg was faithful in the end. Georg evidently realized Freder's goodness and, knowing Freder had helped him before for no reason except to help the workers, he stands in front of Freder and takes the death stab. Georg realizes Freder could have remained one of the elite, unconcerned with the workers' conditions. He knows Freder's intentions are good and that Freder represents all that is honorable and true. Georg succeeds in protecting Freder, sacrificing himself and allowing Freder to go on to make life better for the workers.

## Grot, played by Heinrich George

### Description

Grot is the worker's foreman. He is still considered to be among their social class, but he also communicates directly with Joh. His position, by definition, must be a lonely one. He is not considered good enough to enjoy the same class ranking as Johhan Federsen, yet the workers who work under his direction are aware that he reports to the Master and would be hesitant in telling Grot anything of importance. Therefore, he is ostracized from both worlds.



Grot appears to be a likeable person. He does as he is told. When he brings the map he has found in the worker's clothes to Joh, he mentions that it is similar to others he has brought to Joh in the past. Joh does not acknowledge his loyalty or thank him for the delivery of the maps. He naturally EXPECTS this behavior of Grot, as the foreman.

Grot would seem to feel more allegiance to his fellow workers. He remains in their social class, endures the same inequality they do, and weathers the same horrible conditions. For reasons not even suggested in the film, his loyalties remain with Joh. It can be assumed that Grot's character is one that can be easily manipulated.

## Analysis

Grot is the spokesman for the workers, although they may not agree with his viewpoint. When the riot first begins, Grot calls Joh on the picture phone and Joh tells him to open the gates, since Joh has decided to let the workers do as they will. Grot initially refuses to listen to him because he cannot believe Joh is going to allow his beautiful city of Metropolis to be destroyed. When Joh, upset at having to repeat his orders, tells Grot the third time to open the gates, Grot does so. Even then, Grot tries to dissuade the workers from destroying the machines. He tells them the machines control their community as well as that of Metropolis. However, the workers are so intent on destruction, they do not hear Grot. Those who do see him attempting to impart reason are unwilling to listen. They have all assumed Grot is on Johhan Federsen's side and they want nothing to do with him. They knock Grot out of the way; he hits his head and is knocked unconscious.

When Grot awakens, he finally succeeds in getting the workers' attention. He tells them they have flooded their town, since the machines control both communities. He asks the workers and their spouses if they have any idea where their children are, since their town is flooding. Mortified, they realize how ignorant they have been of all the repercussions associated with destroying the machines. The workers naturally accept no blame themselves: they tell Grot Maria told them to destroy the machines. One of the worker's wives yells that Maria is a witch. Grot yells that they need to find Maria and kill her. At this point, Grot has joined the side of the workers' and is no longer loyal to Johhan Federsen. Grot leads the riot this time, as they all go in pursuit of Maria.

In the end, the robot Maria has been burned at the stake, Freder has won the fight with Rotwang, the evil scientist has fallen to his death, Joh has been humbled by the possibility of losing his son, and Maria and Freder have been blissfully reunited. Grot now finds himself facing Joh, in the presence of Maria and Freder. Grot is the first to extend his hand to Joh and Joh walks toward Grot, beginning to extend his hand also. However, Joh stops short of reaching Grot and pulls his hand in as it changes to a fist. Grot is embarrassed and he, too, changes his extended hand to a fist and pulls it down by his side.

Maria tells Freder that the brain and the hand want to come together but they need the heart in between. Freder stands between the two, taking his father's hand and Grot's hand and bringing them together.





# Themes

## Management and Workers as a Team

"There can be no understanding between the hand and the brain unless the heart acts a mediator." Maria carries this theme throughout the movie, advocating peaceful negotiations between the head and the hands. The workers are angry about their conditions and the way they are treated; they want to revolt, refuse to continue working and begin rioting, if necessary. Maria preaches patience and nonviolence and she is their spiritual leader.

Maria tells the workers the story of The Tower of Babel, foreshadowing what will happen in Metropolis. In the Tower of Babel, Maria says that all the people (meaning the minds of those who had invented the tower and the workers who built the tower) spoke the same language, but they could not understand one another. At the end of the story, she emphasizes the coming of a negotiator, who can prevent the destruction like that in the Tower of Babel. A couple of the disgruntled workers ask where the mediator is and Maria can only respond that he will come. A worker tells Maria they will wait, but not for much longer.

At this point, there is no reason to attempt to negotiate with Johhan Fredersen. He is oblivious to the needs of others. He has just fired Josaphat, a loyal worker within the office and his right-hand man. He shows no remorse for treating Josaphat poorly and is totally unconcerned with Josephat's welfare. Freder, his own son, has just run from his father's office, having realized there was no reason to talk with him further. Joh is a callous, selfish man who is unwilling to even consider changing the workers' status.

Rotwang and Joh secretly watch Maria's meeting. Instead of giving consideration to changing the horrific lives of the workers, Joh tells Rotwang to make the Machine Man in Maria's image, so that he (Joh) can manipulate the workers through the robot. This action indicates Joh is completely void of compassion, and is, in fact, just as evil as Rotwang. Joh will stop at nothing to see that his will is done and that he retains total control; he has chosen dishonesty and trickery to manipulate the workers.

Joh's only redeeming quality is his love for Freder, his son. As he sits in his office, watching the lights of Metropolis flicker and go dim, caused by the damage being done to the machines by the rioters, he remains unconcerned until the Thin Man tells Joh his son is among the workers. Only then does Joh become upset at the turn of events brought on by his manipulation. In fact, he is devastated. The love Joh has for his son is deep and unconditional; he cannot fathom losing his son.

Joh's love for his son leads Joh to go out and try to find Freder. As Joh witnesses the struggle between Rotwang and Freder, his fear of losing his son is so great that his hair turns white. At the end of the film, Joh would never have agreed to shake Grot's hand



without the urging of his son, who grabs the hand of his father and Grot's hand and brings them together.

Freder stands in the middle between Grot and his father. Freder represents the heart that is needed to link the head and the hands together. The outcome is just as Maria spoke of in the first meeting: there can be no understanding between the hand and the brain (head) unless the heart acts as mediator. Only now can there be understanding between the two classes (the head and the hands), because the heart (represented by Freder) is now present to act as mediator. Acting separately, with one class being treated as inferior, destruction is inevitable. Acting as a team, anything is possible.

## Man vs. Technology

*Metropolis* was filmed at a time when Germany's economy had just been devastated by World War I and had to be completely rebuilt. It was a time of industrialist fervor, and the pervading fear was that German workers would eventually become cogs in a great industrial machine. This fear is personified in one of the unforgettable images at the beginning of the film: during the workers' shift change, they walk forward like an army of worker drones, shuffling in unison, heads bowed, mere cogs in a huge machine.

Another major area of anxiety for those living in this industrial era was the fear that technology would run amuck. Machines would take over all the jobs previously performed by men. Furthermore, there would be no controlling the machines once they got started. This fear is vividly illustrated in *Metropolis* by Rotwang's invention of Machine Man, a robot that can take the place of a worker and never tire, never make demands, and never question orders. Once the robot is given Maria's image, Rotwang claims he has retained control of the robot's actions. However, once the robot gets started, there is no controlling it. It wants nothing but death and destruction and it is successful in conveying that enthusiasm to the workers.

The machines, themselves, destroy the workers' city and wreak havoc on the great city of Metropolis. This destruction exemplifies what machines are capable of if not closely controlled by man. Once negotiations are finally achieved at the end of the film, both the robot and his inventor are destroyed. Now machines can once again be used for the benefit of man.



# Style and Cinematography

No one can argue that *Metropolis* is a visual masterpiece. Considering the time period in which it was filmed, the special effects are astounding. There were no computers to create these effects, so they were created by hand, through simple editing, or within the camera by cinematographer Karl Freund. For example, the realistic miniatures are the handiwork of Eugene Schufftan, whose eponymous technical process was eventually adopted in the United States. No optical printing existed in the 1920s, so to create a matte effect, a large mirror was placed at an angle to reflect a piece of artwork while live footage was projected on to the reverse. In order to expose the projected footage, the silvering on the back of the mirror had to be scraped off in strategically appropriate places. One mistake ruined the mirror and the whole image. This process had to be employed for each shot that had to be composited in this manner. Named after Eugene Schufftan, it was called the Schufftan Process.

The interior of Johhan's office reveals amazing interpretations of the future. The office is overlaid with Art Deco elements and foreshadows later developments such as computer displays and two-way video conferencing. Considering the time period in which the movie was filmed, the futuristic vision is an uncanny, realistic vision of our world today.

*Metropolis* has influenced our vision of the future ever since it was made. The images created have been duplicated in so many science fiction films, it is impossible to imagine an absence of its influence. *Metropolis* created a time, place, and characters so striking that they became part of our arsenal of images for imagining the world. Both the futuristic city of Los Angeles seen in *Blade Runner* and the city planet of Coruscant from *Star Wars* were patterned after *Metropolis*. Movies like *The Fifth Element*, *Dark City* and even *Batman's* Gotham City borrow from *Metropolis'* visual style. *Dr. Strangelove* pays homage to Rotwang's artificial hand, as does George Lucas, when Luke Skywalker loses a hand in *The Empire Strikes Back* and then has it replaced with an artificial hand in *The Return of the Jedi*. Lastly, all the *Frankenstein* movies have mimicked Rotwang's laboratory in *Metropolis*. If there is a robot or a laboratory or a mad scientist present in a science fiction movie, it is almost a guarantee that the ideas and images from Lang's *Metropolis* are present in the film. Lang's *Metropolis* created our images of a futuristic world and laboratories where evil scientists create robots to replace mankind.

Fritz Lang was not a well-liked producer. He was known to often use actors who were unknown or new to the industry, most likely because few actors were willing to work with him after their first experience. The heroine in *Metropolis* was made to jump from high places, and when she was burned at the stake, Lang used real flames. The extras were often hurled into violent mob scenes, made to stand for hours in cold water, and were handled more like props than human beings. The irony was that Lang's directional style was similar to the approach of the villain in his film. *Metropolis* employed vast sets and 25,000 extras, and took a year to film. As Roger Ebert's review states, "The production itself made even Stanley Kubrick's mania for control look benign." Fritz Lang was a perfectionist, and with perfectionism often comes mania and obsession. However, the

result is one of those seminal films that marked so many of the standards for science fiction that the other films cannot be appreciated or fully realized without viewing Lang's *Metropolis*.

# Motifs

Although there are many different definitions of German Expressionism, all acquaint it as a theory of art that expresses feelings in an abstract way. Expressionism prevailed in the arts right after World War I, when Germany was entering a period of unrest and confusion, an almost hysteric despair coupled with the economic woes of an inflation-ridden country. German filmmakers capitalized on this strangling terror, thriving on the yearning for the fantastic, the mysterious, and the macabre.

The primary themes of expressionism are based in the human struggle to make sense of the world around us. Expressionist films deal with trying to figure out answers to our problems. There is always a fundamental sense of "wrongness" in these films, and they radiate a sense of displacement. This is manifest in *Metropolis'* dehumanized conflict of the owners vs. the workers. However, the end of *Metropolis* provides an answer. This ending is different from the later horror films, where the heroes know all the answers or provide the answers, but, tragically, no one listens. In general, dark films by an afflicted people ring truer than similar films by an unaffected people, mostly because viewers identify better with humans struggling with themselves, rather than those horror pictures where heroes struggle with forces outside themselves.

German Expressionism influenced the arts, and the film industry in particular, from 1919-1933, although many historians report that expressionism died out around 1924. Whether this style died out before or after the filming of *Metropolis*, its influence is evident in the film. The theme of class difference, indisputable in the film, was very important to the expressionist movement. In *Metropolis*, the film begins with the workers' shift change- those going to work walking in synch to the elevators, while those just finishing their shifts also walk in perfect sync to the elevators, returning to their meager existence.

This scene is juxtaposed with the next scene where Freder is playfully running around a large, elegant fountain surrounded by young women. He chases after a particular girl and finally catches her. It is a beautiful day and the scenery is gorgeous. These two contrasting scenes clearly establish the theme of upper vs. lower class that pervades the film and sets up a film clearly defined by the era of expressionism.

The most obvious expressionist means Lang employed is the use of lighting and contrast. The lighting below the city where the employees work and particularly where they enter the elevators is dark and dismal, reflecting the dismal nature of their work as laborers. On the other hand, Freder and his playful companions frolic in a brightly sunlit scene with soft contrasts. This is a much more appealing image than that of the downtrodden workers. In addition, many of the scenes in the upper city, while lit in a fairly traditional way, are bright and full of light. However, the scenes in the underground city are full of shadows, mostly dark with the bright angular lighting often present in expressionist films.

Expressionist influences can also be appreciated in the acting and set design of the film. All the movements by the actors in the film are extremely exaggerated. Freder is the moderating *heart* between the workers and the upper-class and his exaggerated movements reflect his role. He continually embraces Maria, his father, Josaphat, and even the worker #11811 (Georg) who he replaces at the clock. Rotwang plays the role of the evil, mad scientist. His movements, also overstated, are jerky and sudden, pointing out his manic state of mind. Expressionist art also mirrors Metropolis in its angular, crowded skyline of the city, since expressionists were concerned with the role of the city in a modern, industrialized world.

Lastly, the whole core of the film is naturally the theme presented in the beginning and resolved by the end of the film. Nothing could be more expressionist than the price of industrialization, revealed by the inhumane treatment of the workers, the people who literally make the city possible with their endless toil and who pay the biggest price with their tedious, joyless lives. The lighting, set design, and characterization are all central to this theme and undeniably present a strong statement in the art of expressionism.



# Symbols

## Religious Symbolism

The most obvious symbols in *Metropolis* are religious symbols. There are enough religious symbols in the film to devote pages to pointing them out. However, the most obvious ones are those involving Freder and Maria. The film parallels the story of

Adam and Eve in the Bible, particularly the fall of man. Freder is in the Miracle of Eternal Gardens and is very happy (like Adam), chasing girls around a beautiful fountain. Maria appears and gives him knowledge of the underground workers; this causes him to "fall" from his blissful existence into a more knowledgeable and sympathetic state. The upper world is a utopian society where no one works, much like the idea of heaven, but this society depends on the workers of the underground to keep their city going. The underground is comparable to the idea of hell. The workers are forced to sacrifice themselves for the people who live above them.

Johhan Fredersen is called the Master of Metropolis. His office sits at the pinnacle of the city and he oversees everything, with a vast control board that alerts him to any trouble. He is as close a reference to the Supreme Being that one could imagine, although he is an Old Testament god who is quick to wrath and scornful of disobedience. He demands total control, but remains aloof and distant, disinterested in the plight of those below.

Maria is the beautiful reformer who, from her first appearance, evokes the image of the Virgin Mary as she enters the Eternal Gardens surrounded by children, her hands extended over them in saintly grace. She immediately draws Freder's attention and is at least indirectly responsible for pulling Freder away from his home in paradise and down to the level of the workers.

At the meeting of the workers in the catacombs, Maria is bathed in heavenly light and surrounded by tall crucifixes when she tells the story of the Tower of Babel from Genesis in the Bible. This tale is a foreshadowing of the events that will come to pass in the city of Metropolis. The end result, like that of Babel, will be confusion and separation in a society that values competition and ambition among humans. She denounces open revolt and violence, however, and speaks of patience and of hope for a better way of life.

In essence, Maria states that a messiah is needed and that reconciliation must come through a mediator, a third party who can bridge the gap between the workers and the owners. Maria foretells of Freder's coming (like Christ's), and then she herself becomes the agent of that arrival when Freder descends to underground in pursuit of her. There is no mistaking the comparison between Maria and the Virgin Mary, who is also the agent bringing forth the Messiah.



The robot Rotwang builds takes the form of Maria and serves as the antithesis of Maria's vision of peace and compromise. The robot spreads fear and breeds anger. The first vision the viewer has of the robot is in Rotwang's lab, where it sits beneath an inverted five-point star. This symbol is a pentacle and has always been associated with magic, particularly the kind of magic that summons outside forces in the form of spirits and those who have passed on. The robot seduces the upper class men by performing a fevered dance, to the point where they argue and kill themselves and each other in an attempt to unite with her on any level. Maria's look-alike appears to hypnotize those she comes into contact with; she is an entity that can only bring ruin to those who follow her. Her next victims are the workers. She incites them to attack and destroy the machines, an action that will subsequently destroy the workers of the underworld and the inhabitants of Metropolis.

This act of violence has a spiraling effect, causing a flood of biblical proportion and threatening to kill the children. Freder's intervention is all that saves them and the others. The "only begotten" son of the city's "god" descends into the workers' world, mirroring Christ walking among the people. Freder's pleas to his father failed, so he took up the yoke of one of the worker's. After his first, grueling ten-hour shift, he collapses at the foot of the clock, arms outstretched, symbolically crucified to the machine that has enslaved the workers, and cries "Father, I never knew ten hours could be so long," which is similar to Christ's agonizing cry of "Father, Father, why have you forsaken me?"

Just as Christ died on the cross, Freder emerges reborn from the torture of the machine. He has a newfound passion for the plight of the workers, along with a determination to end their torture. In the end, Freder alone can bridge the gap between the workers and their master, just as Christ bridges the gap between God and man.

## The Ambiguity of Technology

Within *Metropolis*, there are ambiguous messages on the subject of technology. Technology is shown as fascinating, alluring, and desirable; however, it is also shown as something to fear if it is not controlled. This ambiguity is apparent in the opposition and the connectedness between the upper and lower worlds, which are both linked and estranged by technology.

The dark side of technology is shown underground, where the workers tend the machines. The workers are reduced to robots, their mechanized movements dominated by the rhythms of the machines, in an environment where the sun never shines. There is a violent explosion in the machine room and through Freder's eyes, we see his hallucination as Moloch devouring its victims. The workers are all enslaved by mechanisms that resemble giant, ten-hour clocks. This is a dismal view of technology: human life completely dominated by machines. These are powerful images of alienation that make it understandable that the film is often read as an indictment of the dehumanizing effects of technology.





However, this dystopian view of technology is profoundly contradicted by the spellbinding images presented of the city. A thriving Metropolis is presented, with vast skyscrapers linked by aerial highways, huge stadiums and pleasure gardens, airplanes hovering between huge buildings and lines of cars that run on jet streams around the outside of the skyscrapers. The excitement and fascination imparted by these effusive images would be difficult to match. Technology is portrayed here as an empowering tool that benefits human purpose and liberates its inhabitants for sensual pursuits and playful activity.

*Metropolis* shows both the positive and negative sides of technology and appears to suggest that it is the way we use the machines and the cultural uses we make of them that determines whether technology is good or bad. The film's resonance is in the visual allure of technology and in its capacity for dehumanization. The viewer is in awe of the spectacular technological creations. At the same time, we witness technology's intolerable human cost. The opposing viewpoints leave us to our own resources, formed as a result of the ambivalence. The viewer cannot watch the extreme dehumanization of the workers and still completely embrace technology. However, the film also reveals the futility of completely denouncing technology, since machines are already a big part of our lives and it is impossible to separate ourselves from our technological creations. When the workers destroy the machines, they destroy their homes, and almost destroy themselves and their children. It is man who controls how machines are used, and at the end, when Freder steps in as the heart and the negotiator between the brain and the hand, balance can be restored.



## Essay Questions

Describe the two worlds present in *Metropolis*. Include the vast differences. Also include the ways in which these two worlds are linked.

Compare and contrast the real Maria and the robot Maria, describing the scenes in which each is most vividly portrayed.

How can Freder be compared to Jesus Christ, as the savior in *Metropolis*. How is his character consistent and/or inconsistent with the savior image?

What purpose do the children serve in the movie? Could the movie have been as easily and successfully filmed without their presence?

Describe the character of Rotwang, including his house. Include a discussion of his relationship with Johhan Fredersen.

*Metropolis* has been called the first science fiction film. How does the movie set precedence for all other science fiction films? What images are repeated or borrowed in other films of this genre?

In what year does *Metropolis* take place? Considering it was filmed in 1927, what details foreshadow those of this time period?

Describe the role of technology in the film. Is technology always presented as a dehumanizing force or does the film include details that cast technology in a favorable light?

Describe the German Expressionist movement in Germany, as related to its effect on the arts, particularly its effect on film. Is Expressionism evident in Lang's film? Why or why not? Was *Metropolis* filmed during this era of German Expressionism?

Discuss the main theme, as stated several times in the film: "There can be no understanding between the hand and the brain unless the heart acts as a mediator."

Include details of Maria's first discussion of this principle and Freder's reactions, and how the theme is resolved at the end of the film. What has been accomplished by the end of the film? What has failed to be accomplished?

### Bibliography

"Biography for Fritz Lang." IMBD. 1994. <http://www.imdb.com/SearchBios?Fritz%20Lang>

Ebert, Roger. "Metropolis." 28 March 1998. [www.rogerebert.com](http://www.rogerebert.com)

"German Expressionism." *The Silent Movie Monsters*. [www.silentmovies.com](http://www.silentmovies.com)

Hawkins, Erika. "Fritz Lang and Metropolis." [www.ladyhawkeswebpage.com](http://www.ladyhawkeswebpage.com)