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Film Studies 380

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Reading Responses 1: Metropolis

The Aesthetics of Rare Experiences by Philip Fisher

[Fritz Lang's](#) 1927 expressionist science-fiction epic [Metropolis](#) was one of the most expensive and influential films of the silent era. Throughout the decades Metropolis has been regarded as the quintessential science-fiction film, and was the first feature length science-fiction film that pioneered the genre, with George Melies, [A Trip to the Moon](#) technically being the first. Metropolis employed large vast sets and groundbreaking special effects to create two extraordinary worlds: the great city of Metropolis, with its beautiful Art Deco design of the expressways, airplanes, bridges and towering skyscrapers that reached the skies, and the bleak subterranean workers underground city, which included over 25,000 extras.

Almost 100 years today many of its themes, designs and special effects has been duplicated, parodied, and recycled, and virtually almost every form of symbolism or dichotomy, religious or political, can be found within Metropolis: rich versus poor, man versus god, male versus female, nature versus technology, with its imagery and metaphors interpreted, whether it's the upcoming rise of Nazism, or to Judeo-Christian theology. George Lucas's blockbuster *Star Wars* was hugely influenced by Fritz Lang's epic, most obviously the design of the droid of C-3PO which is a striking parallel to the android of the false Maria. The creation of the android and

of its creator Rotwang are greatly reminiscent to the old laboratories of mad scientists that came out of the 30's James Whale *Frankenstein* horror films, and the subplot of the creation of the false Maria, is highly similar to *The Terminator* machines or the Replicates in the sci-fi noir *Blade Runner*.

Within the readings of “Wonder, the Rainbow and the Aesthetic of Rare Experiences”, writer Philip Fisher seems to argue of the aesthetics of wonder or sublime. When using such aesthetics to Lang’s science-fiction classic, it’s at first difficult to say which one *Metropolis* could fall under. The film at first glance can be immediately thought of for its wonder, with the films groundbreaking special effects. At first after viewing this film multiple times and knowing the historical importance that surrounds it, I’d have to come to the conclusion that the film includes more direct moments of the sublime. Fisher describes in the article, “The sublime secularized religious feelings of the infinite and of the relative insignificance of human powers in an attractive way, allowing the modern intellectual to hold onto covert religious feelings under an aesthetic disguise (Fisher, 2).

Many politicians at the time looked at *Metropolis* as more of a political allegory of a dictatorial overlord. It's bleak vision of a dystopian future of human despair, and it's themes of the rich and greedy capitalist corporations oppressing and enslaving the poor working man were social themes that Lang stated the Nazi Party quite agreed with when the film first premiered. (Lang got an almost opposite reaction a few years later to *Testament of Dr. Mabuse* in 1933 and the Nazi's demanded changes). According to Lang, the city of the future of *Metropolis* was synonymous with exploitation, inequality, power, corruption and greed. Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels was highly impressed with the film, and took the film's message to heart, which

isn't so surprising since the screenplay was written by Thea von Harbou, Fritz Lang's wife at the time, a woman who would later become a member of the Nazi Party.

The historical changes on Metropolis are equally fascinating as well. After its German premiere Metropolis was cut substantially and large portions of the film were lost over the subsequent decades. Fortunately after 70 years, a print of Lang's original cut of the film which included the last major missing pieces was found in a museum in Argentina, and after a long restoration process, the restored film was shown on large screens in Berlin and Frankfurt simultaneously on 12 February 2010. Greatly taking from the works of German Expressionism, Lang combined the use of stylized sets, bold shadows and lighting, dramatic camera angles, and vast bright buildings, too great an entrancing and nightmarish futuristic city.

Aesthetically many could state that the film of Metropolis is of wonder, as Metropolis was like nothing seen in Germany at the time. And yet the descriptions of sublime given by Fisher within the article seem to describe the real political purpose of Metropolis. "In the sublime, fear and surprise, power and danger occur in a rich blend. The sublime could be called the aestheticization of fear" (Fisher 2). Even though Lang intentionally wanted to make a wondrous special effects film to stir the creative imagination of the German people, the UFA studios behind the funding and idea of its creation seemed to have ulterior intentions. This is probably why in subsequent interviews after the release of the film Lang stated Metropolis was a film he personally detested and was his least favorite of his films.