

***Metropolis* - the “summit of German Expressionism”?¹**

Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927) can certainly be regarded as one of the most important and influential movies of all times. Even though large parts of the film were lost until recently (this paper is based on the 2010 restoration), many of its cinematic elements have inspired filmmakers from the date of its first screening until now. Film critic Roger Ebert called it “the summit of German Expressionism, with its combination of stylized sets, dramatic camera angles, bold shadows and frankly artificial theatrics.”² The vaguely defined genre called German Expressionism describes most of the silent films made in the brief period between 1918 until 1932 in Germany, a time of cultural blossoming that is also known as the Weimar Republic. This paper analyzes the film’s stylistic and contentual elements and compares it to *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) by Robert Wiene, which is considered as one of the first representatives of the genre and Fritz Lang’s later work, his film *M* (1931) specifically. The purposes of this comparison is not only to clarify what the “expressionist” characteristics of the film are, but also to circle out elements of the film that can not be classified as such. My thesis differs from the common assessment that *Metropolis* is a purely Expressionist film. I argue that it also implements techniques that were revolutionary for its time and can be linked directly to Fritz

¹ This periphrasis of *Metropolis* was coined by well-known film critic Roger Ebert, *Metropolis*, June 2, 2010. Retrieved December 2, 2016, from <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-metropolis-2010-restoration-1927>.

² Ebert 2010.

Lang's later work. Hence, this paper is also meant as a critique of the commonly applied genre theory and categorization in cinema and film studies that can constrict cinematic research as I will exemplify below.

At the beginning of this analysis, before looking at the cinematic devices of *Metropolis* and German Expressionist cinema in general, it can be quite helpful to contextualize the film historically. The comparison with *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* is not only interesting from the analytical standpoint regarding existing cinematic parallels between the two films, but also in terms of their production. Even though Robert Wiene, who came from directing theatre plays, was finally chosen to realize *Caligari's* production, it was Fritz Lang who was first asked by the production company Decla and the films producer Erich Pommer.³ Decla would later be taken over by Germany's major production company UFA, which also produced *Metropolis*, again with Erich Pommer as head of the production. Lang declined, because he was working on another project, but had great influence on the production of *Caligari* when he, after reading the script, suggested to add a *Rahmenhandlung* (framing-treatment), the two scenes at the beginning and end that ground the fantastic journey of the protagonist in the reality, that would make *Caligari's* "subversive" script more attractive to the mass audience.⁴ This shows the strong connection the two films share in terms of their production. An aspect that partially explains many of the similarities on the contentual and stylistic levels.

³ See Holger Bachman, "I: The Production and Contemporary Reception of *Metropolis*," in Michael Minden and Holger Bachman (eds.), *Fritz Lang's Metropolis. Cinematic Visions of Technology and Fear*, Rochester 2000, p. 6.

⁴ See Lotte H. Eisner, *The Haunted Screen. Expressionism in German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt*, London 1969 [Paris 1952], p. 18.

A main characteristic of German Expressionist cinema is the extensive use of film sets and stages. Both films were 100 percent studio-made and incorporated very innovative, sophisticated, and gigantic set constructions. In the case of *Caligari* it was the revolutionary emergence of contemporary Weimar art and film, with the two Expressionist painters Walter Reimann and Walter Röhrig designing the really dark and obscure sets, that explicitly reflect the emotional and mental states of the characters, a stylistic device that would be adapted by many other films, even outside the expressionist genre.⁵ *Metropolis* makes use of this, too, for example when Freder, one of the film's protagonists and son of the city's wealthy master-industrialist Joh Fredersen, stumbles through the vast machine halls below the surface of city, where he discovers the harsh reality of the working conditions of the people who keep the city alive by operating gigantic machines that secure the power supply. After a worker collapses it comes to an explosion that catapults the workers and Freder across the room. He is suddenly struck by the vision of a dreadful machine-monster, "Moloch" as an intertitle describes it, which eats the workers in a cult-like ritual. Then, when he gets back to his senses, the machine reappears in its previous shape. These Visualizations of a mental state appear in both films very frequently.

The plot, too, relies heavily on the film sets, but the sets of *Metropolis* have a different scale, they impress not only through their design, but also by their sheer size. The production of the sets was extremely cost and time consuming. In contrast to *Caligari* does *Metropolis* not solely rely on painted sets alone, the set design was also completely different, not so much of expressionist as more futurist. The futuristic landscape of *Metropolis* inspires filmmakers until today and it also incorporated many at the time newly developed trick and animation techniques

⁵ William Guynn (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Film History*, Florence (USA) 2010, p. 186.

to a degree that is revolutionary in film history and that goes beyond the Expressionist genre. Many of the sets were extended through illusionist effects, such as the use of mirrors that made buildings appear taller, or the sophisticated animation of the city's skyscrapers and the masses of moving cars that were trendsetting for the time.⁶ It can certainly be argued that set design was crucial to the Expressionist genre, but the amount of trick techniques applied in *Metropolis* pushes past of what is commonly understood as expressionist.

Nevertheless, it has to be noted that in regards to the acting style *Metropolis* is very much in the tradition of *Caligari*. Especially the acting of Freder summons all attributes of what is considered as expressionist acting. In many scenes he and other characters are showing their inner turmoil in a very extroverted way with wild gestures and mimics that connect to the ubiquitous narrative of sanity and insanity in expressionist cinema.⁷ The extensive use of make-up in both films underlines the characters' emotionality. This is very different from Fritz Lang's later work. *M*, his first sound film, appropriates voices as the main medium to transport emotions and feelings. Still, it should be noted that Peter Lorre's highly acclaimed acting style as the murderer, especially in the trial scene, with his jarring facial expressions mirroring his inner conflicts can be seen as a homage to expressionist cinema and Fritz Lang's own, earlier work. It should not be forgotten that the central theme of *M*, too, is the discussion of sanity and insanity in society, as the trial scene impressively shows.

Besides its astounding effects, *Metropolis*' story has been subject to a great amount of critique. It should be noted, though, that until recently large parts of the film were missing, which

⁶ Janet Ward, *Weimar Surfaces: Urban Visual Culture in 1920s Germany*, Berkeley 2001, p. 149.

⁷ see *The Routledge Companion to Film History* 2010, p. 186.

led to some confusion concerning the interpretation of the story. Roger Ebert trenchantly remarks, that “the storytelling is mostly visual. Lang avoided as many intertitles as possible, and depends on images of startling originality.”⁸ This connects and separates *Metropolis* from other Expressionist films. Very much like *Caligari* does the film rely heavily on the visual to advance its story: the set design, the lighting, the use of darkness, the acting, facial expressions all help to establish a narrative that speaks directly to the audience visually. An intriguing example is the “cave scene”: Maria, the central character of the film, tries to escape Rotwang, the inventor, who plans to replace her with a robot clone (*Maschinenmensch*) to stir up a riot among Metropolis’ workers that should eventually destroy the city. The claustrophobic setting of the cave, the darkness that surrounds it, the helplessness in Maria’s face as there is no way out, and her over-exaggerated acting, all touches on the Expressionist themes of angst and madness.

Metropolis reduces the use of intertitles to a minimum, in contrast to *Caligari* which relies very heavily on them to support its narrative, sometimes even in a very experimental way as one of the final scenes shows, when the madness of Dr. Caligari is displayed all over the screen (“*Du musst Caligari werden*”). This is an important fact, since one of the main traits of Weimar expressionist film or silent film in general is supposedly the extensive use of intertitles, as the lack of sound does not allow any other way to present dialogues or action outside of the *mise-en-scène*. *Metropolis* challenges this believe by mainly focusing on the narrative capabilities of actors and sets. This closely connects to Fritz Lang’s later work. *M* does not rely on intertitles at all (not taking into account are the close-ups of the murderer’s letters) and dialogues are also sparsely utilized. Some scenes like the police raid of Berlin’s underworld

⁸ Ebert 2010.

remain silent, while there is a lot of movement happening on the visual level, cars moving and people running around. This connects directly to the mass scenes of *Metropolis*, e.g. the final chase and the drowning sub-levels of the city, all scenes required vast sets and thousands of extras. Here the drama, the tension is created not through dialogues, but through action and movement. Captured are those mass scenes in relatively long camera takes, very unusual for the silent cinema, giving the audience a chance to let the film's architecture, the highly stylized and sophisticated sets sink in.

Another interesting approach besides a stylistical assessment is to analyze the film's content for political aspects, which can be difficult at first. As noted earlier were, until recently, only parts of the original film available. A fact that needs to be considered since shorter versions tend to distort the story and the filmmakers' original intention. Furthermore, were films of the Weimar period in hindsight often being seen as the bearer of dark Germanic tendencies or even proto-facist, as film theorists Siegfried Kracauer and Lotte Eisner argued shortly after the war.⁹ These standpoints are less focused on a formal analysis and are more a political interpretation of the films that has been formed briefly after World War II, a psychoanalysis of "the German mind," a cultural explanation for the rise of the Nazi-regime. This made a differing analysis of films like *Metropolis* based on stylistical aspects much more complicated. Only recently did academia start to adjust its angle of analysis - and opened up for a variety of interpretations. But of course, all three films can be seen as bearer of different political messages. While *Caligari*, produced briefly after World War I, was intended by its screenwriters to be an allegory against war and the soldiers' unconditional obedience to their superiors. As mentioned earlier, it was

⁹ See Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler. A Psychological Study of the German Film*, Princeton 1947, and Eisner 1969.

Lang who suggested to weaken the film's strong message by adding the first and final scene and making it therefore more apolitical.¹⁰ This was an accusation that was directed at his own work as well, especially *Metropolis* was often criticized as being too “unbearably trivial, naive, sentimental, and [...] even Lang himself wasn't too fond of the film,” as film historian Holger Bachmann noted - Lang would later regret that he did not make the film more political as *M* for example.¹¹

But still there is a lot to be interpreted into the film, especially now with the availability of the restored near-original. The architecture of *Metropolis* can be seen as symbolic for the class stratification of society and the conflicts within it. The finale, which leads to an utopian reconciliation of the two classes, could be interpreted as the central message of the film. As mentioned earlier, did many reject this message as being too naive and utopian, while leaving out the revolutionary techniques the film implemented. Recent research shows the influence of the producing studio, UFA, on *Metropolis* as a gigantic project, in which it invested vast amounts of money, trying to compete on the international market, especially with US-American productions flooding the European market. It becomes clear that the studio system in Weimar Germany had a tremendous influence on the produced films. One might think of Erich Pommer, whom I mentioned earlier and who saw *Metropolis* as an opportunity to compete with the ultra-realistic American cinema by heading into the opposite direction and favoring the stylized art film since it was clear that UFA did not have the money of American productions, even though it has to be said that the vast sets and masses of extras nearly went beyond their tight budget.¹² *Metropolis*,

¹⁰ Eisner 1969, p. 17-27.

¹¹ See Bachmann 2000, p. 3.

¹² See Bachmann 2000, pp. 4-45.

therefore could also be interpreted as a prestige project for a film studio, here namely UFA, that used certain elements of Expressionist cinema, but also pushed for the implementation of new techniques and effects that make this film project unique and go beyond the borders of a single genre.

This brings one back to the initial question this paper asked, can *Metropolis* really be considered the peak of German Expressionism, if it contains so many elements that are unique on their own or should it be considered as something else, a new genre? Both can not be ultimately answered, but it becomes clear that the over-categorization in the field of cinema and film studies needs to be overthought. The example of *Metropolis* shows that it is impossible to put a film in a certain category, it can be helpful for analytical purposes, but it can also narrow down one's capability of interpreting a film from a different viewpoint and angle. This is one of the reasons why the quite negative interpretation of the Weimar cinema, brought forward by Siegfried Kracauer and Lotte Eisner, has dominated the discourse for so long. Until recently it was not challenged, even though Kracauer's and Eisner's analysis is partially simplifying or false, mainly shaped by their personal experience and involvement in the Weimar film industry, and is therefore a subjective rather than an objective reading of a genre called German Expressionism.¹³

My analysis of *Metropolis* is not only intended to be a critique to the extensive use of genre-theory in film, but moreover it proposes that it can be quite rewarding to have a more open approach towards the analysis of films, assessing them from different viewpoints. It has to be said that the paradigm of assigning every film to a certain genre or style, especially in the case of *German Expressionism*, which is limited to a certain national sphere and place, is not very

¹³ See Scott MacKenzie, "New Perspectives on Expressionist Film I. From Caligari to Kuhle Wampe: the Golden Age of German Cinema, 1919-32," in *Screen*, Vol. 40, No. 4, 1999, pp. 454-455.

helpful in the process of crystallizing the stylistical or historical dimension of a film. Film was, is, and will always be a medium that draws on so many different sources, may they be other films, a certain *zeitgeist*, or the willingness to experiment. *Metropolis* showed this impressively. Although the film was often target of harsh critique it remains one of the most influential, mostly cited and important films in the brief history of cinema.

Films

- *Metropolis* (1927) dir. Fritz Lang, Germany (Weimar Republic)
- *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* / *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (1920) dir. Robert Wiene, Germany (Weimar Republic)
- *M / M - Eine Stadt sucht einen Mörder* (1931) dir. Fritz Lang, Germany (Weimar Republic)

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