Discussion Guide for

METROPOLIS

Fritz Lang

The Great Books Foundation
ABOUT THIS DISCUSSION GUIDE

How should society be governed? How should communities be structured? Download the free Great Books Foundation Film and Book Discussion Guides to continue the conversation. These guides were developed by Great Books Foundation editors, to extend the discussion of utopia and dystopia to films and longer written works.

This discussion guide includes references to the 2010 restoration of *Metropolis*.

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LEADING SHARED INQUIRY DISCUSSIONS WITH FILMS

SPOILERS: Our film guides contain no spoilers through the Before You Watch section, but after that, the guides will contain spoilers. You may find it helpful to read the whole guide before watching the film, but be warned! Spoilers abound.

The Shared Inquiry™ method of learning focuses on asking interpretive questions in a group discussion about meaningful works of art. One of the many virtues of Shared Inquiry is that it can be applied to discussions not only about written works but also about cinematic works. There are some unique considerations when approaching Shared Inquiry discussion of a film. To foster lively conversation, pay attention to elements particular to the medium of film. The combination of story and the visual ways filmmakers create meaning will give you a wealth of discussable material.

Below, find some quick definitions of cinematic elements to help your group start thinking about the unique ways films create meaning.

**Cinematography:** The movement and placement of the camera in a film. Think about the height of the camera, its angle, its movement, and how it portrays space in the film. Also consider how scenes are lit, where the light sources are, and what kind of light a film has (natural, studio, even, harsh, warm, etc.).

**Editing:** The way a film is pieced together from individual shots and scenes to create a coherent, logical structure. Editing determines a film’s rhythm—are the scenes long or short? Does the film feel serene or agitated? Admittedly, editing can be hard to discuss with certain films because some editors aim for invisibility. But if a film feels unsettling, you may be able to trace that feeling to the editing on a shot-by-shot level.

**Mise en scène:** French for “to put into the scene.” Mise en scène is exactly what it sounds like: all of the props, costumes, characters,
actors, and settings that compose a film and its individual scenes. Questions about why an actor plays a part a certain way, why scenes look cluttered or spare, why characters always look a certain way, or why a film seems to have a blue tint are all questions related to *mise en scène*. Reminding your group that all of these elements were chosen to be in a film for a specific reason may help them generate questions. *Mise en scène* is a very broad term, but it allows you to analyze purely visual elements of film, which can be forgotten if you focus too heavily on the story or plot alone.

**Sound:** Both the score/soundtrack and the sound originating within the film itself. Though this seems fairly self-explanatory, this cinematic element tends to be overlooked in discussions of film. Imagine a film like Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining* without sound: it would still be frightening, but the ambient sound and thrilling score contribute so much to the atmosphere that the film would be lacking without them. Think about how sound and image relate to or are juxtaposed with one another, and what sort of atmosphere they create together.

In addition to these special considerations, you should also think about the best logistical way to facilitate discussion. Watching a film twice is ideal (just like reading a written work twice), so have your participants watch the film once beforehand on their own and once all together before your discussion. If the film is long, consider gathering as a group for the discussion portion only. When taking notes, it’s easiest to refer to a scene’s timestamp if you want to find it later as an example in your discussion. Once you adjust to a few new techniques and different terminology, you will find that Shared Inquiry can lead to stimulating conversations about film, just as it does with written works.
Discussion Guide for
Metropolis

BEFORE YOU WATCH

Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* is pivotal in film history. It paved the way for modern dystopian movies and has been thematically and visually imitated by science fiction films as diverse as *Blade Runner*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and *Star Wars*. The 1927 movie was adapted by Lang’s then-wife Thea von Harbou from her novel of the same name. The film’s budget far exceeded that of any other silent film of the time, allowing Lang to make one of his most lasting masterpieces.

Despite its historical significance, the original version of *Metropolis* seen by Munich theatergoers in 1927 was, until recently, all but lost. With a runtime of more than two and a half hours, foreign distributors did not believe it would draw an audience. Because of this concern and the desire to censor inflammatory scenes, more than thirty minutes of *Metropolis* was cut. Presumably this was accomplished by physically cutting the scenes out of the film reels and disposing of them on the spot. Later generations were left with little hope of reconstructing the film as it was seen at its premiere. Over the years, many attempts were made to describe and recreate the missing scenes using secondary sources and adding intertitles. The great breakthrough came in 2008 when a nearly complete copy of the movie was found in Argentina. After restoration, this copy was released in 2010. This definitive version has returned all of Lang’s original vision to the movie, even after he had claimed it was a movie that no longer existed.
As you watch *Metropolis*, consider the following questions:

- The epigram focuses the viewer’s attention on the conflict between the workers and the intellectuals. Which events help to move along this “main” storyline, and which can be considered subplots? Why does the movie include so many diverse stories?

- Who, if anyone, can be considered a villain? Do their actions reveal their character, or is it in the way they are visually depicted? Do the appearances of characters ever belie their moral character?

- Freder has several hallucinations or visions during the film. What visual cues help the viewer identify them as such? Is it possible to discern what is “really” happening at these moments? Why is this device used to reveal what Freder thinks about a situation?

- How does Lang employ light in the film? Is the underground workers’ city always darker or only at times? Does light draw attention to certain images or direct it away from others?

- What references are there to brains, hands, and hearts? Why is the main machine called the “heart machine”? What visual cues reveal whether a character is driven by brain, hands, or heart?

**ABOUT METROPOLIS**

*Metropolis* relates the conflicts of a hierarchical society divided between common laborers and exalted intellectuals. While the former are relegated to a workers’ city “deep under the earth’s surface,” the brains of the society are allowed to live on and above the surface. The highest ranking individuals of this class live and work in buildings that extend all the way to the sky, such as the New Tower of Babel and the Eternal Gardens. These names give the first indication of the prevalent Christian themes that are woven throughout the film, reaching their highest point when the movie’s inventor character, Rotwang, brings to life a
“creature” that begins to fulfill the apocalyptic prophecies of the New Testament. Eventually the threat of this creature is suppressed by secular means, raising the question of why Lang and von Harbou chose to communicate the portents of their dystopia through religious symbolism.

The film itself opens with an epigram stating: “The mediator between brain and hands must be the heart!” This phrase is repeated throughout the movie and proves to be the primary theme of the plot. Just at the moment when the workers have staged their most extreme revolt and the brains have made their most coldly logical decision on how to contain it, the “heart” comes through to mediate. However, this romantic story arc takes place amid a flurry of other plot events that tie the characters to many other intrigues and heroics. Rather than being a solely moralistic tale of social classes coming to understand one another, Metropolis also takes on multiple subplots with drastically different tones. At times it is a folkloric just-so tale, but at others it more closely resembles the film noir style that is characteristic of many of Lang’s films. Why does Lang choose to implement so many styles and themes, and to reference so many other stories and tales?

The city of Metropolis is divided into three vertical sections between the workers’ city, the ground level, and the soaring buildings of the elite. Within these hierarchical categories, there are deviations. The heart machine underground towers over the other machines and residences. Rotwang’s house is of an “old” style that does not match the rest of the futuristic city. There are churches and religious structures that are also of an older stone architecture both under and above ground. What effect do the setting and location of events have on our viewing of individual scenes and the film as a whole?

A silent movie, particularly one made so early in the history of film, poses unique questions. The melodramatic style of acting employed in silent films is significantly different than later “talk” movies. By imitating the extravagant style of stage theater, actors are able to communicate emotions and thoughts that cannot readily be included in the intertitles. What do the actors’ exaggerated movements tell us about their characters? For example,
why does Freder clutch his heart in so many scenes? Do other characters have identifying movements?

Another unique characteristic of silent films is the role of intertitles. Intertitles are often straightforward and provide necessary plot information or dialogue. But why does Lang choose to reveal information via intertitles sometimes sooner and sometimes later? For example, when Freder goes to talk to his father for the first time, there is a long scene without an intertitle. Why does Lang allow us the uncertainty over which man is Freder’s father? Are there other moments when Lang refrains from using intertitles in order to conceal information temporarily or entirely?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why did Freder originally choose to go into the depths?
2. Why does Rotwang live in the only part of the city that has not been renovated or rebuilt?
3. Why does Maria modify the story of Babel when she tells it to the workers?
4. What does Freder mean when he says he needs Maria “to fulfill his destiny”?
5. Why does 11811 sacrifice himself for Freder?
6. At what point in the movie does Joh Fredersen change his mind about the plan to destroy the workers?
7. Why can’t Maria be the mediator?
8. Why is the head worker, Grot, who is originally shown to be a mole working for Joh Fredersen, chosen as the representative for the workers in the mediation?
9. What is the role of the individual in Metropolis? Does the movie make a case for individual initiative and responsibility, or does it assume that classes or groups are more essential?
10. Does the movie conclude that an uneven social order is the ideal?
FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. Can peaceful mediation between social classes bring lasting change, or are the aims of these groups too different for real mediation?

2. Is there a natural hierarchy among human beings, such that some are suited to deliberate and rule, while others do the manual labor?

ABOUT FRITZ LANG

Fritz Lang was born in Vienna, Austria, in 1890. Lang fought in World War I, but he was eventually discharged after several injuries that left him blind in his right eye. While transitioning back to civilian life, he became involved in stage theater and screenwriting. His success in the latter helped to launch him into his career as a director. His first film, Halbblut (1919, The Half-Caste), is no longer extant but was followed by several other well-received silent films which propelled him into early fame. His first film with live sound, M (1931), only increased his popularity.

Lang left Austria, and eventually Europe, after his 1933 film Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse (The Testament of Dr. Mabuse) was banned by the Nazi regime. After a brief stint in Paris, he settled in Hollywood. Known for an incredible work ethic, Lang directed more than forty movies in his lifetime; he also wrote the majority of the scripts. Most of his films integrated elements of the noir style, although he experimented with other genres, including several westerns. Later in his life he moved back to Germany for a few years, but ultimately returned to Los Angeles where he died on August 2, 1976. As one of the first great directors, responsible for countless classics of film history, Lang has influenced many directors of science fiction films including Jean-Luc Godard, Stanley Kubrick, and George Lucas.
ABOUT THIS GUIDE’S AUTHOR

Kelsey Crick, college senior and GBF intern, says that Metropolis is an amazing accomplishment of early film that challenges us to look at the consequences of how well we relate to the diverse members of our society. Kelsey is a senior at the Great Books college of Chicago, Shimer College. She has been working on content development with the Great Books Discussions department of the Foundation since June 2014.