



METROPOLIS 1927 (GERMANY)

Director Fritz Lang **Producer** Erich Pommer **Screenplay** Thea von Harbou, Fritz Lang **Photography** Karl Freund, Günther Rittau **Music** Original release score composed by Gottfried Huppertz **Cast** Alfred Abel, Gustav Fröhlich, Brigitte Helm, Rudolf Klein-Rogge, Fritz Rasp, Theodor Loos, Erwin Biswanger, Heinrich George

Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* is crowded with startling images and flashes of brilliant technique that transcend all other considerations (such as its often risibly naïve parable of the struggle between capital and labor) and warrant its inclusion in any comprehensive list of screen classics.

Within the tangled narrative, muddled further by many cuts and existing in several versions of differing lengths and degrees of completeness (with lost footage still being recovered as recently as 2008), Lang posits a future where technology rules and an army of workers living underground slave on the orders of a small ruling elite. Into this hidden realm stumbles Freder (Fröhlich), son of the city's Master. Moved by the workers' plight and the purity of Maria (Helm), a serenely beautiful young woman who ministers to them and cares for their children, he decides to improve their lot. Meanwhile, Rotwang (Klein-Rogge), a crazed inventor, has created a "Maschinenmensch," an android slave capable of assuming human form. He kidnaps Maria and transforms the robot in her image before, for reasons of his own, using it to stir the workers to revolt. At the end, order is restored and Maria and Freder reconcile the two strata.

◀ **Brigitte Helm's doppelgänger robot in its gold-painted, pre-humanized incarnation remains the defining visual signature of *Metropolis*.**

In later years, Lang himself dismissed the plot as “a fairytale, definitely,” and it seems clear that he paid little attention to it. The pictures are the thing: in a succession of beautifully composed images, Lang vividly depicts a dehumanising underworld in which identically dressed workers toil before and within vast banks of (surely impractical) art deco machinery, illuminated by billowing jets of smoke and electric

“I DIDN’T LIKE THE PICTURE— I THOUGHT IT WAS SILLY AND STUPID”

FRITZ LANG (DIRECTOR)

sparks. These scenes have influenced countless subsequent sci-fi filmmakers, and now form part of the standard repository of images by which futuristic architecture is identified.

The film’s final quarter, in which the workers rise and destroy the city, is its startling highlight, combining mammoth sets with seamlessly integrated model shots, gallons of flooding water and a crowd of thousands of extras in an astounding feat of direction, construction, editing, and special effects. Lang also makes impressive use of montage, notably in Freder’s fevered vision of the fake Maria’s erotic dance before a crowd of leering men, the screen at one point becoming a tangled mass of staring eyes. The human element of *Metropolis* is as incidental to its importance as its narrative, but Brigitte Helm’s performance as both the saintly Maria and her bewitching, gyrating robot doppelganger has become justly iconic. **MC**

►
**Frederesen
persuades the
scientist Rotwang
to give the robot
Maria’s appearance,
hoping to use the
robot to tighten
his control over
the workers.**

