

Thought Experiment

Kelly Lagor

THE SHOWING AND TELLING OF *METROPOLIS* AND FRITZ LANG

A young woman lies on an examination table, unconscious, enclosed in a coffin of glass and metal. Behind her, in a chair from which a dozen thick cables run, sits a robot in the shape of a woman. A man in a dark smock with a shock of white hair stalks through the lab. Lamps illuminate. Flasks bubble. He pauses at the master controls, then throws a switch. Halos of light encircle the robot, climbing up and down its form. The man adjusts the controls. Light dances in the robot's chest, a heartbeat. Its facial features change. When it awakens, it has the young woman's face, blankly staring.

Description of a scene from
Metropolis (1927)

* * *

Among the most visually striking science fiction films in history, *Metropolis* exemplifies both Fritz Lang's mastery of visual storytelling and his almost strategic refusal to pay much mind to a story's message. Is it a love story? An expressionist critique of capitalism? An authoritarian conformist tale? Regardless, it is a triumph of cinematography, and Lang's single-minded focus on that imagery meant none of its muddled themes—like religion versus science, and the duality of feminine vice and virtue—was sufficiently developed, which left audiences with an understanding as hollow as the Robot Maria's chest.

* * *

"To begin with I should say that I am a visual person. I experience with my eyes and never, or only rarely, with my ears—to my constant regret."

Fritz Lang

One can hardly find a piece of fiction-writing advice more well-trod than "Show, don't tell," which, in its contemporary form, is meant to implore a writer to choose words and details that carry greater emotional and imaginative weight. While the phrasing implies showing is better than telling, this advice's origins reveal the more symbiotic relationship between the two.

"Show, don't tell" was popularized in Percy Lubbock's influential 1921 book, *The Craft of Fiction*, in which he used a Modernist lens to try and identify a novel's perfect form. Showing, Lubbock explained, is akin to a reader viewing a stage play. All the reader has is their own interpretation of what characters say and do, and though the author decides what things to put on the page, an obvious narrator is absent. This approach, when done well, allows a reader to step into a scene and use their experience and understanding of cause and effect, and feel a sense of immediacy and authenticity, effectively telling themselves the story the author intended.

Telling, by contrast, has the narrator become a character, which creates a sense of distance, as though a reader is watching them tell them a story. The loss of that sense of immediacy, however, allows the narrator to give information a reader wouldn't otherwise have, such as character background or context. Telling, therefore, adds depth that is difficult for showing alone to accomplish.

Lubbock's ideal narrative involved both showing and telling because they work together to achieve the richness and authenticity necessary to tell a great story. With *Metropolis*, however, where the showing works and the telling doesn't, no amount of visual genius can save a deeply flawed story. "Never for a moment does one believe any of this foolish story," said H.G. Wells in his scathing 1927 review of the film, "Never for a moment is there anything amusing or convincing in its dreary series of strained events. . . . The film's air of having something grave and wonderful to say is transparent pretense."

* * *

The heart of the machine city Metropolis lived in a white, cathedral-like hall. The heart of the machine city Metropolis was guarded by one single man.

The man was called Grot, and he loved his machine.

This machine was a universe to itself. Above the mysteries of its delicate joints stood, like the sun—like the radiance of a deity—the silver whizzing wheel, and, as it swirled and whirled, its spokes seemed like one sparkling disc. This disc filled the back wall of the room in its entire breadth and height.

Metropolis (1925, novel)
by Thea Von Harbou

Shot 263.

Heart Machine

Long Shot:

Almost filling the image, the giant steel frame of the heart machine. The whole colossus standing against the spokes of an enormous steel wheel—these are like a disc.

A tangle of switchboards, lever systems, scales, safety valves. The machine working, all its enormous limbs moving steadily. The wheel behind it is like a radiant sun. Grot occupied with his machine, secure, calm, attentive. One cheek swollen with chewing tobacco.

Metropolis (shooting script)
by Thea Von Harbou and Fritz Lang (uncredited)

* * *

The mix of showing and telling in the early days of cinema shifted along with the maturing expectations of audiences. In the fifteen years after the first public exhibitions, film evolved from its "novelty period," in which the technology itself was the attraction, to its "cinema of attractions" phase, which used static cameras to shoot stage productions or live events. This latter phase also, however, included the more innovative trick films of George Méliès, with their simple narratives and boundary-pushing techniques with otherwise static cameras.

Film narratives took a leap forward with Edwin Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903). Porter, a director-cameraman-editor working for the Edison Manufacturing Company, was formerly a traveling projectionist with a love for Méliès' films, and he wanted to make a movie that could both tell a complete story and get a strong reaction from audiences. Porter's script was based on a stage play and drew additional tropes from dime novel westerns to create the wildly popular film.

To help audiences better follow the narrative, Porter used dissolves instead of the more usual abrupt slice cuts between different outdoor moving shots, and "cross-cutting" to jump between action sequences taking place simultaneously. He was also the first to use intertitles, which soon became a standard silent cinema practice, to aid the story flow by identifying characters and scenes.

Porter's work also established the shot, not the scene, as the basic unit of a film, and developed many techniques that became industry standards, including multi-shot

scenes, close-ups, and improved lighting schemas. Though they're cinematic givens today, these techniques had a huge impact on the narrative capabilities of film. With close-ups alone, for example, philosopher Horace M. Kallen in 1942 said, "Slight actions, such as the incidental play of the fingers, the opening or clenching of a hand, dropping a handkerchief, playing with some apparently irrelevant object, stumbling, falling, seeking and not finding and the like, became the visible hieroglyphs of the unseen dynamics of human relations."

The increasing sophistication of the language of visual narrative meant that by the 1920s, the distinct visual and narrative tropes of every type of movie genre, from comedy to crime had been established.

* * *

A massive, four-story machine fills the room before Freder. Between the tiers of laborers throwing their jumpsuit-clad bodies back and forth to obey the dictates of their stations, a steep stairwell climbs into a huge opening where pistons endlessly churn. A worker at a complex station of gleaming dials and levers collapses against its controls. As the man loses consciousness, a temperature gauge climbs to dangerous levels. The laborers struggle to maintain control of the machine as jets of steam engulf them. Some succumb, others leap from great heights to escape the scalding clouds.

Aghast, Freder has a vision of chained men as they're dragged up the steps to be fed into a gaping mouth beneath staring eyes.

"Moloch!" Freder yells.

Description of a scene from
Metropolis

* * *

German Expressionism, for how briefly it existed, is responsible for some of the most notable films of the silent era. Expressionism arose in Northern Europe in the early 1900s and embraced Modernism's "make it new" imperative to move art away from its traditional Realist roots to instead portray a subject's emotional inner world. By the 1920s, this aesthetic approach, which told by showing, would find its way into German cinema.

The evolution of German film history mirrored the history of film in general; from technical demonstrations to nickelodeon-type *Kientopps*, to posh cinemas as demand for increasingly narrative-based cinema grew. Because films were necessarily silent, cinema easily transcended language barriers and national boundaries, allowing American movies to flood European markets. During World War I, in response to the spread of English propaganda films, Germany closed its cinematic borders and consolidated its film industry. Under government control, the German film industry produced both anti-ally and pro-German propaganda alongside lighter, more popular fare. By the time the war ended and Germany's government collapsed, the German film industry had become the second largest in the world, behind the United States.

The collapse of the government marked the beginning of the Weimar Republic in Germany, a tumultuous post-war period of rampant unemployment, hunger, rapid inflation, and widespread political corruption. It was also a period of intense philosophical debate among German artists and intellectuals about what Germany should become in the twentieth century. There had been a proliferation of different Modernist -isms—Capitalism, Communism, Socialism—each with their own unique and competing images of what a more perfect world might look like. What better time for such revolutionary dreams than in the wake of a devastating war unlike any seen before in which, notably, soldiers rode in on horses and out on airplanes.

This maelstrom of hope and despair became particularly apparent in the German Expressionist films of the time, and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) was among the

first, and most Expressionist of all. In it, a man, Francis, recounts a tale in which he and his friend encounter Dr. Caligari and his somnambulist, Cesare, at a city fair. After Cesare's prediction of the friend's imminent death comes true, Francis discovers Caligari to be the director of the local psychiatric hospital. In a twist ending, Francis is revealed to be a patient in the hospital, the story all in his head.

Caligari's stark, chiaroscuro lighting, and twisted, distorted sets, emotive acting, heavy makeup, and close-ups, all together effectively capture the nightmare reality of its protagonist. His sense of anxiety and terror is evident in every curve of its claustrophobic sets, and every shadow drawn on Cesare's haunted face.

Caligari's effective aesthetic, its use of setting, light and shadow to portray the inner lives of its characters, had an immediate impact on other contemporary German directors, and the most notable to adopt this style was Fritz Lang.

* * *

Filling the frame are an expanse of tightly packed, white-stone deco skyscrapers. Spanning between, and running along the ground far below, are long roads packed with cars. A shining train streaks by as biplanes pick leisurely paths between buildings. In the background, a building towers over these architectural marvels. Blocking out half the sky and standing over a hundred stories tall, it is the pride of Metropolis and the seat of its ruler. It is the New Tower of Babel.

Description of a scene from
Metropolis

* * *

Lang was always most concerned with appearances.

Growing up at the close of the nineteenth century, Lang's artistic sensibilities were shaped by the pulp fiction he adored, such as the westerns of Karl May and the scientific romances of Jules Verne, as well as by his mother, who hosted frequent artist and poet salons at their Vienna home. As a teenager, Lang decided to become an artist, and skipped school to frequent Vienna's cafés, cabarets, and cinemas. When Lang was fourteen, he saw *The Great Train Robbery*, and had the epiphany that one "could also paint using a camera!" Lang also was developing his lifelong habit of exaggeration and embellishment to better paint himself as a creative genius.

After purportedly traveling around Europe to study art, he volunteered for the Austrian Army following the country's declaration of war in 1914. During his service, he won several awards for reconnaissance, and was injured multiple times. One injury, according to Lang, necessitated him to start wearing his trademark monocle, however, friends claimed he started wearing the monocle before he enlisted.

During one convalescence, he began writing scripts, and fortuitously his monocle earned him his only stage role, through which he met Erich Pommer. Pommer, a former propaganda and educational filmmaker, was the founder of the film studio Decla, and while Pommer was not impressed with Lang's monocle or arrogance, he was impressed by the artist he saw behind the affect. "With the eyes of a painter," Pommer said, "Lang saw that the photographic lens, that is, the eye of the camera, must serve, by using light-and-shadow effects, to fuse performance, plot, and background into a unified entity, to somehow create a film composition."

At the end of 1918, Lang moved to Berlin to work for Pommer at Decla's (later Ufa) Neubabelsberg Studio. It was an auspicious time to work in film. The German film industry was a calm within the Weimar storm. Due to the escapism promised, the demand for films was booming, which made for steady employment. Working for Pommer, and with the resources of the largest film production company in Europe, Lang quickly became one of Germany's pre-eminent directors.

Under Pommer's financial indulgence, Lang's perfectionism and already enlarged ego grew. His scripts were saturated with handwritten notes describing exact shot

compositions and actor mannerisms. He would even write down numbered scene beats, then arrive early on set to mark the floor where his actors would stand and how they would move, which often resulted in wooden performances even from seasoned actors. “He hypnotized people with his air of extreme confidence and terrified them with his barking orders,” wrote Patrick McGilligan in his excellent 1997 biography of Lang. “Men and women alike found him exciting.”

Pommer offered Lang *Caligari* to direct, but Lang was in the midst of filming a successful adventure serial, *The Spiders* (1919 and 1920), and declined. Lang was, however, responsible for *Caligari*’s controversial frame story, a popular stylistic affect at the time, which transformed the otherwise radical, anti-authoritarian tale into a more conformist one. Lang, who was already playing with pronounced light and shadow, confined spaces, dramatic makeup, and emotive acting styles, was further encouraged to develop in that direction by the success of *Caligari*.

That same year, Lang met his artistic soul mate—Thea von Harbou. Von Harbou was a writing prodigy as a child. Before pursuing a career as an actor, she published multiple short stories and poems. She was married to the German actor Rudolf Klein-Rogge (who later played Rotwang) when she was introduced to Lang in 1919, and was focusing on screenwriting. She and Lang met while working on a screenplay together, and began an affair that led to von Harbou’s divorce and the suicide of Lang’s first wife. Lang and von Harbou were soon after married, and von Harbou became one of the preeminent screenwriters in Germany.

Long after Lang’s infamously short attention span wandered to other women, von Harbou remained faithful to him, kept his house, and cooked his meals. For all his brutalism on set, she acted as mediator, fed his overworked cast and crew, and talked down anyone Lang ruffled. With her stories and his vision, they collaborated on all of Lang’s remaining German films, including a succession of masterpieces—*Destiny* (1921), *Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler* (1922), *Die Nibelungen* (1924), *Metropolis*, and *M* (1931).

* * *

“The buildings seemed to be a vertical veil, shimmering, almost weightless, a luxurious cloth hung from the dark sky to dazzle, distract, and hypnotize. At night the city did not give the impression of being alive; it lived as illusions lived. I knew then that I had to make a film about all of these sensations.”

Fritz Lang

* * *

Lang repeated slightly different versions of the above anecdote about his October 1924 arrival in New York City for the American premiere of *Die Nibelungen* throughout his life, but it was another embellishment. Pommer wanted another stylized mega-production after *Die Nibelungen*, so Lang had conceived of the “costliest and most ambitious picture ever” to be made in Europe, and von Harbou had already completed the script by the time he set foot in New York.

The script, and subsequent novel, drew inspiration from a myriad of von Harbou’s science fictional influences. The futuristic environs and stratified class divisions von Harbou lifted from Wells’ *The Sleeper Wakes* (1899), which Wells would later also complain about in his review of the film. The working-class anxiety over becoming cogs in an Industrial Revolution machine came straight from Karel Čapek’s influential play, *R.U.R.* (1921), which coined the term “Robot” to describe its cloned human workers. She also borrowed from Villiers de L’Isle-Adam’s short story *L’Eve future* (1886), which detailed the construction of the perfect mechanical woman, and from *Frankenstein* (1818), with a mad scientist creating life with electricity. Despite such rich source material and Von Harbou’s lofty ambitions, a hodgepodge of pastiches and sentimentality made for a narrative mess.

Freder, son of the master of Metropolis, Joh Fredersen, discovers his life is made possible by the brutal toil of cog-like workers. After following Maria into the lower city, he falls in love when she gives a sermon to workers promising them a savior is coming to mediate between them and Fredersen. Fredersen also watches Maria's speech and demands Rotwang, the former lover of Freder's now-dead mother Hel, give a robot Maria's face. Robot Maria then incites a worker rebellion that floods the workers own homes. In the end, the mob burns Robot Maria at the stake, Freder saves the real Maria from Rotwang, and Maria convinces Freder to pacify the mob by facilitating a handshake between their leader and his father.

While its bloated narrative was derided by audiences and critics alike, Pommer's indulgent budget let Lang create what would become German Expressionism's last great gasp. Iconic imagery was used to bring to life every aspect of Harbou's script—heaven and hell in the brightly lit upper city and its silk-clad inhabitants, versus its dark, rough cloth-clad workers below, Robot Maria's shining metal body in the dark, rune-scribbled laboratory of Rotwang; Maria's pleading sermon versus Robot Maria's seductive dance at the Yoshiwara nightclub. To bring these visions to cinematic life, Lang's perfectionism consumed his crew: cameramen Karl Freund and Günther Rittau and set architects, Otto Hunte, Erich Kettelhut, and Karl Vollbrecht.

To create the shot of the upper city, with its pedestrians, trains, cars, and planes, the crew toiled over stop motion effects for eight days to create a scene that would last barely ten seconds. "Based on the test shots," Kettelhut wrote in an unpublished memoir, "we found out that after every single frame, planes had to be moved by one and a half centimeters, trains by one centimeter, cars by roughly three quarters of a centimeter and the pedestrians only by minimal steps to create a flowing movement at a realistic speed. . . . Only reliable people could carry out this job."

The Moloch machine scene used a pioneering technique known as the Schufftan process, in which set pieces too large or intricate to build to scale were built in miniature, then merged into live action scenes by using carefully placed mirrors. This technique proved so useful that it later became popular with directors ranging from Alfred Hitchcock to Peter Jackson.

In the scene where Robot Maria is made, Lang required Brigitte Helm to sit perfectly still inside a painfully stiff and skintight suit designed to fit her standing, not sitting. Rittau created the light ring effect by photographing a rapidly whirling silver ball against a black velvet background, then raised and lowered the camera. Multiple shots of these rings were then superimposed over the footage of Helm.

Due to the unprecedented budget, the studio's publicity engine worked at full steam to drum up interest in the film. This included the release of von Harbou's *Metropolis* novelization, a standard marketing practice even then. Articles also appeared in studio propaganda magazines alongside production stills, interviews, and behind the scenes photos. One called *Metropolis* "a tremendous step ahead," and claimed that "one can already rest assured today that Fritz Lang and Ufa are creating a piece of work here that once again will prove that German film is among the world's best productions." Soon after its release in January of 1927, however, public excitement waned, and the film flopped. Its overblown budget also led to the eventual collapse of Ufa.

* * *

"All of my German films and the best of my American ones deal with fate. I don't believe in fate anymore. Everyone makes fate for himself. You can accept it; you can reject it and go on. There is no mysterious something, no God who puts the fate on you. It is you who makes the fate yourself."

Fritz Lang

* * *

Lang was never one to look much past his own concerns, so at first he didn't pay much attention to the rise of the Nazi Party and the increasingly worrying political situation in Germany. The Nazis, however, didn't overlook Lang. "Lang made films so truly German that even Hitler admired them, and he was a connoisseur," wrote critic and journalist Siegfried Kracauer in his seminal work *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947).

The Nazis were particularly impressed with *Metropolis'* massive, impersonal sets and its conformist, authoritarian-affirming message at the end, in which a labor revolution defers to its authoritarian dictator, thus upholding the status quo. Joseph Goebbels, chief propagandist for the Nazi Party, recognized the most important aspect of any propaganda was the emotions it evoked, since those impressed upon the subconscious more strongly than any spoken or written message. Goebbels was particularly impressed by the large set pieces, long shots, and cog-like workers in Lang's *Die Nibelungen* and *Metropolis*, which were replicated in the cinematography of the 1935 Nazi propaganda film, *Triumph of the Will*.

Von Harbou became one of the highest paid screenwriters in Germany. She and Lang divorced in 1933 after Lang discovered her affair with an Indian journalist. Prior to their split, Von Harbou had taken up the Nazi cause, and channeled her love of nationalist themes into screenplays for over two dozen films made for the Nazis during the war. Though she claimed only to have joined to fight for Indian independence, she would never, according to McGilligan, distance herself from Nazi ideology or express repentance for the Third Reich's atrocities at any time before her death in 1954.

Another questionably true Lang anecdote described how in 1933 Goebbels offered him the position heading the agency that would supervise the Nazi film industry because Hitler wanted Lang to "make the Nazi pictures." Whether or not it's true, Lang fled Germany that year and eventually wound up in Hollywood, where he continued to have a profound impact on cinema's visual landscape with his noir films. In the end, it didn't matter how impressive he found his own stories—the ego, exaggerating, bullying, and womanizing alienated him from every studio and nearly every friend by the time of his death in 1976.

Lang's legacy has a long reach, extending from Hitchcock and Stanley Kubrick to Tim Burton and Guillermo del Toro. According to the *New York Times*, "The film world of Lang, whose innovative craftsmanship influenced hundreds of younger directors . . . put [an] indelible stamp on the art of cinema."

Metropolis was to be routinely recut by theaters to streamline the narrative before it disappeared from cinematic memory. Interest in the film was renewed in 1984 when the musician Giorgio Moroder recut it for the Cannes film festival. He focused on the love story and included music from Freddie Mercury and Pat Benatar. It also had a profound influence on science fiction film, its reach felt in *Star Wars*, *Bladerunner*, and *The Matrix*, to name a few, and its rediscovery eventually allowed it to assume its rightful place in the cinematic pantheon for its cinematography, a marvelous example of the power of showing in film.