

# Complete print of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* discovered in Argentina

## Metropolis

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A complete version of Fritz Lang's silent film classic *Metropolis* was discovered in Argentina in June. Long believed lost in its complete form, the 1927 masterpiece has until now only been available in heavily truncated versions.

Discovered in the archives of Buenos Aires' Museo del Cine, the rare find was shown to researchers at the Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau Foundation in Germany, which owns the rights to *Metropolis*, who then declared it authentic. Though badly scratched in its current state, there are plans under way to restore the work and make it available to the public. When this happens it will be the first time the work has been shown in its original version, as Lang intended, since 1927.

*Metropolis* had its debut in Berlin on January 10 of that year. At that time the work was 13,701 feet long and, projected at 24 frames per second, had a running time of 210 minutes. It was panned by critics. Executives and censors at UFA (Universum Film AG), Germany's leading film production company, wasted little time in cutting the film, the most expensive made up to that time, down to size after its disastrous opening.

Paramount Pictures, the American distributor, along with UFA, chopped the film not long after it premiered in order to shorten it to a more commercially acceptable running time. The picture's length was not the only consideration in cutting it, however. The management of UFA insisted on removing intertitles with "Communist tendencies" for versions of the film to be shown in the United States. A similar process occurred in most countries in which the film was distributed. Censors and industry executives from all over the world had their chance to mutilate Lang's work.

Adolfo Z. Wilson of Argentina's Terra film distributors had in the meantime acquired the complete version of the film in 1928 and returned with it to Buenos Aires. A film critic there, Manuel Peña Rodríguez, later purchased Wilson's print and held it in a private collection until the 1960s when he then sold it to Argentina's National Art Fund. From here a 16mm reduction negative copied from the original nitrate found its way into the collection of the Museo del Cine in Buenos Aires in the early 1990s.

In January of this year, Paula Félix-Didier became the curator

of the Museo del Cine and was later informed by the Film Department of the Museum for Latin American Art, following a tip from the director of a local cinema club, that the original version of the work might be hidden away in their archives.

The discovery of the film in those archives has been met with the greatest enthusiasm from film lovers all over the world. Until now, little hope remained that this work could be seen again in its original form. Many restorations of Lang's film have been attempted over the years—the best and most recent done by Munich's Alpha-Omega and released on DVD by Kino corrected most of the continuity flaws and narrative confusion of previous versions—none of them have truly been able to make the work whole again.

While the complete version of *Metropolis* has finally been rescued from oblivion, the vast majority of silent films have not been so lucky. According to the National Film Preservation Foundation, "Fewer than 20 percent of our silent-era fiction features survive in complete copies in US archives. The losses are even higher for the teens. Surviving titles often exist in unique copies in highly flammable nitrate or deteriorating diacetate film. These are too fragile to be screened for contemporary audiences."

Many of the lost films, owned and controlled by private interests and completely at their mercy, were left to languish in storage facilities ill-suited to their preservation or deliberately destroyed. Following the advent of talking pictures, studios often destroyed silent films rather than wasting space and expenses storing them. These are cases in which the profit system has allowed a significant portion of the rich artistic heritage of the last century to literally turn to dust.

Among the films lost are works by some of the most significant filmmakers of the silent era. While his *Nosferatu*, *Sunrise* and *The Last Laugh* continue to be cherished by lovers of cinema, F.W. Murnau's *Sehnsucht* and *Four Devils* are no longer in existence. *The Battle of the Sexes*, a 1914 collaboration between director D.W. Griffith and actress Lillian Gish, the duo responsible for such remarkable works as *Broken Blossoms* and *Way Down East*, is also gone forever. Josef von Sternberg's *The Dragnet* (1928), released the same year as his

*Last Command* and the powerful *Docks of New York*, has not survived alongside them.

The loss of such works, and so many more, is a damning indictment of a system in which the cultural needs and resources of a vast majority of human beings are subverted to the profit interests of a few, not only to the detriment of the current creative works being made, but even more fatally, to the important contributions of artists from the past.

The rediscovery of Lang's classic is an all too rare opportunity to get one of those lost films back.

## ***Metropolis***

Set in a dystopian future, *Metropolis* tells the story of an advanced industrial city beset by the sharpest class tensions. The ruling elite enjoy the finest lives among the towering city skyscrapers while workers live in an underground ghetto. Draining ten-hour days sap their strength while the sons and daughters of the ruling elite play in luxury and reap the benefits of the workers' toil.

When Maria (Brigitte Helm), a kind of Joan of Arc of the labor struggle, brings a group of workers' children to the elite Eternal Garden only to be turned away by security forces, it both moves and disturbs Freder Fredersen (Gustav Fröhlich), the son of prominent industrialist and apparent ruler of the city, Joh Fredersen (Alfred Abel). Freder goes in search of her, and making his way towards the worker's district, witnesses a devastating accident in which an explosion at a worksite claims the lives of several machinists. Freder has a vision of the machinery as a great demon devouring a human sacrifice of worker-slaves. It's an extraordinary image.

He will soon decide to trade places with a worker, making his way into the depths of the workers' world where he discovers a secret movement forming under Maria's leadership.

Joh, who has had a spy following his son all along, also learns of the worker's movement. He commands a scientist (Rudolf Klein-Rogge), who has created a robot with human qualities, to give it Maria's likeness and send her to the workers as an agent provocateur. With the real Maria captured by the scientist, the robot double assumes her role as leader of the workers, inciting an insurrection that the ruling elite intends to crush with devastating force. The battle that follows will threaten to destroy the entire city. It will be up to Freder to set things right.

Little is wasted in *Metropolis*. Virtually every camera movement, every use of shadow and light, every architectural design is rich in meaning. Lang, along with cinematographers Karl Freund and Gunther Rittau, created a truly haunting portrait of a world absolutely devastated by social inequality. At the heart of the work is an extraordinary performance by Brigitte Helm in her film debut. Her dual role as Maria and her

robotic doppelganger never fails to move or disturb the viewer.

But while it is a powerful and unforgettable work, *Metropolis* is certainly not without flaws. The film's message, which is explicitly stated in opening and concluding titles, posed to viewers like the last bold lines of a manifesto, doesn't carry the weight the filmmakers intended: "The mediator between head and hands must be the heart!" This triumphant declaration at the film's end, never received with open arms by critics, would trouble the director as time went on. Lang told *Cahiers du Cinema* in 1965, "I have often said that I didn't like *Metropolis*, and that is because I cannot accept today the leitmotif of the message of the film. It is absurd to say that the heart is the mediator between the hands and the head, that is to say, of course, between employee and employer. The problem is social, not moral."

The ultimate message of the film is indeed unsatisfying, and not only because one doesn't agree with it on the face of it, but because it is an unconvincing resolution to the truly sharp clash between the workers and the ruling elite in the film. The struggle portrayed is so intense that one knows with certainty that a handshake and a moral can't possibly bottle it all back up again. Even so, it would be a mistake to dismiss the movie on account of these flaws, so strong is the film in its best moments. The work holds up, in whatever version one sees, as one of the major achievements of silent era filmmaking.

Fritz Lang made several other significant works in Germany during the silent period, including *Dr. Mabuse: The Gambler* and *Destiny*. His first sound films, the greatly admired *M* and *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* are remarkable. While Lang would be forced to leave Germany in 1933 when the rise of the Nazis made it impossible to work there any longer, he would take up his work again in Hollywood. There he had a long career directing, among others, such films as *Fury*, *You Only Live Once*, *Scarlet Street* and *The Big Heat*. A proper appreciation of filmmaking in the twentieth century would be impossible without a thorough consideration of his work.



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