

# The Dehumanizing of Modern Life: Iris Barry on *Metropolis*

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**M***etropolis* (1927), the dystopian film by the visionary German filmmaker Fritz Lang, is generally considered the first great sci-fi film. Although both its sets and the technological improvements were spectacular, the film's contemporary reception was heterogeneous. The general public was shocked and the critics, not always satisfied. The aim of this paper is to present and analyse the film review written by the first woman film critic in England, the modernist pioneer Iris Barry.

The text was published in *The Spectator* after the film's British premier and stands as one of the first film reviews ever written in a serious journal. It will be critically approached from different perspectives, that is, taking the social and cultural context into consideration, and also from a industrial point of view.

The social context at the beginning of the twentieth century involved radical technological, social and political changes. All of them were reflected thematically in painting, literature and art: the city, the apocalypse or the war were the protagonists of novels and works of art. From a formal point of view, new techniques of fragmentation, like collage or photomontage, were created to represent a new vision of a world in pieces. The whole image of the world was being transformed. Concentration camps or cities devastated by the bombs of the Great War were being drawn in contemporary minds (Lathan and Rogers 12). The city's own image was also transformed by the construction of skyscrapers, which affected the population density. And all this was also reflected in the cinematographic field. A good example is the case of Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis*.

Although cinema was still very young and starting to be considered an art in the second decade of the twentieth century, several avant-garde

movements prior to the Second World War, like expressionism, surrealism and Soviet constructivism, used cinematic experiments. German expressionism created for the cinema nightmares similar to that in Kafka's novel *Metamorphosis* (1916) in films like *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* (Wiene, 1919), *Nosferatu* (Murnau, 1922) and *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927). The main elements were the same: the character's point of view, the projected shadows, the melodramatic tone and the expression of the inner world.

Although some modernist female writers, such as Virginia Woolf, attempted to write about some of these films, like *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* in Woolf's case, it was Iris Barry who analysed most of these works in her film reviews from the 1920s. As Leslie Hankins has affirmed,

Although scholars have shown some interest in Virginia Woolf's 1926 essay, "The Cinema," we are just beginning to realize the vital role of Iris Barry, who was born in Birmingham and came to London to become one of the most prolific and influential figures in film forums of her day. (491)

Also known as Frieda Crump (Edwards 8), Iris Barry was born in Birmingham in 1895, that is, when the cinema was born. In 1914, the arrival of the First World War prevented her from going to study to Oxford University, even if she had passed the entrance tests. Her family decided then to send her to France, where she worked at a flower shop and learned French. Back in Birmingham, she got a job at a post office. At the same time, she spent all her free time going to the pictures and published some poems in the *Poetry* magazine. In 1916, she began an epistolary exchange with poet Ezra Pound, which marked the beginning of a life dedicated to cinema and literature. Following his advice, she moved to London in 1917, where she met vorticist artist Wyndham Lewis, "the real leader of the London avant-garde" (Edwards 11). In 1919, they started a relationship living together until 1922. They had a son in 1919 and a daughter in 1920.

Iris studied cinema in a self-taught and compulsive way in London. Apparently, Lewis also pushed her to go to the movies so he could see other women (Sitton 58). Consequently, she spent hours and days watching films of Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd, to the point that she could quote subtitles word for word, as she would recall later. In the mid-

1920s, Barry led a whole revolution in film culture in London, as she became the most widely read film critic and contributed to the creation of one of the most important cultural institutions for film, the London Film Society. In her book *Let's Go to the Pictures* (1926), published in the United States as *Let's Go to the Movies*, she analysed the experience of going to the pictures, both as entertainment and as art. Throughout the second decade of the twentieth century, she wrote more than forty articles for *The Spectator* (1924-1927), at least five for the British *Vogue* (1924-1926), and more than sixty columns for the *Daily Mail* (1926-1930), where she also worked as a film editor. After she was fired by the *Daily Mail* for not promoting British films enough and supporting Hollywood films instead, she left for America. Her contribution to the study and conservation of film there was also immense, as she founded and curated the film archive at the Museum of Modern Art.

Among some of her most remarkable achievements as a film critic is her early defense of film as an emerging art form, the very first attempt to categorize films by genre, her prefiguration of much-later author theory or the development of the first program for Film Studies, when she was working as a film curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. As to the style of her writings for *The Spectator*, the magazine where her film review of *Metropolis* was once published,

Iris began to develop an aesthetic for the emerging art of film. She did this at a time when motion pictures were finding a grammar and syntax to differentiate the medium from theater and the other arts [...] Her writing and analysis is sophisticated, substantial, and surprising for a self-taught critic who seems to have derived great benefit from her informal contacts and conversations with the British modernists she knew. (Sitton 91)

The film had its premiere in Berlin on 10 January 1927, where the audience reacted to several of the film's most spectacular scenes with "spontaneous applause" including a critic from the Berliner Morgen post. However, others have suggested the premiere was met with muted applause with boos and hisses in between. The film's extensive running time and its Communist message were also criticized. At the time of its German premiere, *Metropolis* had a length of 4,189 meters (approximately 153

minutes at 24 fps). *Metropolis* was cut substantially after its German premiere, removing a large portion of Lang's original footage.

Was *Metropolis* "The silliest film" (4), as H.G Wells wrote in his review for *The New York Times Magazine* in April 1927, or "the most remarkable and unique spectacle ever shown on the screen" (22), as the *Bioscope's* review proclaimed? *Metropolis* provoked extreme responses at the time. Unlike in the case of some of his other films, even Fritz Lang himself stated in retrospect that he found it "silly and stupid" and even "detested it after it was finished" (Bogdanovich 124).

As Bachman suggests in his book *Fritz Lang's Metropolis: Cinematic Visions of Technology and Fear*, it seems that *Metropolis* suffered the fate of many modern blockbusters: an enormous advertising effort created widespread interest and huge box office takings in the first few weeks, but as soon as news of the film's imperfections were spread by word of mouth, the audience's interest declined. The arrival of sound film in 1927 with *The Jazz Singer* gave another punch to *Metropolis* in the eyes of a public thrilled by the marvels of the new talkies. "As early as April 1927, Ufa realized that *Metropolis*, which was supposed to generate revenues of one million reichsmarks (the monetary unit in Germany from 1924-1948), would turn out to be a financial failure" (Bachman 3).

Barry attended *Metropolis'* London premiere, which took place in the Marble Arch Pavilion on March 21, 1927, which was located at the western end by Marble Arch, in number 531 of Oxford Street. The venue was first opened on 30th May 1914 and closed in 1956. It was soon demolished and replaced by a row of low-rise shops, which in the late-1980 had become a Virgin Megastore. From 2008, the building is a shopping center known as *Surprise, Surprise*.

Iris Barry's review on *Metropolis'* London premiere was published by *The Spectator* five days later, that is, on 26 March 1927. As soon as the beginning, the review already shows the spirit of a visionary woman, a pioneering mind. She seems to be anticipating that cinema, as a medium of expression, is going to change considerably with the passing of time. She knows that cinema is only at an early stage of its life as if she could predict its future. At the same time, she is aware of the possible negative reception of the film but justifies it by blaming the medium for not offering what a science fiction film demands.

If *Metropolis* fails to be quite a great film, the fault lies not with its brilliant German producers, nor with its subject matter, nor with the actual treatment of this picture-parable of life next century. It fails because the cinema as yet fails to be quite adequate as a means of expression. (Barry 540)

She probably uses the term “television” for the first time. Far from the meaning we are familiar with, she seems to refer to the projection of an image on a screen. And she accepts this, as well as the making of an artificial human being, as miracles, stating the importance of suspension of disbelief. The imagination of Fritz Lang, the director, and of the studio-architects and designers who have brought this vision to ‘life’ proved adequate enough here. The film shows us the making of an artificial human being; shows us television. Barry can accept these miracles showing sympathy for the workers, who she can recognize. She can even feel identified with them and support the final rebellion: “We know and recognize and accept these manual workers with their weary backs, heavy hands and dull, hopeless eyes. We can feel with them and for them, when they rebel and destroy the machinery that enslaves them” (540).

Barry tries to imagine what the audience’s reaction might be after watching such a futuristic urban landscape depicted in front of their eyes for the very first time: “But I fear that the intelligent part of the audiences that see *Metropolis* will find it very difficult to admire the peacock-strewn pleasure gardens of the future” (540). She also refers to cinema as being still too young:

The cinema, even here at its best, and full as it is of invention and thrill, is still only at the mental age of seventeen. It is still — quite rightly — far more concerned with its medium than with what its medium may most magnificently express. Yet *Metropolis* is by far the most nearly adult picture we have seen. (540)

Cinematography was indeed too young to even talk at the moment, although *Metropolis* did contain minimal elements of sound. Two years later, that is, in 1929, the silent film was going to face a new challenge with the arrival of talking pictures.

When she is not positive, Barry’s review also reveals that she did not see the original version but a cut variation, which led to a confusing plot.

In relation to this, Barlett wrote in his review on the same film:

I have never seen a greater achievement of the editing art [...] There are incidents that are almost hilariously amusing. In Metropolis there was originally a very beautiful statue of a woman's head, and on the base was her name — and that name was Hel. Now the German word for “hell” is “hoelle” so they were quite innocent of the fact that this name would create a guffaw in an English speaking audience. So it was necessary to cut this beautiful bit out of the picture. (Barlett qtd in Bachman 90)

Barry's review is largely positive, as the following fragment shows:

There are moments when it touches real greatness: in its handling of crowds, not for the sake only of spectacle, but for what emotion the movement of the crowd can express. Its architecture is beautiful, its pictorial composition frequently superb. The clothing of a robot in human flesh provides as great a thrill as anyone could wish; [...] The photography of Metropolis is absolutely brilliant. (Barry 540)

If there was a Communist message in Fritz Lang's film, there was in the same way in this review. The very last paragraph of the text seems to be a call for workers to watch the film: “I wonder how the audiences in cinemas in the South Wales mining districts and in Glasgow will regard this film. And whether the members of the Coal Owners' Association have been invited to see it” (Barry 540).

When Iris Barry became the head of the Film Library of the Museum of Modern Art —which, together with the British Film Institute in London, the *Cinémathèque Française* and the *Cinémathèque Nationale*, the *Reichsfilmarchiv* in Berlin and the Scientific Research Institute in Moscow was a founding member of the *Fédération Internationales des Archives du Film* (FIAF), the international association of film archives-, she asked Ufa, a major German film company producing and distributing motion pictures from 1917 through the end of World War II, for a copy of the German version of the film. Unfortunately, that was not the first version, but the second. John Abbot, who travelled to Europe together with Iris in order to stock the Film Library, recalled this part of their trip like this:



Yes. London has the film. Arriving there you find that a portion of the film has been deleted by the censors for some reason or other. Then you are off for Sweden, where the London attendant is quite certain you will find a print of the original film. That is just one illustration of what we had to go through to get one film. (Abbot qtd in Sitton 220)

In fact, the original film, shot by Fritz Lang in 1926, underwent so many changes. In an article called “The City of the Future. A film of ruins. On the work of the Munich Film Museum”, included in *Fritz Lang’s Metropolis: Cinematic Visions of Technology and Fear*, Enno Patalas, offers a detailed analysis of the evolution that the original film has suffered from the version, including its passage through the film censorship office before it was shown in Berlin on 10 January 1927, until our days. This is the introduction before the careful reconstruction of the original scene he does:

If there was a representative survey asking for the best known title of a German silent film, *Metropolis* would undoubtedly make the running. But which film would people mean? The one shot by Fritz Lang in Berlin in 1926 and only ever shown there at the beginning of 1927? The one shortened, rearranged, newly titles for Hollywood by one Channing Pollock? The second German version, fashioned after the American model, which could be seen in Germany from the end of 1927? The same, shortened once more, with different English intertitles again, which the Museum of Modern Art in New York has made accessible to the cinephiles of many countries since before the war? The German sound version from the sixties, which goes back to the one mentioned before? The attempt at a reconstruction made around the same time by the film archive in the then GDR? Giorgio Moroder’s postmodern interpretation with colour and music from 1984? The “Munich version” now always running at one or other of the Paris cinemas and available on VHS? Madonna’s video clip “Express yourself”? (111)

Although the version Iris Barry wrote her review about was not the first, the film provoked a great impact on her, as a passage from her last days illustrates, told in the recent and only existing biography of her, from

which all biographical data mentioned in this article has been taken. Barry's life ended in a hospital in Marseilles, where she was operated on for cancer of the throat in October 1969. Near the end of her life, being already extremely ill and broke, she recalled *Metropolis* one last time,: "The hospital", she said, "was like a scene out of the once shattering film on the dehumanizing of Modern life, *Metropolis*." (Barry qtd in Sitton 401)

This paper considers her text to be historically relevant for many reasons. First, it can increase our understanding and appreciation of the role of this woman in film culture. Women have been a central presence in film culture for a long time, and many of them have been forgotten. As Fritz Lang, Barry was a visionary, a visionary lady in the dark who deserves to be in the light today. Her vision went beyond expressing points of view in her film reviews to the building of a world she was deeply committed to build. Secondly, in contrast with most contemporary reviews, she wrote with passion and a positive perspective about the misunderstood *Metropolis*, and also about so many other film productions from the 1920s. Barry's articles from this period were published in journals that artists and intellectuals looked up to, making a persuasive argument that film should be taken seriously. (Sitton 3) They are of particular interest because they represent pioneering attempts to give autonomy to film as an art form that at the time was slighted by critics and generally considered as entertainment for the working class.

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### **Electronic Resources**

- <http://londonfilm.bbk.ac.uk/about/project/>  
<http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/30900>

**ABSTRACT**

*Metropolis*, the dystopian epic by the visionary German filmmaker Fritz Lang, is generally considered the first great sci-fi film. But despite the spectacular sets and the technological advancements, its contemporary reception was mixed. The general public was puzzled and the critics, not often satisfied. The aim of this paper is to present and analyse the film review written by the first woman film critic in England, the Modernist and cultural pioneer Iris Barry, which was published in *The Spectator* after the film's British premier in 1927. The text will be critically approached from different perspectives, that is, taking the social context into consideration, and also from a cultural and industrial point of view.

**KEYWORDS**

Film criticism; reception; silent art film; women's writing; 20<sup>th</sup> century

**RESUMEN**

*Metropolis*, la distopía cinematográfica de Fritz Lang, es generalmente considerada la primera gran película de ciencia ficción. Pero a pesar de los espectaculares escenarios y los avances tecnológicos, su recepción contemporánea fue mixta. El público en general lo desconcertaba a los críticos, no siempre los dejó satisfechos. El objetivo de este artículo es presentar y analizar la crítica de cine escrita por la primera mujer crítica de cine en Inglaterra, la pionera modernista Iris Barry, que fue publicado en *The Spectator* después de su estreno en Londres en 1927. El texto será abordado de manera crítica desde diferentes perspectivas, es decir, teniendo en cuenta el contexto socio-cultural, y también desde el punto de vista industrial.

**PALABRAS CLAVE**

Crítica de cine; recepción; cine mudo; literatura de mujeres; siglo XX

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