Silent films were the birth of moviemaking, pioneering the acting and technique of years of film to come. To this day, they are known as films without synchronized sound, especially dialogue, forcing heavy reliance on visual cues and elaborate performance. Actors tended to emphasize body language and facial expression to compensate, stressing gesticulations in order to portray plot and emotion in what modern audiences would consider “overacting”. However, the industry quickly realized that music was necessary for the movie atmosphere and to indicate emotional cues; most silents were accompanied by live music, ranging from a pianist to an entire orchestra, or even live sound effects. For key dialogue or necessary plot points, titles were incorporated between shots for the audience. Sadly, around 85% of films from the silent era remain, many lost to time or burned in studio fires.

Many silent films were comedic, featuring slapstick humor dependent on “campy” appearances and physical jokes. Others were romantic, such as City Lights and Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans (1927). Seeing film as a new art form, directors seized the opportunity to satirize or comment on political constructs and human condition over a new medium. Commonly, the nature of love, social classes, and politics were explored.
History & Prominent Names

The silent era began in 1894, lasting until 1929 when films with sound—or "talkies"—began rising in popularity. During this era, silent films established a reputation of being "quaint, old-fashioned, melodramatic, and technically immature" in the eyes of more recent years (Reihner 1). While silents were understandably primitive—yet not inferior—in comparison to modern films, since 1894, silent films evolved in technique and taste as directors and actors experimented with and created new cinematographic practices. Silent film originally revolved around theater, a possible explanation for its theatrical tendencies. As many film actors were sourced from the stage, "film acting started with much the same" melodramatic "style" (1). As silent film progressed, the dichotomy between theater and film grew as the nature of filming brought new possibilities in the manipulation of audiences. From humble beginnings of static cameras and simple cuts, directors began incorporating more complex editing and camerawork, including tracking shots and high and low angles.

Georges Méliès, director of A Trip to the Moon (1902) pioneered the use of "optical effects, editing, mise-en-scène, and lighting design" ("Film" 1). Edwin S. Porter directed films featuring editing techniques including "simultaneous parallel action" and "elliptical shifts" (1). Other famous directors who furthered silent film technique and culture include D. W. Griffith, director of various epics including The Birth of a Nation (1915), a politically controversial film that featured flashbacks and realistic lighting among other new techniques; Mack Sennett, the "founder of silent-screen slapstick comedy" (1); Buster Keaton, a lover of irony and vaudeville; Carl Theodor Dreyer, a Danish director known for The Passion of Joan of Arc (1928), a film that
almost exclusively features emotional close-ups of Joan’s face; and Charlie Chaplin, a writer, director, and actor famous for his comedic character known as “the Tramp” among various successful silents. Chaplin considered comedy as not an “end in itself” but a way of examining the influences of “social forces and structures” on “individual freedom and happiness” (1).

Similar to many other directors, screenwriters, and their silents, Chaplin criticized the divisions in society between classes and genders. June Mathis was another well-known screenwriter at the time, while many other famous films were adapted from plays such as 7th Heaven (1927) and What Price Glory (1924).

Besides Chaplin, other prominent actors graced the screens of the silent era. Lillian Gish and Greta Garbo were two of the most famous female actresses. Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd were two famous comedians, and Max Linder and Louise Brooks were of the famous actors as well.

**Shot-by-Shot Analysis**

One of the most famous silent films was Fritz Lang’s Metropolis (1927), a German expressionist epic science-fiction drama. This silent, about the wealthy Freder and impoverished Maria and their struggle to close the gap between the social classes, pioneered futuristic, dystopian, and cyborg related movies. It is concerned with social hierarchies, human reliance on machinery and technology, and dehumanization as a result of industrialization. The film was overwhelming with imagery and special effects, revealing new possibilities in moviemaking.

In one of Lang’s Metropolis scenes, Maria’s likeness is transferred into mad scientist Rotwang’s humanoid robot. This scene—referred to as “Maria’s Transformation” and exemplar
of the genre—implies the paradoxical dichotomy between man and machine. During “Maria’s Transformation,” Rotwang encases Maria’s body in his laboratory and connects it to his humanoid robot. A chaotic process ensues as lights begin encircling both Maria and the robot, and various glass beakers begin to bubble with unidentified liquids. Lang’s techniques in “Maria’s Transformation” reveal his concerns with machinery and man’s necessary coexistence yet inevitable conflict.

“Maria’s Transformation” features an intense and chaotic mood as Rotwang hurries around his laboratory, his anxiety and near-insanity almost palpable. The medium to low key lighting immediately establishes a mysterious, almost sinister environment as the scene begins with a close-up of Maria’s face. Her unconsciousness is alarming, her head encased in a strange helmet, playing off fears of machinery and vulnerability. Following the close-up are medium shots of Rotwang’s laboratory that not only establish setting but even more anxiety as well. The lab appears in disarray, filled with various shapes and fluorescent lights and foreign technology. As Rotwang proceeds to turn more and more machines on, the suspense rises. His maniacal appearance seems to compensate for the lack of sound, as he pauses dramatically. From the more neutral medium shots, the camera begins to close in as the scene features more and more close-ups in a claustrophobic, uncomfortably intimate effect.

Furthermore, the mise-en-scene reflects the genre-expected futuristic technology and its perception in society. Maria’s encasement appears as if she’s in a coffin, dying or already dead. This “coffin” is presumably glass— it’s as if she can be seen, but not saved, an implication to human condition
in regards to machinery’s inevitable growing influence in people’s lives. Meanwhile, the robot is located on a chair, almost as if on a throne. The robot’s power is only heightened as Maria’s likeness is transferred over, displaying how humans will only make artificial intelligence stronger.

As seen in earlier scenes in the film, the machines—especially this humanoid robot—take away life from humans in a both literal and metaphorical act of dehumanization and death. Once taking Maria’s likeness, the robot becomes even more human until the physical difference between Maria and artificial Maria is too minute to discern, if not nonexistent. The dichotomy between man and machine is then questioned, as appearance becomes deceiving. As the scene ends, the robot’s face dissolves into that of Maria’s, its eyes slowly opening, then cutting to the real Maria’s head falling to the side, indicating the transformation complete and absolute. This emphasizes the recurring impression that humans will eventually surrender their power if not their lives to machinery in the future. Notably, Maria’s face is bare with no makeup while the robot Maria’s face almost appears artificial with painted lips and kohl-rimmed eyes against alabaster white skin. This may insinuate that in the future, humans will pale at the perfect, complex, and superior nature of machinery.

Despite the overwhelming and increasing control of machinery, humans are dependent on technology for their livelihood. The usage of machinery leads to man—the proletariat—becoming more slave like, almost robotic in repetitive tasks as they are exploited by the upper class. This scene establishes the paradox as, almost contradictorily, a robot becomes more
human. During the silent era, machinery was a prevalent part of the everyday life; this scene reflects society’s fears and condition at the time, predicting a dystopian future. Metropolis epitomizes the silent film tropes of power struggles and poverty while pioneering the sci-fi genre.

**Conclusion & Legacy (Importance)**

Silent film was the beginning of film itself. It paved the way for an immense part of society’s culture today as movies continue to be a growing industry. During the silent era, the art of moviemaking blossomed, maturing over the decades. Without silents—the primitive, small steps of the movie industry—film would be drastically different. They remain the only universal films that can be watched by cultures around the world, independent of language and translation. They represent the power of image and the power of human emotion, allowing people to explore a new medium to portray the world in new ways. While silence was eventually drowned out by sound, the silent era and its films are an integral part of human history and artistic expression.
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