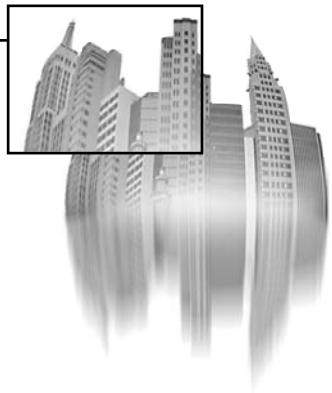
1 Modernity and the city film: Berlin



> Today all segments of the population stream to the movies, from the workers in suburban movie theatres to the haute bourgeoisie in the cinema palaces.
>
> Siegfried Kracauer

Learning objectives

- **To understand the role of Berlin in the development of the city film in the Weimar Republic**
- **To outline the concept of modernity and the contributions of its different theorists**
- **To define the genre of the street film and consider its gendered dimensions**

Introduction

"A new genre was born: 'city film'," claims Helmut Weihsmann about *avant-garde* films in the mid-1920s (10). City films as a crucible of modernity created urbanity as the modern space, and during the 1920s in Europe, this modern city *par excellence* was Berlin. After the First World War Berlin played a central role in Germany and Europe as the locus of modernity and cosmopolitanism, a place where modernist art flourished. The city of Berlin was the theme of several city films, the site of production with several studios located on its outskirts – including the famous Ufa in nearby Neubabelsberg – and it was also the site of elaborate movie theaters where important premières took place. Berlin was also a place of coffee-houses, bars, newspapers, and magazines where those who entered the new industry met and networked, and those who wrote about the city and its culture gathered to discuss. Berlin was central to the development of the cinema and from

its inception German cinema has been "preoccupied by the big city as a site of adventure and modernity" (Kaes 1996: 65).

The birth of the city film

Weihsmann suggests that the early filmic depiction of cities in the 1920s resulted from a growing fascination with "metropolitan motifs, motion, and development" and from the assumption that the camera could capture visual evidence of a city. In "documentary style" city films filmmakers reproduced different "urban motifs," while in "pictorial *colportage*" they mixed documentary footage and fiction shot on location (9). Karl Grune's *The Street* (1923), Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau's *The Last Laugh* (1924), G. W. Pabst's *Joyless Street* (1925), Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927), Robert and Curt Siodmak's *People on Sunday* (1928), Joe May's *Asphalt* (1929), and Lang's *M* (1931) were all produced within one decade, and all take place in a city – most often Berlin, but not always – and thematize urbanity, especially the

Figure 1.1 ***The Last Laugh*: The city at night**

period's understanding of the dangers and pleasures of modern urban life: crime, anonymity, a loosening of morality, unemployment, and class struggle on the one hand, and movement, speed, entertainment, and liberated erotics on the other. These films foreground what David Frisby has identified as characteristics of modernity: "abstraction, circulation and movement and monumentality" (20). While some were fascinated by the cinematic possibilities of documentary realism, others were fascinated by the artificiality of the set. The latter is famously the case with Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, but also with *The Street*, for example, which has a highly artificial set.

The genre of the city film thus integrates the aesthetic and the documentary aspects of film. It constitutes a genre with its own history and a prism through which to address a host of related and interconnected topics regarding cinema and urbanism. Several films depict the city as the setting for social problems: *M* famously tells the story of the search for a child murderer, and *The Last Laugh* portrays the fate of a hotel employee who has lost his position but continues to wear his uniform to garner respect. The figure of the prostitute embodies both liberated and commodified sexuality located in the streets of the metropolis, for example in Grune's *The Street*, Pabst's *Joyless Street*, and May's *Asphalt*. All these films except for *The Last Laugh* constitute the genre of the street film developed between 1923 and 1925.

Other social problems, such as class conflict, perceived as crucially defining the urban metropolis in the early twentieth century, are expressed spatially, as in Lang's *Metropolis*, where a vertical, futuristic city is segmented into the upper world of the factory-owner and the lower world of workers, portraying a dystopian vision of urban modernity. Images, events, and encounters seen as representative of urbanism become the raw material for *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* and *People on Sunday*. Most importantly, however, the experience of the modern metropolis changed visual perception and yielded new narrative forms and possibilities for aesthetic representation: abstract shapes and compositions, episodic narratives, and cinematic montage express the experience of urban modernity. Because film was part of the newly emerging mass culture, changing in tandem with urban modernity, cinema of the 1920s functioned in a double role as both "product of urban modernity" and "producer of urban culture" (Weihsmann 10).

The film industry created not only artificial cities as settings for films, but also an artificial city for film production: Neubabelsberg, in the no-man's-land between Berlin and Potsdam. The Weimar Republic witnessed the early development of the studio system, particularly with the growth of Ufa (Universal Film Aktiengesellschaft), the studio that Klaus Kreimeier labels "one of the most important movie studios in the world" (3). It was founded during the First World War for the purpose of creating national propaganda. In this "film-city" (Ward

Figure 1.2 ***The Last Laugh*: A typical Berlin working-class tenement court yard**

2001a: 21), unemployed and underemployed architects created their architectural visions in set designs (22), because in the immediate post-war period building projects were denied to them (28). Janet Ward emphasizes the artificiality of Neubabelsberg, describing it as "Babelesque, consisting of towers and tunnels

over eighty-odd acres of artificially lit outdoor and indoor playgrounds" (21). And while movie production created its own fantastic city outside of Berlin, movie-houses, called film palaces, changed the face of the metropolis itself.

In Germany the rise of modernity was accompanied by theoretical discussions articulated by Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, Georg Simmel, and Max Weber, who had a keen interest in the city and the cinema. Their theories offer us ways to think about cinematic representations of urbanity with regard to the city film from the Weimar Republic, but they also provide us with foils for discussions about the cinematic representation of urban space in general. The next section provides an introduction to these crucial figures in their respective contexts. Their contributions to the theorization of urbanity remain reference points throughout this book.

Theories of modernity and urbanity

Sociologist Georg Simmel noted the importance of the emerging metropolis for changing life, culture, and subjectivity in the early twentieth century. His seminal essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life" (1903) focuses specifically on the effect of the city on subjectivity and describes "the metropolitan type" as characterized by a rational and intellectual response to uprootedness, the increased speed of information and impressions, and the "*intensification of nervous stimulation*" (175, italics in the original). Simmel noted that in contrast to the quiet life in rural communities characterized by social networks, kinship, and family, the metropolis produced quickly changing impressions on individuals. Discontinuity and fragmentation characterized city life, where actions and events assaulted individual inhabitants actively and unexpectedly. The shift at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century created a radical rupture of the "sensory foundations of psychic life" and created a new kind of "sensory mental imagery" (175). Simmel described the effect of the modern metropolis on subjectivity in a combination of imagery and sensory perception, motion and stimuli, a combination that encapsulates the potential of the medium of film to express the characteristics of the city. A film such as *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* reproduces the sensory experience of the city through its "associative montage," a method which can capture the fragmented aspects of modern life in the metropolis (Hake 1994: 130).

Other films combine the contrast between the rural and the urban environment with a developmental narrative from rural to urban. German director F. W. Murnau's *Sunrise – A Song of Two Humans* (1927), made in the United States, is a case in point. A woman from the city tries to seduce a man from the country to

kill his wife while crossing the river on the way to the city. The city is embodied by the destructive seductress and the country by the wife, who is also a mother, a caring and quiet character defined by her social roles in the rural village. In contrast, the woman from the city is characterized by her independence and her appearance: clad in a sexy black dress, smoking, and using make-up, she is the incarnation of "the archetypal metropolitan female of the 20s" (Fischer 43). If the husband does indeed drown his wife, the familial ties connecting him to the rural soil will be destroyed. Instead, however, he travels to the city with his wife and experiences with her its pleasures and dangers. On their arrival, echoing Simmel's description, traffic surrounds and overwhelms them and the wife is almost run over. They find many distractions – going dancing, having their photo taken, and visiting a barber shop.

Sunrise also refers to the role of cinema in negotiating the contrast between country and city, generally associating cinema with the latter. When the city woman tells the man about the city, a film is projected against the rural sky transposing the city onto the rural environment. Once the man and his wife are in the city, they have their photo taken in a studio, thus participating in the modern technology of visual self-representation. They are adding their technological and visual literacy to the journey, which becomes a passage into maturity associated with the city. Raymond Williams proposes that the idea of the country is paradigmatically associated with "childhood" (297), and thus the individual story of the couple from the country represents the history of humankind, outlined by Simmel as a shift from rural to urban. The city woman attempts not only to destroy the relationship between the husband and his wife, but also to sever his ties to the land by persuading him to sell his farm and take his cash to the city. This narrative movement ties money economy to the city and portrays the emotions expressed by the city woman as calculating rationality, a construction that also reflects Simmel's theories regarding the metropolis and Max Weber's discussion of rational capitalism, which I return to later in this section.

The metropolis is defined by Simmel as a place of money economy, which for him goes hand-in-glove with the metropolitan rationality that redefines human relationships in terms of exchange value and turns all action in the metropolis into "production for the market" (176). The potentially alienating effect of the metropolis necessitates that the metropolitan character reacts with "his head instead of his heart," which we will see demonstrated in a case study of *Metropolis* (176). In order to be most efficient and highly productive, according to Simmel, cities display the "highest economic division of labor" (182).

This emphasis on the division of labor is reflected in many films that depict differentiated professions, from *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, *Sunrise*, *M*,

and *The Last Laugh* to its most explicit articulation in Lang's *Metropolis*, which famously shows a city in which the class relationships are expressed through its spatial compositions (see the case study at the end of this chapter). The owners of the means of production live and socialize in spacious offices, gardens, and a sports arena, all of which are elevated, while the workers of Metropolis live below the surface with no access to light, art, or nature, and are reduced to their functions in a differentiated workplace. Frederson, the boss of Metropolis, is characterized as the head, the workers as the hands, and the film moves towards establishing a triangulation in which a representative of the heart connects the fragmented aspects of production that would otherwise be alienated from each other.

Simmel describes characteristics that we find not only in the early city film but in the visual and narrative strategies of present-day urban films, such as the emphasis on one well-known city that is inhabited by an urban type. He differentiates between cities that have become significant through "individual personalities" – such as Weimar, which will be forever associated with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe – and the metropolis, which is significant in and of itself, even beyond its physical boundaries (182). This explains the predominance of Berlin as the setting in the Weimar Republic city films. And the particular urban types that we find in city films from different time periods and geographical locations echo Simmel's descriptions: there is first and foremost the "blasé attitude" that he ascribes to characters shaped by the urban experience. In the films analyzed in this book, we often see the figure of the migrant arriving in the city and encountering this blasé attitude. Simmel's theoretical account, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," evinces the ambivalence of artists and theorists about modernity. While his description of the metropolis is in many ways critical, he also acknowledges the freedom of the individual in the city, which can, however, have the effect of feeling lonely and lost in the metropolitan crowd.

The two crucial moments articulated by Simmel – movement through the city, and the commodification of relationships in the city – were extensively theorized by Walter Benjamin, the foremost philosopher and cultural critic during the Weimar Republic. He observed and described the *flâneur*, strolling leisurely through the city, as a key figure in nineteenth-century Paris and then in Berlin in the early twentieth century (see the lyric poetry of Charles Baudelaire for a literary account of the *flâneur*). As Jaimey Fisher points out, Benjamin returned to the figure of the *flâneur* in the 1920s when he reviewed Franz Hessel's *On Foot in Berlin* (*Spazieren in Berlin*) (461). The *flâneur* was the idle person of the nineteenth century who wandered the city aimlessly and sought "refuge in the crowd" (Benjamin 1999a: 21). Benjamin points out that around 1840 it was considered elegant to take turtles on walks through Paris, and the turtles determined the pace of the *flâneur* on his stroll through the city.

In contrast to Simmel's model, however, the crowd in Benjamin's understanding was a veil "through which the familiar city beckons to the flâneur as phantasmagoria," creating quite a different relationship between the crowd and the individual from Simmel's and giving us another understanding of the use of crowds in city films: as a reference to the cinematic fantasy and variety of the city (1999b: 10). Benjamin recognized the cinematic quality of the metropolis, and his own writing mimics the process and effect of editing and juxtaposing interior and exterior spaces when he describes urban space as "now a landscape, now a room" (1999b: 10). David B. Clarke explains that "the practice of *flânerie* and the apparatus of the cinema both changed the social meaning of presence, and did so in much the same way; both effectively embraced the virtual" (5).

In "The Return of the Flâneur" (1929) Benjamin mused about the rebirth of the *flâneur* in Berlin in the 1920s (1999c: 262–7) and concluded that the *flâneur* can read the past because he can recognize it from his perspective of modernity; the *flâneur* is a figure who emerges at the particular moment of modernity. Yet, the *flâneur* does not entirely belong to modernity; instead he is positioned "on the threshold – of the metropolis as of the middle class. Neither has him in its power yet" (1999b: 10). Susan Buck-Morss also sees a "utopian moment of flânery," but describes it as fleeting, because the conditions for flânery had already passed by the time Benjamin was writing (344). Like Simmel, Benjamin projected his own ambivalent relationship to the city and modernity onto the figure of the *flâneur*. On the one hand, he described the phantasmagoria of the modern metropolis, while on the other he preferred a mode of movement that belonged to a period that had already passed (Fisher 474–5).

Benjamin's description of the *flâneur* is still deeply ingrained and shaped by gender distinctions to the extend that Anke Gleber points out that the "female flâneur has been an absent figure in the public sphere of modernity, in its media and texts, and in its literatures and cities" (1997: 69). Benjamin aligned Baudelaire's Parisian *flâneur* with the asocial beings whose "only sexual communion" is "with a prostitute" (1999a: 21); in the mind of the *flâneur*, woman appears only as sexual commodity. The gendered binary is mapped onto the urban landscape: the *flâneur* scouts the marketplace of the city, and the woman, as prostitute, constitutes the city's sexualized commodity. Like Simmel, Benjamin emphasized the gaze, but only the gaze of the *flâneur*, who would lose himself in the crowd but nevertheless remain "the alienated man" (1999b:10). In Baudelaire's poetry, according to Benjamin, Paris becomes the site where woman intermingles with death, which creates an association between woman, death, and the city that recurs often in films about the danger of the city.

The triangle of woman, death, and the city is most clearly embodied by the femme fatale, who represents death and the city. This figure can be traced from Weimar

city film (in such figures as the false Maria in *Metropolis*) to her incarnation in film noir as a character who seduces men to kill. Most often these femmes fatales emerge from the anonymity and chance encounters of the city. Benjamin used the fetish of the prostitute, seller and sold in one, to resolve the contradictions between inside and outside, modernity and the past (1999b: 10). In the literature, film, and early-twentieth-century German theory the figure of the prostitute functioned to negotiate female sexuality and gender relations, particularly in the city of Berlin. Jill Smith argues that her figure "destabilize[d] the traditional sexual roles of male and female – that of male agency and female passivity" (3).

Many of the important theorists on the interconnection of the city, cinema, and modernity emerging out of the 1920s in Germany were in dialogue with each other, as were Benjamin, Simmel, and Siegfried Kracauer. Both Benjamin and Kracauer were concerned with changes in perception, the emerging masses in the metropolis, and the subsequent changing character of art. In his famous essay "Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility," Benjamin mapped out the historical changes in art, from painting that carries an aura to the cinema, which relies on technical reproducibility and creates distraction as a form of reception (2003a: 269).

Kracauer was also critical of the entertainment industry's mimetic claim, which, he argued, displaced history and sold daydreams to the newly constituted audience of female white-collar workers. He particularly reproached the "surface" culture produced by modernity, which he saw manifested in the Ufa studio in Neubabelsberg: "350,000 square meters house a world made of papier-mâché. Everything guaranteed unnatural and everything exactly like nature" (281). This surface culture was seen by theorists as produced by capitalism's attempt to turn content into a product for consumption. It was particularly Kracauer's training as an architect that provided him with a "method of approaching a subject from its surface structures" (Hake 1993: 263).

The disavowal of history in Kracauer's mind was enabled by the cutting apart of reality in the editing process, and creating and destroying the sets and props for films, and then reconstituting "a world out of these pieces" (287). The films that circulated, he rightfully observed (and later mapped out with regard to German film in his most influential study, *From Caligari to Hitler*) "are the daydreams of society" (292). Such films addressed themselves particularly to the new audiences of what he called "little shopgirls," created by the changing gender roles and new professions that accompanied new technological and urban developments (291–304). These young women had white-collar jobs outside the home as telephone operators, secretaries, and shopgirls. Kracauer's critique of the fantasies advanced in these films and his critical analysis of the Ufa studios was also

mirrored in his critical assessment of the movie-houses as "palaces of distraction," characterized by "*surface splendor*" and constituting "shrines to the cultivation of pleasure" (323, emphasis in original). Such places aimed to entertain the masses who constituted the city, particularly Berlin.

Kracauer suggested that modernity in the city created the masses, a social organization that in turn shaped cultural manifestations in the city. Their influence moved from the exterior to interior; in Kracauer's words, the life of the street gave "rise to configurations that invade even domestic space" (325). The opening of Fritz Lang's *M* illustrates this understanding of the relationship between the exterior and interior urban environments. The film opens with children playing in a Berlin tenement courtyard, singing a song and playing a game about a murderer who, the audience finds out shortly, is terrorizing the city. The camera moves from the children's play in the courtyard to a working-class woman carrying laundry to the house and up the stairs in the otherwise empty staircase, a hybrid space between the public and the private, and entering the apartment of Elsie Beckmann's mother, who is worried about her daughter's failure to arrive home from school yet. The children's play mirrors her anxiety, and the camera's movement from the exterior to the interior reflects the movement of terror and anxiety from exterior, social to interior, psychological spaces.

Berlin became the representational metropolis, both in films such as *M* and in Kracauer's study of the relationship between the masses, the city, and distraction, represented by the cinema. He explained that Berliners were "*addicted to distraction*" as a result of the tension experienced by the working masses, and he extended the relationship between the city and cinema to a psychological model rooted in a Marxist understanding of labor: the modern metropolis creates working masses who are never compensated adequately; consequently their need for compensation can "be articulated only in terms of the same surface sphere that imposed the lack in the first place" (325, emphasis in original). Kracauer was critical of the surface quality of films, but he also argued that they revealed the living conditions of the masses in the modern metropolis.

Simmel, Benjamin, and Kracauer understood modernity in a Marxist context and thus analyzed cinema and city as part of the reorganization of labor and the market. Max Weber, on the other hand, focused specifically on the market as a rational and secular mechanism in the modern West. He argued that instead of relying on myth or religious beliefs, individuals in modern Western society make rational choices based on the calculations necessitated by capitalism. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905) contrasts the rational capitalist with the figure of the adventurer capitalist, who Weber assigned to the premodern, marked as geographically and temporally different civilizations: "Whenever money finances of

Figure 1.3 Advertisement for Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927)

public bodies have existed, money-lenders have appeared, as in Babylon, Hellas, India, China, Rome . . . This kind of entrepreneur, the capitalistic adventurer, has existed everywhere" (xxxiv). Instead of adventure capitalism, Weber emphasized "sober bourgeois capitalism" that relied on "technical possibilities" and

"calculability" (xxxvii). *Metropolis* stages the encounter between adventure capitalism and the rational capitalism of the West that both supersedes and integrates religion, similar to Weber's analysis of Protestanism as an integral part of the development of Western capitalism.

The case study later in this chapter will discuss in more detail modern capitalism in relation to the modern city as understood in the early twentieth century. Before we get to it, however, two sections, one on the emerging genre of the street film and one on *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* as a prime example of modernist aesthetics, reflect the theories outlined so far.

The Weimar street film

A subgenre of the city film that developed in the Weimar Republic was the street film, organized around the street as a space of random encounters, violent crimes, urban surveillance, and ambiguous morality and sexuality – the emerging social space and public sphere of modern urbanism. The fascination with the street reflected technological changes that enabled a new and different kind of street life in the city than previously existed. Frances Guerin explains that by "the 1920s, the industrialization of light that had begun in the mid-nineteenth century reached a moment of intensity" (155). Life in the streets became visible at night, which opened another dimension for interaction.

The street in the Weimar Republic street film became the setting for "psychological melodramas" that represented "a dangerous lure and a force of tragic destiny for the imprudent male" (Katz 520), the danger lying in the possibility of illegitimate desires bridging social divisions and moral codes. The inner workings of modernity were externalized in the urban modernity of the street, as we can see in Pabst's *Joyless Street*, which focuses on the working poor in its portrayal of class conflict.

Motherless working girl Greta, played by Greta Garbo, lives with her retired father, who loses his entire pension in an investment scheme of stock options for a mining company. A second plot involves Maria (Asta Nielsen), who is treated badly by her father and who in the course of the film prostitutes herself for her boyfriend, Egon, just to witness him with another prostitute, who she then kills. A group of ruthless adventure capitalists plays on the masses by pretending that coal-mine stock will go up, so that poor people invest and lose their money. The space most closely associated with the ruthless adventure capitalists is Madame Gill's Bar, a place of postwar decadence that provides a playground for them and represents the threat of prostitution for Greta and Maria as well.[3] The street is the space of social encounters across class.

Figure 1.4 G. W. Pabst. *Joyless Street* (1925)

Joe May's *Asphalt* (1929) portrays the dangers as well as the possibilities of those random encounters in the streets of the city. The film exposes the dangers of urban modernity by juxtaposing the transgression of law with the reconstitution of law, poles embodied by a prostitute and a policeman. An early scene shows the Potsdamer Platz with a policeman who is trying in vain to control the traffic with his hand stretched out, which positions him at the mercy of the modern metropolis. A low camera angle foregrounds the asphalt and the cars exceeding his control across which the title of the film, *Asphalt*, is written. The film constructs a stark contrast between interior domesticity, inhabited by the policeman's parents and coded as premodern, and the exterior urbanity of the modern metropolis, inhabited by the prostitute who seduces the policeman.

Like the prostitution and adventure capitalism in the space of Madame Gill's Bar in *Joyless Street*, the character of the prostitute in *Asphalt* shows the seduction of modernity and capitalism gone awry. Her cosmopolitan modernity connects her to crime across national borders in the form of a boyfriend who robs a bank in Paris. When the policeman visits her and her criminal boyfriend arrives, the

Figure 1.5 The shooting of *Joyless Street*

policeman kills the boyfriend out of jealousy and is consequently arrested. The figure of the prostitute is an early incarnation of the femme fatale of film noir in that she seduces a law-abiding man to kill her lover – see the readings of Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944) and Howard Hawks's *The Big Sleep* (1946) in Chapter 2. The city film of the Weimar Republic was more optimistic about the possibilities enabled by these new social spaces than was the later cynical film noir, and *Asphalt*'s narrative has a happy ending – the prostitute testifies that the policeman acted in self-defense and promises to wait for him until he is released from jail. He has succumbed to the sexual seduction of the cosmopolitan metropolis – his fate was foreshadowed by his inability to control the traffic early in the film – but the prostitute is domesticated by his love, honesty, and morality.

In general, scholars disagree on how to read the gendered politics of the street film. At one end of the spectrum, Bruce Murray argues that, beginning with *Joyless Street*, the street films "promoted the maintenance of patriarchy" *vis-à-vis* the mysterious woman who threatened to undermine it. At the other end, Patrice Petro sees the street as the setting of "male symbolic defeat" (1989: 163). This binary underlies the femme fatale in the Weimar Republic city film and film noir as both castrating and empowering, and as a punishable and often punished character.

Whereas the films mentioned thus far project the seduction of modernity onto the woman-in-the street, Lang's *M* portrays "the darker side of the urban flâneur"

Figure 1.6 The empty street as setting in Fritz Lang's *M* (1931)

(Elsaesser 2000a: 145). As we have seen, in *M* a child murderer is terrorizing the city, and when the police efforts to catch him begin to impede the illegal activities of the underworld, members of the latter decide to capture the murderer themselves by mobilizing the beggars of Berlin. A blind street-vendor recognizes the murderer by his whistle – a brilliant use of sound in early sound films – and where modern police methods of surveillance have failed, the gangsters succeed in capturing the murderer using their knowledge and organization of those who inhabit the city. Anton Kaes suggests that *M*'s "obsession with surveillance also addresses the deep-seated fear of an expanding urban population," explaining that "Berlin more than doubled in population by the end of the decade; it had reached 4.5 million inhabitants in 1930" (2000: 49). *M*'s "conflict between surveillance and obscurity" connects cinema and the metropolis, according to Carsten Strathausen (25).

In *M*, the murderer's sadistic sexuality is presented through the narrative and mirrored in the social space of the city, but is evident also in the commodified space of a window display. At one point we see Beckert, the killer of little girls, looking into a shop window, his face framed by the reflection of knives displayed

there in an ornamental pattern. The next shot is from Beckert's point of view as he looks into a mirror in the same window and sees a little girl outside, this time framed by the knives. Kaes reads this sequence of shots as "Beckert's desire . . . figured as violence" (2000: 60). The knives remain the consistent content across

Figure 1.7 The shadow of the mass murderer meeting his next victim

several edits, becoming a miniature mass ornament symbolizing that the commodity itself functions to transfer the violence to the object of desire. Kracauer developed the theoretical concept of "the mass ornament" (75), for which the point of departure was the Tiller Girls, a review group of young women who in their performances no longer appeared as individual performers but as "indissoluble girl clusters whose movements are demonstrations of mathematics" (76). The mass ornament resulted from a capitalist production process that destroyed natural organisms, community, and personality in order to create calculable entities. As Thomas Elsaesser points out, Kracauer's theory of the mass ornament situated the "relationship of self to body in terms of vision and self-display" (2000a: 48). The visual emphasis in the process of modernization affected not only cultural representation, but also self-perception and self-representation, a claim that is visible in the single shot of Beckert looking in the shop window.

In this short sequence the film accomplishes two things: one, it depicts Beckert as a passive character despite the aggressive violence of his crime, a facet which is acted brilliantly by Peter Lorre at the end of the film when he confesses but also cries out that he cannot help himself; and two, even though Beckert cannot control his destructive urges, the scenes of him gazing in shop windows show a reflexivity regarding representation and commodification that other cinematic texts lack in depicting women as commodities in the street. Thus, the sexual perpetrator is accorded both self-reflexivity and victim status by Lang.

Characteristic of the subgenre of the street film, then, is the street as the site of social interaction and control. It is also the space in which desires and anxieties are acted out. In accordance with the theories advanced by Benjamin, Simmel, Kracauer, and Weber, the street film is highly gendered: female figures appear repeatedly as prostitutes, and male characters range from enforcers of the law, in the form of policemen, to those who break the law, in the form of criminals. The gendered interactions are negotiated in the public space of the urban street.

Modernist aesthetics: the city symphony

While the street film offers melodramatic narratives acted out by characters, other films such as Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* reproduce the psychic and visual experience of modernity without relying on a conventional narrative. Hake accords *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* a radical position because it organizes Berlin's "social and spatial qualities in visual terms" (1994: 127). However, despite the fact that many have applauded the film's aesthetic expression of the *avant-garde* and modernism, Hake maintains that Ruttmann's "ultimate goal was visual pleasure, not critical analysis" (1994: 127).

In Ruttmann's film, the modern metropolis of Berlin is anthropomorphized through the temporal organization of a full day there, from beginning to end, arranged in five acts. Onto the opening shot of calm waves of water and the sun, abstract shapes are projected: a circle, lines, and a square move in an abstract formation, accompanied by a short, atonal score. The abstract opening then cuts to a shot from a train moving towards Berlin through the surrounding gardens, industrial areas, construction sites, empty train stations, and advertisements, to the sign announcing Berlin. The very next sequence contrasts a close-up of a machine, signifying the anonymity and efficiency of modern production, with the old splendor of Berlin's cathedral shot from above. Human beings in the metropolis are continually subordinated to the material dimension of modernity in shots of modernist architecture, industrial design, and electricity. The emptiness of the streets in act one, at five o'clock in the morning, emphasizes both the absence of humans and the city as an entity in itself as the particular focus of the film.

The film's abstract opening of different shapes edited together and forming a rhythmic pattern is followed by a train-ride into the city. This sequence is not only a formal consideration, but reflects the fact that, as Kaes points out, "Berlin has always been a city of migrants from rural areas" (1998: 185). The film's opening shows nature and abstraction as two poles framing the idea of the modernist metropolis. Hake describes this model of editing as "a kind of associative montage," which, in contrast to the political commentary associated with Sergei Eisenstein, "confirms total exchangeability and eternal recurrence as the foundation of experience in modern mass culture" (1994: 130). She also points out that the film does not emphasize the monuments of the nineteenth century that identify imperial Berlin, an important change from the previous understanding of the city (1994: 134). The modern metropolis is marked mainly by the camera's repeated return to places in the city that are not identified by their national significance in the capital of Germany, but rather by their role for transportation or leisure. Instead of architecture, we find traffic, which continues the fascination with movement and brings into play the dynamic possibilities of traffic with the dynamic possibilities of editing. Ruttmann was a painter by training, and Strathausen explains that he published a statement before the film's release that characterized his montage technique as fulfilling "musical–rhythmic demands" (43).

Berlin: Symphony of a Great City repeatedly shows displays of mannequins in shop windows, thus combining their artificial, anthropomorphic quality with the seductive allure of commodities. The careful arrangements of mannequins to arouse the pleasure of looking and then seducing the implied *flâneur* to enter the store and purchase something are juxtaposed with the masses of people on their way to work, arriving for work, moving quickly and disconnectedly up and down stairs at subway stations. The shots are organized according to abstract principles

Figure 1.8 Walter Ruttmann. *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927): Traffic

of movement and composition, cross-cutting masses on the way to work with soldiers, marching in formation, and animals, and increasing the profusion of people from one shot to the next. Views of masses moving through the city, in turn, are intercut with close-ups of industrial, mechanical, and electrical machines that dwarf humans, and we also see instruments of communication, such as the typewriter and the telephone, which signal modernity.

Because there are no individualized characters, the few singular individuals take on a symbolic function, and once again one of the few is a prostitute, a streetwalker recognizable through her interaction with a man who picks her up. She is seen through the corner of a shop window, aligning her with both the seductiveness and sexualization of consumption and the public space of the street. The next contrasting shots show mechanical window displays and a wedding couple, pointing to the mechanization of sexuality in contrast to traditional matrimony. Frequent shots of neon signs dominate the cityscape announcing movies and reviews. Thus Ruttmann's film reflects aesthetically the experience of modernity, characterizing the city as Kracauer's "surface."

The street film captures the experience of modernity in narratives about urban types and projects the changing gender roles onto the newly emerging urban space of the street. *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* responds to the experience of

modernity as fragmented and abstract through its aesthetic choices of editing, rhythm, and rejection of traditional narrative. Both examples, however, reflect aspects of modernity highlighted by important theorists during the Weimar Republic, such as that of the *flâneur* and the metropolitan type, the configuration of the mass ornament, and the different formulations of the crowd; in short those kinds of configurations of cultural productions, urban spaces, and human subjectivity that changed with modernity but that also produced modernity in the city.

Case Study 1 **Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927)**

Lang's paradigmatic city film *Metropolis* addressed the connection between the city and industrialization and served as a blueprint for science-fiction films by advancing film technology in order to present a vision of the urban future (see Chapter 6). The

Figure 1.9 Creating the set for Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927)

city of Metropolis connects technology and futurism, socio-political problems, and their resolution. Anne Leblans sees in the film "a seismograph that with great accuracy registers concerns, conflicts, and developments of the mid-1920s" (96). Famous for its settings, the original production cost more than 4 million Reichsmarks, had a duration of seven hours, and did not recover its production costs.

As already mentioned, the imaginary city of Metropolis is organized vertically. The spaces above, pleasure gardens and the large office of the owner of Metropolis, Frederson, are inhabited by the upper class, while below the workers toil in uniform and drab workplaces and houses, dressed uniformly and moving in unison from and to work. Maria, the daughter of a worker, mediates between the workers and Frederson, who wants the workers to be replaced by machines to enhance productivity, but Rotwang, a mad scientist, builds a seductive, evil robot in the likeness of Maria to incite revolution among the workers and ultimately destroy Metropolis. Frederson's son, Freder, and the real Maria meet and fall in love. The robot Maria incites the workers to revolt, but their chaotic actions result only in the destruction and flooding of their own quarters. When their children are at risk of drowning in the flood, Maria and Freder save them. The foreman reports to the hysterical masses that their children had almost drowned, and consequently they burn the false Maria at the stake. Freder, Maria, and Rotwang fight on top of the cathedral, and Rotwang falls to his death. The final image of the film shows Freder, Frederson, and the foreman shaking hands in front of the cathedral with Maria at their side, and the last intertitle reads: "The heart connects the mind and the hand."

With Maria's help, Freder has come to be the connection between the alienated labor force and the owners of the means of production in industrial capitalism. Religious imagery is substituted for a political solution to the problem of class exploitation. Modern Weberian capitalism is embodied by Frederson, the boss of Metropolis, in his rational, profit-oriented relationship with those around him, including his son, Freder. Rational functionalism and automatism are also represented by many fetishizing shots of the machines that celebrate technology. Rotwang represents the danger of irrationality in capitalism, which could destroy the means of production as well as the workers. Ultimately, however, it is the spiritual connection of the heart between the hand and the brain, and the destruction of the atavistic and mystical–magical embodiment of capitalism that makes possible a modern, rational, and humane capitalism for the future. The film's narrative drives towards that final constellation encapsulated in its ultimate shot.

Metropolis opens with a shot of a city signaling its abstract design, which reflects the modernist vision of functionalism and the absence of decoration. Onto this shot

continued

are projected close-ups of industrial machines that function in a well-orchestrated rhythm. By showing only parts of machines, the close-ups celebrate the industrial aesthetic and at the same time obscure the concrete function of the machines. The next shot shows a ten-hour clock, symbolic of the organization of the industrial workday and the labor force in the shift-change of the workers. The workers are grouped as an anonymous mass and their alienation and exhaustion are expressed in their unison movement, uniform costume, lack of communication and absence of individualized facial expressions.

Figure 1.10 Mies van der Rohe's modernist vision of architecture

This lower class is contrasted with the playful and sexualized upper class in a space called the "Eternal Gardens" that is located above the workers' homes. Here the characters express their individuality through elaborate costumes and playful interaction. At the same time, their individuality is coded as superficial, particularly for the female characters. While modern in their self-confident expression of sexuality and extravagant clothing, they are also portrayed as excessively decadent, a quality mirrored in the design and architecture of "Eternal Gardens," with its fountain and peacocks reminiscent of baroque architecture, a stark contrast to the modernist design of city below. *Metropolis* captures the relationship of modernity in the city that is also the workplace through the scale of the relationship of setting and characters. Repeatedly the size of the architecture overshadows the workers, whose monotonous and repetitive movement also reduces them to parts of the machinery.

Several shots emphasize the city's fantastic modernist architecture with the pathways of the traffic below. While the film shows the conditions of work in the industrial city to be oppressive, it also celebrates the modernist design and architecture as aesthetic possibilities and, by implication, film's ability to showcase this splendor.

Figure 1.11 *Metropolis*: The spectacle of the modern cityscape

continued

Rotwang introduces the false Maria to upper-class men in a bar called Yoshiwara, a place where capitalist desire is sexualized. Yoshiwara is associated with the feminine and the Orient, echoing the notion of adventure capitalism described by Weber. This space – similar to Madame Gill's Bar in *Joyless Street* – connects the feminine in the commodification of sexuality with the atavistic form of capitalism. The threat of modernity is embodied by the figure of the prostitute, now also a robot, combining dangerous sexuality with the danger of technology. Andreas Huyssen points out that the figure of woman, split in "two traditional images of femininity – the virgin and the vamp, images which are both focused on sexuality, [poses] a threat to the male world of high technology, efficiency, and instrumental rationality" (1986: 72). The dialectic conclusion to the conflict is aided by characteristics that are rooted in the premodern.

Like so many other directors and films discussed here, Lang's *Metropolis* portrays the ambivalence of modernity. On the one hand, the modernist city gives birth to its own destruction embodied by the robot, representative of the technological displacement of humans. On the other hand, the impressive setting of the modernist city, with its oversized architecture, its celebration of machinery, and its reduction of humans to orderly masses, fetishizes the surface aspects of modernity, à la Kracauer. The film's lasting visual and intellectual appeal results from its reproduction and thus documentation of the fascination with an aesthetic vision of modernity more than from the critical discussion of modernity found in its narrative. Thus the fascination of audiences with the film also responds to the awe-inspiringly homogeneous, coherent, and larger-than-life vision of city that points to the possibility of a better future, a vision that is hardly visible today on the grand scale that Lang created in Neubabelsberg.

Further Reading

Thomas Elsaesser (2000b) *Metropolis*, London: British Film Institute. As part of the BFI series of film classics, Elsaesser's *Metropolis* advances a detailed historical account of important contexts of the film, such as Lang's own mythical account of the film's creation, the production at the studio, and the film's different versions.

David Frisby (2001) *Cityscapes of Modernity: Critical Explorations*, Cambridge: Polity. *Cityscapes of Modernity* provides an in-depth and detailed overview of the theories of modernity that this chapter can only address in a cursory fashion. Focusing on Berlin and Vienna, it pays particular attention to the relation between social theory and cultural production.

Anton Kaes (1996) "Sites of Desire: The Weimar Street Film," in D. Neumann (ed.) *Film Architecture: Set Designs from Metropolis to Blade Runner*, Munich: Prestel, 26–32. This essay analyzes the Weimar Republic street film as intimately tied to modernity.

Patrice Petro (1989) *Joyless Streets: Women and Melodramatic Representation in Weimar Germany*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Petro offers a reading of the role of women in the Weimar Republic as spectators in the context of the theories of modernity and popular culture.

Jans B. Wager (1999) *Dangerous Dames: Women and Representation in the Weimar Street Film and Film Noir*, Athens: Ohio University Press. Wager's book connects the film noir femme fatale to her origin in the films of the Weimar Republic.

Janet Ward (2001b) *Weimar Surfaces: Urban Visual Culture in 1920s Germany*, Berkeley: University of California Press. Ward proposes that surfaces are an important concept for urban modernity as it emerged in 1920s Germany and elaborates on surfaces in architecture, advertisement, film, and shop windows.

Essential viewing

Fritz Lang. *Metropolis* (1927)

—— *M* (1931)

Joe May. *Asphalt* (1929)

F. W. Murnau. *The Last Laugh* (1924)

G. W. Pabst. *Joyless Street* (1925)

Walter Ruttmann. *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927)

Robert Siodmak, Edgar Ulmer, and Billy Wilder. *People On Sunday* (1929)