ABSTRACT
The most expensive European film to date, Fritz Lang’s futuristic epic Metropolis (1927) drew in its art direction on Gothic architecture, Bauhaus design, and modern high-rise buildings pioneered by American urban planning. Inspired partly by the skyline of Manhattan which so impressed Lang during his visit to America in the early 1920s, high-rise architecture is used in Metropolis to support the dystopian vision of a future society divided between the wealthy technocratic elite enjoying leisure in their sun-bathed sports stadiums and vast estates situated above ground, and the enslaved workers toiling in inhuman conditions in the dark factories underground. The idea of the “vertical city” was widely debated at the time not only in America but also in Germany as a possible solution to housing congestion in rapidly expanding cities. Abandoned in Germany in the 1920s, high-rise architecture from Lang’s visionary film returned in the 1970s as part of a world-wide phenomenon of tall buildings as a sign of universal architectural language of modern urban space and civic aspiration.

METROPOLIS AND AMERICAN SKYSCRAPERS
Fritz Lang reportedly conceived of the idea of Metropolis when he first saw New York from ship-board, arriving in October 1924 to attend the American première of his mythical epic Die Nibelungen. Still non-existent in Europe at the time, the skyscrapers that so impressed Lang included the Flatiron Building (twenty-two stories), the Singer Building (forty-seven stories), and the Woolworth Building (fifty-five stories), to name just the most famous. There was a vigorous debate conducted in Germany at the time about the possibility of introducing American-style high-rise residential building to relieve housing congestion, but the plans were never realized, mainly for structural reasons: unlike Manhattan, which is built on granite rock, Berlin is largely situated on sand. The idea of the “vertical city” may have been defeated in Germany at the time, but not in Lang’s imaginary metropolis of the future, in which studio-built high-rise architecture supports the film’s moral and political allegory.

THE FUTURISTIC TOWER OF BABEL
Fritz Lang’s urban vision inspired by Manhattan skyline not only defined German urban experts, who predicted horizontal suburban sprawl as the more likely solution to Berlin’s housing problem. The director’s grand vertical metaphor also seemed to go against the nature of the cinematic medium itself with its horizontal screen, on which Lang conveyed the sense of the new Tower of Babel stretching towards the sky, and the inhuman machine halls situated deep below the ground. Lang’s up-down division of architectural forms becomes a metaphor of traditional class struggle as well as a historical bridge between the capitalist “tomorrow land” of the top-floor penthouse suite and the “times immemorial” of the underground Christian catacombs.

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