

***As dystopian and futuristic texts, Metropolis and 1984 share similar ideas but, due to the times in which they were composed, offer very different perspectives on the plight of the individual in a political landscape. Discuss with close reference to each of the texts.***

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Composers of dystopian texts explore the plight of the individual within political landscapes, reflective of their contextual concerns. Both Fritz Lang's German Expressionist Film Metropolis (1927) and George Orwell's satirical novel Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949) employ textual form to reveal the exploitation of the individual by oppressive oligarchic rule. Lang exemplifies how this inequitable power distribution elicits dehumanisation, reflecting his concerns with the perpetuation of capitalist power in post WW1 Germany. In contrast, Orwell's condemnation of this inequity responds to post WWII fears of totalitarianism, envisaging the degradation of morality stemming from endeavours to achieve absolute control. Ultimately, both composers follow the dystopian convention by exploring the detrimental ramifications of technological and political oppression upon the individual, restricting their freedom and relationships.

Both Lang's Metropolis and Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four urge the audience to challenge this plight of the individual emerging from a detached form of autocratic government. The silent film, complete with inter-titles, places much emphasis on the visual and audio representations of the homogenised populace. This suppression of the individual is primarily reflected in the alienation of the protagonist, Freder. Lang's economic views towards Germany's struggle in paying the Treaty of Versailles is echoed through Freder's pursuit to overcome the socio-economic divide within his society. This unstable Weimar Republic era led to a loss of humanity in preference of industrial gain. Lang condemns the workers' loss of human agency through the initial cross-cutting shots of the city panorama and their drudgery. The extent of their degradation is heightened through Lang's use of German Expressionist chiaroscuro lighting, where the avaricious bourgeoisie are displayed in juxtaposed bright settings to the working class' darkness. Their repressed individuality echoes the Marxist theory of class struggle founded in the 1800s. Lang, however, reminds the audience that human agency can be restored through a return to past values about the community and empire rather than a continual emphasis on social progression through the exploitation of workers. The importance of reconciliation is depicted through the biblical allusions to Noah's ark, the factory floods acting as a cathartic cleansing of society. Lang's portrayal of this dystopic society explores the plight of the individual induced from an oppressive oligarchy, challenging the audience to consider how a valuation of individuality is key for any society to succeed.

Orwell shares Lang's antipathy of a society that oppresses human thought and autonomy, ultimately leading to the plight of the individual. The autocracy within Nineteen Eight-Four, however, restricts autonomy due to their own hedonism, as opposed to the flawed attempt at social progress in Metropolis. The audience are reminded of this suppressed autonomy that Orwell envisions through the eyes of the protagonist, Winston. This subjugation is heightened in Winston's ironic sensory description of trivial paraphernalia such as his diary as "the beautiful cream paper". The irony embodied within this imagery is reflective of Winston's desire for beauty and freedom, which have been eliminated because of the Party's utilitarianism. Utilising satirical commentary, Orwell exposes the Party's oppressive control and ensuing climate of fear, reminiscent of the great purges within the Stalinist Russia regime. This verisimilitude heightens the efficacy of his warning, forcing the audience to realise that Airstrip One is not a meaningless fantasy, but the potential future. The exaggeration of its physical degradation, having "no colour in anything except the posters" and the smell of "boiled cabbage and old rag mats" mirrors the deterioration of individualism in an authoritarian state that exerts thought control. Orwell consequently projects his fear of these oppressive political landscapes, especially the dictatorship under tyrannical rulers such as Hitler and Stalin. In particular, the metaphorical "cutting [of] language down to the bone", expresses his caution against the impoverishment of vocabulary and the repression of human autonomy. This suppression is reinforced through O'Brien's final speech to Winston, where the symbolic imagery of "If you want a picture of

the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face-forever” exposes the inescapable reality of power-drawn oligarchies and their suppression of individualism. Following the dystopian convention, any sign of rebellion to these systems is negated in a manner similar to Stalin’s midnight purges. The parallels between Lang’s criticism of capitalist power and Orwell’s warning against a tyrannical regime espouse that despite different contextual situations, the plight of the individual remains a universal concern.

Both Lang and Orwell’s warnings of the plight of the individual extend to the potential for a totalitarian regime’s use of technology to control human consciousness and rationality. By using a visual medium, Lang denounces technological expansion through the close up shot of Freder clutching his heart. This German Expressionist action reflects Lang’s fears on the growing dependency for machinery in the Weimar, heeding warning of consequential human suffering. Lang expresses his concern towards the workers’ lack of human consciousness through repeated montages of their mechanical motions, whereby they have been transformed into the components of the leviathan boiler that powers the city. Consequently, this dehumanisation evokes the technophobia of his era in response to the machine age in America and Germany’s Second Industrial Revolution. In addition, Lang accentuates mankind’s corruptive pursuit of technology through the character of Rotwang, where the bodily sacrifice of his hand is symbolic of his loss of humanity and rationality. Unlike Orwell’s forewarning of the abuse of technology by an oligarchy, Lang also accompanies his warning with a tonal shift near the end of the film. Through the use of the mis-en-scene of Freder linking hands between Freder and Grot, Lang presents a hope-instilled resolution where Freder’s compassion and empathy reconciles the workers and the bourgeoisie. Therefore, Lang’s Metropolis presents an archetypal message of dystopian science fiction; the dilemma of whether technology would be constructive or destructive for the individual, warning the audience of his society’s trajectory under industrialism.

Similarly, Orwell forewarns the use of technological control by an oligarchic government to oppress the individual but, unlike Metropolis, he focuses on the degradation of human relationships that this individual suppression leads to. Orwell uses third person limited rather than omniscient narration so that the audience bears witness to Winston’s desire for familial relationships. This universal human desire is therefore conveyed through Winston’s intimate recount of his mother, “her feelings were her own, and could not be altered from outside”. The reflective diction reflects the 1945 Holocaust in which families were executed within gas chambers, projecting Orwell’s fears of the perversion of familial devotion and love by authoritative powers. The post- WWII world saw unprecedented advances in weaponry, its renewed destructive capabilities shadowing global economic stratification and the moral decay of human relationships. This destruction of human bonds and the consequent plight of the individual is portrayed through the commonality of Winston Smith’s name representing the everyman archetype. Contrary to Lang, Orwell condemns the deprivation of human emotion and relationships, where telescreens acting as parodies of television are a contributing factor. This aspect of technological control through the emotionless label of sex as a “duty to the Party” severs intimate connections between Winston and Julia. Consequently, Orwell undermines Lang’s faith in rapid industrialisation, presenting his perspective that technology and totalitarian power ultimately leads to demoralisation and eradication of any sense of humanity.

Both Lang’s Metropolis and Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four present divergent messages on the individual’s plight under an authoritarian state in response to their post-war contexts. The two composers denounce the diminution of individual autonomy, and the degradation of human relationships and spirit arising from technological expansion. Ultimately, both Lang and Orwell transcends time with their similar concerns for the imbalance of power and humanity’s predicament within futuristic dystopian worlds.

