
H-France Review Vol. 14 (July 2014), No. 125

Ben McCann, *Ripping Open the Set: French Film Design, 1930–1939*. New York: Peter Lang, 2013. x + 250 pp. Figures, appendix, filmography, bibliography, and index. \$68.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-3-03910-311-9.

Review by Alison J. Murray Levine, University of Virginia.

1930s French cinema, it might be argued, was the period in which production designers played the most important role in French film history. It is well known that designers such as Alexandre Trauner and their long-term relationships with directors across multiple films played a crucial role in developing sets that would come to define the atmosphere and shape the narrative project of Poetic Realism. Given the importance of these designers to some of the most important French films of all time, it is perhaps surprising that the literature devoted specifically to their work is relatively sparse. Ben McCann's monograph, *Ripping Open the Set*, is a rich and detailed contribution to this literature, providing detailed "close readings" of the narrative function of sets in some of the most well-known films of the era, such as *La grande illusion*, *Le jour se lève*, *Le quai des brumes*, and *La belle équipe*. He also provides extensive detail on the visual philosophy and working practice of four of the period's most influential designers: Lazare Meerson, Eugène Lourié, Jacques Krauss, and Alexandre Trauner.

McCann argues that film decor during this period played a central narrative function, and that the centrality of set design was not limited to the Poetic Realist mode with which we tend to associate it. Contending that "French film design throughout the 1930s is not just descriptive, but also expressive" (p. 23), he gives many examples of ways in which very different films' set design serves as a "dramatic symbolic amplifier" (p. 212) of narrative themes, character transitions, and atmosphere. He argues that French designers were exceptionally successful in creating visual spaces that "significantly contributed to the dramatic composition...of a particular film" (p. 2), and that their designs drew international recognition for their high standards, personalized styling, and their difference from the standard-issue sets of Hollywood cinema. As a consequence, McCann argues that set designers of the period were so central to the possible "reading" of the films that they should be considered as *auteurs* in their own right. If they have not received proper attention, it is perhaps due to the influential legacy of the New Wave critics' focus on the director as *auteur*, on the one hand, and these critics' disdain for the artifice of 1930s and 1940s set design on the other.

One of the strengths of the book is a decision to synthesize scholarship on the working practices of particular designers, information gleaned from published writings by those designers, and close readings of the sets in selected films from their repertoire. A scene that a reader might think she knows by heart, such as the tracking shot introducing the character of Von Rauffenstein in *La grande illusion*, takes on new depth as we read about the designer's correspondence with the actor Eric von Stroheim to work out the selection of objects that would be chosen to signify in the scene. We come to see the resulting shot as emblematic of a broader 1930s design principle, in which sets should be "readable," populated with a significant selection of objects that communicate meaning in a precise and intentional way. Lourié, the designer of the scene, explains his interest in communicating a viewer's perception of the real, rather than making a copy of the real: "We eliminate useless details and compose the essential elements to underscore our idea of the setting. Our sets are true to life, often truer than the original settings. In willingly *choosing* what to show, we do not betray the spirit of the truth" (p. 94).

Much of the book is devoted to an elaboration of the idea expressed here by Lourié: that studio design across genres sought to create places that would be perceived by their viewers as “authentic” (pp. 85-86), immediately recognizable, and yet devoid of unnecessary elements that might clutter those places should the viewer encounter them outside the film. McCann shows how designers established a kind of “expressive” relationship to place (p. 94), often beginning with documentary photographs and then selecting and enhancing the particular details they found to be “characteristic” (a doorway, for example; a poster or advertisement; particular type of cobblestone or streetcar, p. 87) or “typical” (p. 81) and deleting the rest. He shows how key elements of the sets become “action spaces” (p. 23) that structure and advance the narrative.

McCann is at his best when, as in his case studies in chapter three, he describes the details of the working relationship between individual designers and directors. In his elaboration of Lourié’s role in three Renoir films, *La grande illusion*, *La bête humaine*, and *La règle du jeu*, he explains how Lourié navigated the complex spatial interplay between built sets and location shooting. After reading about choices such as the decision to build sets for *La bête humaine* next to real railway lines, the reader gains a deeper understanding of how the sets structure Renoir’s fluid camerawork and underpin, even facilitate, his “cinematic grammar” (p. 107). Having finished chapter three, the reader is eager to return to these well-known films with a renewed attentiveness to stylistic components that should perhaps be more appropriately attributed to the designer, than to the director. The same is true of Jacques Krauss’s work on the depiction of the Casbah in Algiers in *Pépé le Moko*, as well as the productions of other designer-director collaborations of the period.

The book is perhaps less convincing in its attempt to establish distinctions among different designers across the decade. Although it does lay out a continuum among different design alternatives, from the “realist” to the “theatrical” to the “symbolist,” McCann concludes that “it was in the middle ground...that the most proficient designers of the period were positioned... [They] aimed for a delicate equilibrium between stylization and realism” (p. 103). In his search to posit an overarching “French” design paradigm for the decade, he chooses to emphasize the similarities, rather than the differences among designers that worked in this middle ground. In this view, Poetic Realism takes pride of place in the analysis, perhaps to the detriment of other design types that were also practiced at the time.

The contribution *Ripping Open the Set* makes to our understanding of the importance of 1930s set design is significant, though it is based primarily on synthesis, rather than on new archival research. The book privileges broad connections among a diverse corpus of films rather than examining, for example, the specifics of one particular production to reveal budgets, choices proposed by the designer but not ultimately taken, and other practical aspects of the life of a production. Even for a book that is primarily about cinema, and not about French social or political history, its laser-like focus on film as an esthetic product leaves the reader wanting to know more about the economic situations of the design teams, the political inclinations of the designers, the politics of particular aesthetic choices, and the connections of these cultural products to moments of social, political, and economic upheaval in 1930s France. McCann cites extensively from scholars such as Dudley Andrew, Martin O’Shaughnessy, and Julian Jackson, but primarily from their aesthetic commentary, rather than other parts of their work. Attention to French Algeria in the discussion of *Pépé le Moko*, for example, is confined to a passing remark about empire, when there is clearly a rich thread of discussion to be drawn out of McCann’s provocative description of the reconstruction of the Algiers Casbah on the outskirts of Paris.

For some readers, characterizing set design as or “connotative” (p. 11) or “narrativized” (p. 26) may come across as literary jargon; however, McCann is carefully attends to the history of these terms and his particular use of them. In other cases, terms such as “performative” (p. 8) could benefit from more careful contextualization. In the introduction, McCann suggests that “the decor was performative, whereby a reciprocal transfer between individual and decor acted as an interpretive matrix for each film”

(p. 8). The term “performative” recurs several times in his analysis, without referencing the debates surrounding its use or his own definition. A similar comment might be made of the use of “indigenous ‘French-ness’” (p. 22), raised in the introduction as part of the broad thesis of the book but not properly defined or developed. Finally, numerous small errors that detract from the otherwise crisp and precise tenor of the writing were overlooked in the proofing.

These minor points aside, Ben McCann has given us a fascinating and highly readable book that excels in its sharp close viewing style, its vibrant description of visual detail, and its focus on the specificity of set design and the contributions of particular designers to classic French cinema. After each chapter, readers will doubtless find themselves, as I did, wanting to return to these well-known films for a closer look.

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ISSN 1553-9172