

Ben McCann

RIPPING OPEN THE SET

FRENCH FILM DESIGN,
1930–1939

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NEW STUDIES IN EUROPEAN CINEMA

PETER LANG

French film design throughout the 1930s was not just descriptive, but also expressive: sets were not merely part of the background, but were vital components of a film's overall atmosphere, impact and critical afterlife. This was a period when sets were 'ripped open', as painted backdrops were replaced by three-dimensional constructions to ensure greater proximity to reality. Accomplished set designers such as Alexandre Trauner, Jacques Krauss and Eugène Lourié crafted a series of designs both realist and expressionistic that brought out the underlying themes of a film's narrative and helped create an exportable vision of 'Frenchness' that influenced other European and American film design practices.

This book details the elaborate paraphrasing tendencies of French film design in the 1930s. The author explores the crucial role of the set designer in the film's evolutionary process and charts how the rapid development of studio practices enabled designers to become progressively more ambitious. The book examines key films such as *Quatorze juillet* (1932), *Un Carnet de bal* (1937), *La Grande illusion* (1937) and *Le Jour se lève* (1939) to demonstrate how set design works at establishing time and place, generating audience familiarity and recognition and underpinning each film's visual style.

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NEW STUDIES IN EUROPEAN CINEMA

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WENDY EVERETT & AXEL GOODBODY



Peter Lang

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For Jacqueline

There wasn't a dream afloat somewhere which wouldn't sooner or later turn up on it, having first been made photographic by plaster, canvas, lathe and paint [...] No dream ever entirely disappears.

— NATHANAEL WEST, *The Day of the Locust*

There was one movie-making quirk that might be easily overlooked – but if you did you'd suffer many a headache later. And that was design the sets to fit the stars [...] One side of Jean Arthur's face was much more attractive than the other; in fact, her 'bad' side made her look like a different person. Thus the sets had to be constructed so that Jean Arthur's 'entrances' showed only the 'good' side of her face. Otherwise, she'd be forced into cumbersome, unnatural crossings and turns to maneuver her 'good' side to the camera.

— FRANK CAPRA

I wouldn't go near those damn things, those sets. What would I do? People don't want me for those things. They swamp me.

— DOUGLAS FAIRBANKS

Doors! He's directing the doors! All he's interested in is the doors.

— MARY PICKFORD

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Note on Translations

All translations from the original French are my own, unless where specified.

Film titles are provided in French, followed by the English-language release title.

INTRODUCTION

Ripping Open the Set

Creating ‘Lived In’ Sets

On 11 March 1939, during pre-production for *Gone with the Wind*, legendary Hollywood producer David O. Selznick sent the following internal memorandum to the film’s production designer William Cameron Menzies, art director Lyle Wheeler, and set designer Edward Boyle:

There has been a great deal of comment recently about the difference between the outstanding foreign pictures, particularly the French pictures, and the American pictures, in that the better foreign pictures seem to capture a quality of reality in the photography, sets, and costumes that is lacking even in the best American pictures. I personally feel that this criticism is a justifiable one. I feel that our sets always look exactly what they are – sets that have been put up a few hours before, instead of seeming in their ageing and in their dressing to be rooms that have existed for some time and have been lived in. (Behlmer 2000: 217)

At first glance, Selznick’s ambition to create more ‘lived in’ sets may seem a little contradictory, given that the dominant design mode while he was Head of Production at RKO and Selznick International Pictures (with such auspicious output as *Dinner at Eight* [1933], *Anna Karenina* [1935], *A Star is Born* [1937] and *Intermezzo* [1939]) was characterized by a glossy decorative intensity which ironically appeared to corroborate his appraisal of the inherent sameness and anonymity of Hollywood decor. Yet Selznick’s rebuke to the perceived artificiality of Hollywood decor, and his recognition of the ‘quality of reality’ in French cinema, is a good starting point for the following study of the importance of French set design on the development of not just its own national cinematic agenda, but also on the standards of production and approach to set design across other national contexts.

Broadly speaking, Hollywood 1930s decor was uniform, designed and coordinated by designers like Menzies, Van Nest Polglase and Cedric Gibbons to reinforce Hollywood's idea of fiction as 'a state inhabited by glamorous people capable of negotiating crises in ninety minutes and bringing them to logical and happy resolutions' (Thomson 1977: 16). Set design in an American context was 'romantic, open and clean, encouraging choreographed movement' (Valentine 2000: 149) and was often predicated on functionally faultless but visually commonplace architectural and decorative tropes. It was a homogeneous design, endlessly recycled and in a permanent state of re-modification. As Tod Hackett discovered in Nathanael West's novel *The Day of the Locust* (1939), Hollywood design constituted a myriad of incomplete buildings, half-constructed and half-demolished, a 'Sargasso of the imagination' functioning seamlessly as backdrop for both melodrama and horror, or *film noir* and western.¹

On the other hand, by the end of the 1930s, the visual exquisiteness of French film decor had become the benchmark against which all other national cinemas were being measured. Particular decor techniques established particular visual environments (of claustrophobia, of community, of exoticism) that seemed far more imaginative than the more orthodox *mise-en-scène* arrangements, and the often bland, circumspect spatial compositions that were developing in Hollywood. French set designers not only created beautifully designed visual spaces, but also significantly contributed to the dramatic composition – or the dramaturgy – of a particular film. They frequently rejected primary realism; this was no simple cut-and-paste job, extracting life 'as it is' and rebranding it for the screen. Designers would identify pre-existing spaces, and then they would embellish them by altering their perspective, recalibrating their dimensions, or overemphasizing their visual fabric to create new, dynamic designs. The collusion between skilful director and set designer masked the division between real and imaginary, between what existed already and what has been totally fabricated from scratch, to create a sensation of the real filtered through the screen of make-believe.

- 1 Spotting the re-employment of Hollywood interior sets is a fascinating exercise. For instance, the gothic staircase from *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942) returned that same year in *Cat People* and became a mainstay for several RKO 'Haunted House' films for years afterwards.

As such, Selznick's 'great deal of comment' reinforces this status of French design as *the* design scheme the rest of the world was seeking to emulate: spatially verisimilar designs that pictured the narrative and communicated underlying narrative themes with visual brio. In 1930, the New York correspondent for the French film journal *Pour Vous* reported enthusiastically that René Clair's recent release *Sous les toits de Paris* / *Under the Rooftops of Paris* (1930) had been voted best film of the year by American audiences, due in no small part to the film's 'French atmosphere [...] its working-class areas, its old houses, its narrow streets and its quaint streetlamps' (Lange 1931: 3). Hollywood design practice would soon become keenly sensitive to design developments in France: Lazare Meerson's designs for Clair's *A nous la liberté* / *Freedom for Us* (1931) inspired Charlie Chaplin's own factory sets in *Modern Times* (1936), while Paramount head designer Hans Dreier and director Ernst Lubitch's sophisticated diptych *Trouble in Paradise* (1932) and *Design for Living* (1933), with their elegant, airy surfaces, unmistakably quarried Meerson's earlier work. The success of French films on the international awards circuit was equally indicative of their cultural prestige. By the end of the decade, *Le Quai des brumes* / *Port of Shadows* (1938) had won the Best Director's prize at the Venice Film Festival, and *La Kermesse héroïque* / *Carnival in Flanders* (1935), *Mayerling* (1936), *La Grande illusion* / *Grand Illusion* (1937), *Regain* / *Harvest* (1937) and *La Femme du Boulanger* / *The Baker's Wife* (1938) had carried off the New York Critics Prize for Best Foreign Film between 1935 and 1940. These successes were all framed as something 'not-quite-Hollywood', the culmination of a mature visual and narrative style that was recognizably French. These six, predominantly studio-shot films, were all inflected with a strong sense of place and were the product of dynamic director–designer collaborations that deployed decor to mirror the action. They contained sets which were supersaturated with 'atmosphere' (a key word in design discourse on both sides of the Atlantic in the 1930s) and were stamped with a strong authorial imprint. It was not without good reason then, that Italian novelist Italo Calvino noted that, after watching Julien Duvivier's *Pépé le Moko* (1937) – another film that had been well received internationally – French cinema smelled of real odours, as opposed to the Palmolive of American cinema (1976: 17).

Writing at the same time, English writer and erstwhile film critic Graham Greene echoed Selznick's and Calvino's observations when he wrote that the best French directors possessed 'the trick of presenting a more intimate reality' (1972: 229). This 'intimate reality' typifies much French film decor of the 1930s: an evocative, architecturally precise design scheme, frequently accentuated with personal flourishes and symbolic punctuations that allowed for a stronger visual sense and a more holistic viewing experience. *The Times'* film critic, watching Marc Allégret's *Gribouille / Heart of Paris* (1937), applauded that film's modest, economical use of decor: 'Perhaps the greatest advantage enjoyed by French films is that they are not expected to have luxurious settings ...[;] the consequence is that their films are at once more convincing and give more varied pleasure to the eye than most of the productions of other countries' (17 January 1938: 10). Gavin Lambert's comments on *Le Jour se lève / Daybreak* (1939) – that the film's sets 'intensify and illuminate' their characters (1948: 19) – stand as a fitting summation of the embellishing role played by many of the settings in 1930s French cinema.

Closer to home, a series of articles and film reviews by French writers, designers, and directors had also been steadily detecting the emergence of a fuller visual and architectural style in their domestic cinema. In particular, six articles observed the increased importance of film design to shape particular dramatic and aesthetic nuances. This identification of an accentuated decor imbued with dramatic significance was related to broader evolution in 1930s French cinema, namely the growing emergence of the 'atmosphere film'. Firstly, in his article 'We Need "Films of Atmosphere"' (1930), French novelist Francis Carco applauded *Sous les toits de Paris* for its picturesque set design and atmospheric portrayal of the common folk (*petites gens*), and for Clair's uncanny ability to record aspects of the urban everyday with deft precision. By reconstituting the familiar spaces of working-class Paris, Clair had, according to Carco, imbued his narrative with a strong sense of popular milieu, whereby instantly recognizable architectural signifiers became powerful metonyms of the *quartier* and of a whole working-class community. A year later, Anatole Litvak, in 'The Film of Atmosphere must replace the 100% talking feature', responded to criticism that his film *Coeur de lilas / Lilac* (1931) had been too 'bitter and cruel' by asserting that 'atmosphere

[...] is and must lie at the heart of all film-making' (1931: 874). For both Litvak and Carco, these *films d'atmosphère* relied upon the establishment of nuanced atmosphere and extensive local colour to sustain their evocative recreations of urban locales. These popular, communal spaces played a fundamental narrative, visual and tonal role in Clair's early sound films, such as *Sous les toits de Paris*, *Le Million* / *The Million* (1931) and *Quatorze juillet* / *Bastille Day* (1932), and would eventually mutate into the Poetic Realist mode established by Marcel Carné, Jacques Prévert and Alexandre Trauner.

Clair's depiction of an atmospheric, socially grounded urban space reappeared in Carné's seminal 1933 article 'When Will the Cinema Go Down Into The Street?'. The future director of *Hôtel du Nord* (1938) and *Le Jour se lève* breathlessly noted that Clair and Meerson's depiction of Paris in *Sous les toits de Paris* was both 'so real, so true, so moving, so sensitive' and 'a Paris of wood and stucco built at Epinay' (Carné 1965: 95). The essential humanity of Clair's *petites gens* thrived within this artificial setting, and later, the creation of studio-based urban decor would become vital to the unfolding of Carné's darker populist narratives. Carné enthused in particular about Dabit's novel *L'Hôtel du Nord* (1929), quoting its authentic depiction of milieu: 'in a decor of factories, garages, slender footbridges, and unloading carts [throbs] the whole picturesque, restless world of approaches to the Saint-Martin canal'. Carné continued:

Populism, you say. And after that? Neither the word nor the thing itself frightens us. To describe the simple life of humble people, to depict the atmosphere of hard-working humanity which is theirs, isn't that better than reconstructing the murky and inflated ambience of night-clubs, dancing couples, and a nonexistent nobility. (Carné 1965: 96)

This proposal of a populist cinema was an ideological formulation that placed the working class at the forefront of cultural achievement. The prime objective of the new French cinema was to visualize the life of the working class, and this required an expressive decor in which popular Paris and the 'real life' of the city could be represented. These new realities that sound cinema was seeking to capture was linked to a conscious desire to create a more democratic cinema which would combine populism and underlying social comment to celebrate and ennoble the working class. Carné also made

explicit the connection between individual and milieu. To describe the life of the working-class required a picturesque and expressive decor which placed the *petites gens* up front and centre. The design context of Carné's article would be fully realized five years later, when he adapted Dabit's novel and created a set of designs that have since achieved legendary status.

Valéry Jahier, in his essay 'Prologue to a Cinema', published in *Esprit* in October 1934, was also pushing for the establishment of a new aesthetic that 'composed with such poetic accuracy' images such as 'some little street', 'some bistro owner', or 'some group of children chasing each other on a pavement' (1934: 75). This was representative of a discourse that wished to privilege a certain kind of French cinema, one that differed from what he called the 'international style' (characterized by literary adaptations, star actors and the lack of social base).

Following in this vein in 1936, Communist film critic Georges Sadoul recalled a screening of Gaston Roudès's 1933 adaptation of *L'Assommoir*: '[S]ome lead workers who were repairing the roof of a house on the outskirts of Paris; and suddenly, for that brief moment, this actual house under an actual sooty sky transfigured the film. The set had burst open. The principal merit of the young French school is to have ripped open the set' (Sadoul 1988: 219). Sadoul's extended review reflected on the sets of several recent films: the *guingette* in *Pension Mimosas* (1935), the central courtyard of *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* / *The Crime of Mr Lange* (1936), the railway bridge in *Jenny* (1936), and the hotel in *La Belle équipe* / *They Were Five* (1936). In contrast to the culturally anonymous, tottering balsa-wood constructions that had hitherto characterized most French studio-shot productions, Sadoul, like Carné, applauded the new-found authenticity in the decor, admiring the way it reflected the action and was seamlessly assimilated into the narrative. The 'ripping open' of the set heralded an entirely new way of representing the dynamism and vibrancy of Paris.

Finally, in a 1938 *Commune* article entitled 'Films and Milieux', Claude Aveline argued that a film's environment was not simply a backdrop to the narrative, but instead played an essential role: 'Whether individuals depend on it or oppose it, whether they submit to it, accept it, or try to resist, the milieu determines everything' (Aveline 1988: 246). Built sets could not

only function as a dramaturgical arena for the playing out of intertwining personal and community narratives, but were also spaces which might exert a benign or malign influence on the individual, propelling the narrative into the realms of metaphor or allegory.

This plethora of discourses clearly indicates a growing awareness of the role of decor in the post-sound French realist cinema, and an evolving analysis of the ideology of set design. In a period marked by the politicization of cinema aesthetics and film criticism, reviews and op-eds from the likes of Carné, Sadoul, and Georges Altman were urgent, engaged tracts that called for a cinema sensitive to ordinary people's daily lives, that was duty-bound to express an ideologically inflected world view that could capture 'the vast fresco of life' (Carné 1932: 9). With the rise of commercially viable populist and popular narratives based on authentic depictions of the contemporary urban hustle and bustle, set design became not only the most visible component of a film's *mise-en-scène*, but also a marker of authenticity and a guarantor of this kind of 'realism'. The establishment of a typically French design was also an attempt to quarantine realist cinema from the symbolic design excesses of German Expressionist cinema. Richard Abel has elucidated many of the theories of realism that were taking place in French film and extended across all its constituent areas – acting, lighting, narrative, and above all, decor practice. Many of the writers and critics of the 1930s, notes Abel, were returning to a discourse popularized by the likes of Louis Delluc and André Antoine; namely that 'cinema's primary subject and function was the reproduction of real life, whether in a fictional or documentary mode' (1988: 157).

A New Awareness of What Design Can Do

Set design also became an intrinsic component of the success of films due to the rapid professionalization of the film industry and a streamlining of decor methods and approaches throughout the 1930s. One upshot of this

industrial reform was the rise to positions of prominence of a new generation of French set designers, whose collective visual style ‘helped define the output of the last years of the decade, and indeed the next decade’ (Crisp 2002: 320). The output of designers like Lazare Meerson, Alexandre Trauner, Georges Wakhévitch, Eugène Lourié, Jacques Krauss, Lucien Aguetand, and Jean d’Eaubonne made a lasting mark on French cinema, and their considerable design expertise heralded the emergence of film architecture loaded with emotional possibilities. In film after film, surface decoration and design details motivated the staging, and architectural elements helped to tell the story and underscore its meaning. By deploying a complex arrangement of architectural fragments, scale models, back projections, perspectival ingenuity, painted backdrops, and large-format photographs, this French Design School helped ‘create a convincing world of planes and volumes’ (Forbes 2011: 281).

The decor was performative, whereby a reciprocal transfer between individual and decor acted as an interpretative matrix for each film. Designs would both ‘abbreviate [and] communicate’ (Valentine 2000: 150); they paraphrased the narrative. Thus, the location-shot industrial bleakness of *Le Havre* combined with the studio-shot Paname bar, fun-fair, and dingy, rain-slicked streets seemed to mirror Jean Gabin and Michèle Morgan’s collective despair in *Le Quai des brumes*, while the individual furnishings and props in *La Grande illusion* revealed subtle aspects of personality and character motivation. French Poetic Realist films in particular relied on the expressive potential of design to such an extent that ‘it radically reduce[d] the function of plot’ (Andrew 1983: 119). It was a decor that was not just ‘there’; it was not a backdrop, but rather a player. Decor ‘spoke’, reinforcing subtextual concerns and architecturally reflecting the emotions and mental states of the individuals inhabiting them. Von Rauffenstein’s (Erich von Stroheim) doleful intonation in *La Grande illusion* when describing the Wintersborn internment camp – ‘Nobody escapes from here. Nobody’ – is subsequently mirrored in Eugène Lourié’s design for the sombre castle fortress. The sets perfectly encapsulate this sense of imprisonment and inaccessibility, its ‘severity and grimness’ (1985: 21) underlined earlier by Von Rauffenstein. Here, set design exceeds its narrative requirements, and instigates a clear match between the thematic and the architectural

aspects of Renoir's film, guaranteeing Wintersborn's symbolic value without recourse to lengthy description or repetition. Designers such as Lourié emotionalized architecture and imbued the decor with a strong spatial and visual presence, distilling a visual concept from the thematic and psychological concerns of the screenplay. This resulting interface between story and style released the performative potential of design from static backdrop to active accomplice. Time and again in this period, decor was not just a geographical focus point for the audience, but became the central actor in the drama.

French design was also performative in the sense that as with other elements of the *mise-en-scène*, it represented a discourse of its own, producing a fascinating dialogue with more conventional modes of film performance. Take the factory scene in *Le Jour se lève*. Carné's camera tracks alongside four anonymous workers, each protected from the deafening noise and the swirling sand and dust by rubber suits and helmets, and comes to rest on the film's hero, François (Jean Gabin). Carné avoids any editing: the tracking shot lasts for nearly half a minute, and the medium-shot of François at work almost as long. Here, costume, sound, (non-)editing, and cinematography all work in close harmony with the decor to create 'meaning': this is a dehumanizing workplace; as well as the noise and the protective suits, workers drink milk to keep their lungs lubricated against the deadly effect of the sand in their lungs.

Lourié's contributions to Renoir's *La Bête humaine* / *The Human Beast* (1938) highlight another facet of design: its importance in revealing character. Decor in this period brings to mind Raymond Durnat's comment that film architecture can 'constitute an X-ray photograph of the heroes' minds' (1967: 102). By filming on location at Le Havre railway station, Lourié was able to indicate how character and environment were intimately connected. Such interactions had already been visible in Emile Zola's original novel, and were further reworked in Renoir's adaptation. For Lourié, the exchanges between the engineer Lantier (Jean Gabin), the stationmaster Roubaud (Fernand Ledoux), and his wife, Séverine (Simone Simon) developed 'with mathematical precision to the inevitable tragedy'; thus the 'continual presence of the railroad [...] was a powerful and important element of the drama' (1985: 46, 47). At one point, Séverine

tells Lantier ‘ahead of us, everything’s blocked off’: despite the many train tracks in the film, escape is impossible. Set design can be oppressive, restricting, stifling. In René Clair’s films, design often reflected class differences in a more playful way. In *Quatorze juillet*, during the *bal populaire*, stuffy bourgeois couples ‘celebrate’ in an enclosed restaurant that lacks the festive, decorative ambiance established in the street. By cross-cutting between the working-class residents who are celebrating outside and the yawning *maître d’* and sombre bourgeois inside, Clair fashions the long-standing myth of the Paris street as ‘uncontained exuberance in contrast to a bourgeoisie marked by the containment and repression of the interior spaces they frequent’ (Butler 2000: 124). The street is a space full of colour, noise, and community – decor is not just backdrop, but a tight web that binds the *petit peuple* together.

The ‘continual presence’ of particular designs mentioned by Lourié typified many French films of this period. Repeated shots of props and objects, or sequences in which specific sets were foregrounded, were favoured design approaches by many directors and designers. Such recurrences gradually increased the importance and prominence of the decor in a film – an apartment block, or a courtyard, or a city street altered from simple backdrop to a more vital presence. This shift from decor-as-metonym to decor-as-metaphor was particularly characteristic of Poetic Realist films (in which the presence of the decor is frequently emphatic), but also of other film genres and styles in 1930s France. In *Le Jour se lève*, objects in François’s room are metonymic of his personality and his social background, while the wardrobe he uses to push against his door metaphorizes his isolation (see Figure 1). Yet decor’s metonymic and metaphoric capacity could equally apply to other films. The courtyard in *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* is both a metonym for a working-class community, with its interlocking stairways and windows, and a metaphor for Renoir’s notion of tightly bound collective class action. In both cases, the part stands for the whole. The audience needs only to see these specific spaces briefly within the apartment block or the courtyard to understand their relevance.



Figure 1 Decor as a metaphor for imprisonment: François walls himself in.
Marcel Carné, *Le Jour se lève*, VOG-Sigma, 1939.

Many of the sets in the films discussed in this book exhibit details at once realist and charged with poetic significance. Much of 1930s French cinema is inextricably bound up in the reciprocity of individual and milieu, a milieu that is often acutely stylized and highly atmospheric. Although we might broadly agree with David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson's assertion that in film, 'character takes precedence over place' (1985: 51), the primacy of the individual over the environment is often equalized in this period.² Frequently, it is the built set which assumes the greater influence in the narrative, either as the visual focal point for the film, or the prime arena for interaction, or the central authorial signature. For Lourié, Trauner, Krauss, and others, the creation of spaces both authentic and artificial is crucial for the impact of the narrative.

Decor in these French films assumes a vital aesthetic function, for it emphasizes the connotative relationship between environment and

- 2 Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson contend that in Hollywood cinema, the exposition of space is attributed the least amount of screen time. For Hollywood, '[s]pace becomes chiefly a container for character action; the story has appropriated it'. An establishing shot will on average never last for longer than twenty to thirty seconds, because by this point, 'the characters have taken over narration' (1985: 64).