

Film's Architects of the Imagination

By PARUL KAPUR

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The movies have many seductive powers, among them the lure of alternative worlds filled with imaginary cities that are either distortions or more intense versions of our own. Their design is the subject of "Film Architecture: Set Designs from 'Metropolis' to 'Blade Runner,'" an intriguing exhibition at the neighboring Deutsches Filmmuseum and Deutsches Architektur-Museum here (until Sept. 8). Originally organized by Dietrich Neumann, a German architectural historian at Brown University in the U.S., and first shown at that institution and in Los Angeles, the show has been expanded to both its advantage and detriment since it crossed the Atlantic.

The most interesting items on display are the original set designers' sketches, paintings, lithographs and models that provide insight into the process of creating a physical world for film. At the heart of the show is the impressive artwork produced for silent films of the Weimar Republic years. During this era of distinguished German filmmaking, Berlin studios outdid Hollywood in technical wizardry and their master directors, such as Fritz Lang, created dynamic new cinematic styles. The show spotlights movies in which the scenery is not just a backdrop but a dramatic element in the story.

Particular attention is paid to the short-lived era of German Expressionist film. This radical stylistic experiment of the early 1920s grew directly out of postwar German theater, from which many film designers came, and was strongly influenced by expressionist painting. Jazzy illustrations of the decor for Robert Wiene's "Genuine—The Tragedy of a Strange House" and stills from Hans Werckmeister's "Algol" reveal the fantastical and eerie environmental distortions that artists conjured up to depict skewed psychic states. Walls tilt, floors spin in painted circles, and ghostly skyscrapers press against windows.

On view are all seven existing sketches connected with Wiene's "Cabinet of Dr. Cali-

gari" (1920), the hallucinatory film, long declared a classic, that spawned the genre. They include Walter Reimann's pastel and gouache impressions of sinister exterior locations haunted by jagged black trees, crooked perspectives and a twisting, upthrusting footbridge—minor works of art in themselves. Reimann, in fact, went so far as to assert that film sets belonged not to architecture but to the expressive field of painting. To my eyes, however, clips from the movie reveal a final work sumptuously fanciful but overwrought in its staginess. (Videos stationed throughout the exhibition play footage highlighting set design; a film series also accompanies the show.)

A far more gripping atmosphere is created in "The Golem," another 1920 film, for which Hans Poelzig, a prominent German architect of the time, designed a claustrophobic medieval Jewish ghetto. On display are Poelzig's initial charcoal sketches establishing the hooded form of his tenements

and the stunning result on celluloid: a clay-and-straw slum going up in flames. Unseen in the original U.S. show, the sketches were discovered by a Frankfurt curator. They strengthen the exhibit, as does the addition of illustrations by unemployed architects who endured the Weimar economic crisis by musing on the magnificent glass cathedrals and flying buildings they might build for the movies. Their intricate drawings leave behind wistful traces of dreams that were never realized.

Although Germans then felt deeply ambivalent about skyscraper cities they associated with brash American values, directors were fascinated with creating these icons of the future. A look at Fritz Lang's milestone 1927 film, "Metropolis," the pinnacle of the exhibit, begins with a photo of neon-lit Broadway that Lang took while visiting New York, the city that inspired his masterpiece. What follows is an overview of the sketches from which a model of Lang's cruel utopia was

built, a toy city enlarged to monumental scale on screen.

Designer Erich Kettelhut's intricate drawings reveal how the structure of a glorious capitalist city built over a hellish underground world of workers evolved. But these images come to life only in the moving picture, with its play of shadow and light, smoke and pulsing machinery, and planes buzzing over layers of elevated roads. Even Kettelhut's special-effects painting of mountainous high-rise facades, used in the brilliant opening montage, does not compare with its animated presence on screen. Lang's monolithic

vision, which took 40,000 people and two million meters of film to realize, is demystified but undiminished by being deconstructed.

When the exhibit abruptly leaps to mid-century movies that celebrate or satirize modern architecture ("The Fountainhead," Jacques Tati's "Mon Oncle"), it loses focus. The lean visual style of these films is a jarring break from

the visionary aesthetic of early German cinema, and really belongs in a separate show. Curators at the architecture museum have stretched this segment in many directions, including gratuitous nods to later Hollywood blockbusters like "The Towering Inferno."

The show fortunately revives with surrealistic pre-production art from the 1982 cult classic "Blade Runner" and Tim Burton's "Batman" (1989). "Blade Runner" consciously borrows motifs from "Metropolis," but artist Syd Mead's lurid gouache paintings on which the sets were modeled reveal a unique sci-fi vision of decaying buildings overgrown with pipes and ducts, and Japanese symbols littering the city. Lithographs illustrating "Batman's" Gotham City recall the dense complexity of "Metropolis" and appeal to our persistent fascination with imaginary dark cities and the films that take us there.

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Special effects drawing for "Metropolis" by Erich Kettelhut