

BOOK REVIEWS

Caligari's Cabinet and Other Grand Illusions

A History of Film Design,
by Léon Barsacq,

Revised and edited by Elliott Stein; 264 pp.;
New York Graphic Society - Boston; \$21.50.

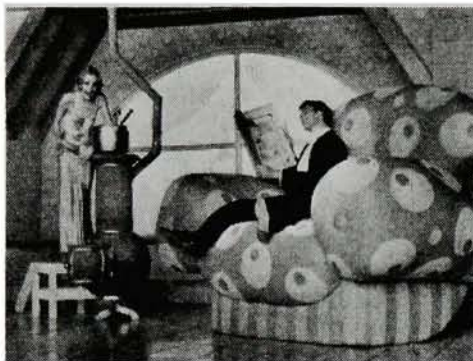
Caligari's Cabinet and Other Grand Illusions, by Léon Barsacq, is a blast in film design. It picks you up and heaves you through 75 years of film history, covering everyone and everything from the Lumière Brothers to Stanley Kubrick in 264 pages, one-third of which is devoted to a fascinating series of black and white photos collected from all over the world, and not often seen combined with such concise chronological detailing.

In a forward by René Clair, he notes that "a photograph is not reality but a reproduction of reality that we take for real because of a convention we are so used to that we no longer recognize the deception involved." The height of the complex art of set design is when the style of the set relates so closely to that of the real work that the audience pays no special attention to it. And so the old adage, "The most successful set is the least noticeable one."

The subtle and hidden art of set design and art direction is often so taken for granted that brilliant movies come and go and audiences never even take notice. Heroes are made of actors, directors, writers, etc., while the entire art department is shelved and aired on a yearly basis for token Academy Awards.

I am convinced that the average audience doesn't care who makes the movies, and that credits are completely wasted with the exception of filmmakers and buffs. Most viewers utilize the beginning credits for the candy counter, and the last ones in a stampede for the parking lot. (There are also the moviehouses that use credits as an opportunity to show off their expensive screen draperies.)

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The sets of French designer Léon Barsacq (*Les enfants de paradis*, 1945, *Gates of Paris*, 1957, etc.) were so completely accepted by the audience and absorbed by the films that he enjoyed this kind of anonymous success. Drawing on a career rich in experience and memories, he has assembled the first complete survey of the history and technology of film design ever written. The revision and editing by Elliott Stein is so true to Barsacq's original intent that it is often impossible to tell when one left off and the other took over.

The first one-third of the book is devoted to a brief history of films. It takes the reader and viewer step by step from country to country giving a concise calendar of film events, always keeping in mind the advancement and temporary setbacks of design.

Praise is showered on Méliès' painted sets; designers Hunte, Kettelhut and Vollbrecht for their work with Fritz Lang on *Metropolis*; Perry Ferguson's contribution to Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*; production designs of Hein Heckroth for *The Red Shoes*; Cedric Gibbons for his 32

years as supervisory art director at MGM; W.C. Menzies whose contribution to *Gone With the Wind* made it the classic it is today; to art director John Hoesli, and the 35 designers and draftsmen who perfected Stanley Kubrick's *2001; A Space Odyssey*, just to mention a few.

Later chapters give a basic analysis of the role, conception, technique and execution of sets. It gives pointers on how to approach researching, lighting and special effects. It actually tells how to attack a set design and physically build it. It even contains a basic formula for costing sets, furnishings and properties. All this is accompanied by black and white photos that correlate sets with examples of particular styles of film.

Film is such a tight little island that it often forgets that some of its greatest talent was conceived and born in the theatre, coming over to films for a number of practical reasons, one being money. Barsacq makes you doubly aware that theatres were the source of some of the world's top designers.

As though all this was not enough, this is followed by a comprehensive muster of film designers and their credits by Elliott Stein; the Academy Awards for Art Direction and Set Design from 1927 to 1975; a selected bibliography of works on art direction and an index that looks like the Who's Who of film design for the past 75 years.

It is a monster of a book and a must for serious filmmakers, students and buffs.

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