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Michael L. Stephens. *Art Directors in Cinema: A Worldwide Biographical Dictionary.* Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1998. x + 350 pp. $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7864-0312-7.

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The Highest Tribute

A recent interview in *Cineaste* shows the power of the production designer over a film crew. Francis Ford Coppola admitted that on the rare occasions when he and production designer Dean Tavoularis had a different take on a set problem, Tavoularis was usually right.

We think of movies as being directed, written, or produced; we seldom think of them as being designed. We remember the composers and the cinematographers and maybe the special effects artists. The art directors (or production designers, the more recent term), however, fill a forgotten role in cinema, and audiences captivated by the look and feel of movies give little attention to how they got that way. This neglect of course pays highest tribute to the art directors, who stay, quite literally, in the shadows and define their presence most fully by absence, either through achieving mimesis on screen and eliminating the fourth wall or through integrating their style with that of the directors they work alongside. In his interview with *Cineaste*, Dean Tavoularis points out that in most cases the moviegoer should not even notice the set.

Becoming fully aware of a film's design snaps the viewer out of reverie. Michael Stephens does this to readers of his *Art Directors in Cinema: A Worldwide Biographical Dictionary*, calling attention to a craft that eludes even fairly serious film buffs, who may be able to roll off a dozen names, tops, from this book. Yet it is the art director, Stephens explains in his introduction, who is responsible for the "individual and readily identifiable in-house styles of the various studios in the Hollywood Golden Age." Art directors have also influenced fashions in popular culture and guided major film movements.

This is a dense book, packed with alphabetical listings and complemented with an expansive bibliography and thorough index. At a little over 300 pages, this is not an unwieldy tome; in fact, its compactness contributes to its appeal, a solid work, heavy in its smallness. The scope is impressive, providing biographies–in several paragraphs or occasionally several pages–of production designers from the world's cinema. Stephens notes that he is considering the entirety of film history from its beginnings to the mid-1990s: a daunting task indeed, considering the lack of accurate credit sources for production designers, many of whom were never given screen credit for their work.

Here lies the richness of Stephens' contribution: arranging an extensive reference compiled from archives (including those in the American Film Institute Library and at the University of Texas) and presenting digest biographies of the artists. But it is integrity of style, more than span of coverage, that makes Stephens' guide such a valuable reference. The author shows a mastery of his material, distilling the achievements of these art directors into readable but scholarly mini-analyses. You can trace links throughout his book, particularly in discussions about studio styles and teamwork between directors and designers. The longer entries–such as the nine-page unit on Hans Dreier–make vivid small histories of both the artist and the film styles: Paramount's "extravagant and surreal use of bright colors and contrasts," for example, was derived from Dreier's traditional approach, all the more interesting since Dreier was known for his startling black and white work in the studio's film noir. In a short entry on Stephen Altman, Robert Altman's son, Stephens goes to the admirable trouble of selecting a noteworthy film from a lightweight in the field, commenting on *Near Dark*'s "intriguing production design that manages to capture in its settings the narcissism of contemporary Los Angeles and the city's self-consciously nihilistic, cynical youth."

Some readers may want Stephens to press to the point faster but I found his leisurely style engaging. This style invites browsing. But browsing may also reveal the book's clear bias: Hollywood's Golden Age. Reference to international films contain curious omissions: Kurosawa's elaborate (and deceptively simple) sets are briefly

mentioned. And on first picking up the book, I looked in vain for an entry on Albin Grau, the art director for *Nosferatu* (from which a still is taken, accompanied by a misleading caption about Hermann Warm as art director). Grau worked with outdoor locations and real shadows, atypical of more purely Expressionistic films such as Warm's interiors in *Dr. Caligari*. Stephens' previous book, *Film Noir: A Comprehensive Illustrated Reference to Movies, Terms and Persons* (1995), looms large: there, he discussed the link between "early, extravagant expressionism" and the 'flatter, more realistic' style" of the 1950's. It is clear that Stephens has most to say about styles closest to American film noir.

There are other omissions. Astounding design feats such as Kubrick's Vietnam city contained within England for *Full Metal Jacket* and his massive interiors for *The Shining* get no mention. In fact, Kubrick's titles, which would seem a likely subject for discussion of the particulars of art direction, appear only a couple of times (and Barry Lyndon is the most recent selection included). Coppola and Dean Touvalaris are discussed at some depth, but design accomplishments such as those for *Apocalypse Now* or *One From the Heart* find little treatment. Tambi Larsen's award-winning sets for *Heaven's Gate* are dismissed in a single sentence by the box-office failure. *Blade Runner*, which may represent for many viewers the ultimate in set design, does not appear. None of Tim Burton's films–which seem to reincarnate German Expressionism–are here. True, personal biases like these may construct an unfair measurement, but readers will look for such films that seem particularly representative of the art of production design.

Still, Stephens provides depth on what he covers and offers a surprising comprehensiveness. Beverly Heisner's two books on production design offer some comparison. Stephens provides as a reference her 1990 book, *Hollywood Art: Art Directors in the Days of the Great Studios*. While that book's scope somewhat parallels Stephens', her 1997 book intensifies the focus on production designers, concentrating on a much smaller scale. In *Production Design in the Contemporary American Film: A Critical Study of 23 Movies and Their Designers*, Heisner presents what an exhaustive dictionary like Stephens' cannot: detailed analysis, exploration of director/art director teamwork, and thematic organization. But what Heisner argues as central–the collaboration of director and designer–comes across as incidental in Stephens. And surprisingly, it is this incidental nature of the artistic link that has such effect in his book. Reading Stephens, you cannot help but become aware of the inextricable ties between so many directors and production designers.

Heisner's index is understandably thin next to Stephens. Her analysis of something like Ragtime is detailed but heavy on content analysis and light on style exploration. Stephens–weak in the long run on many particulars–catches the feel of the whole industry. His book is a valuable asset for reference collections and film enthusiasts, if not for more general readers. It enhances its own subject of illusion: there is a wide world out there on screen, and it looks real.

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