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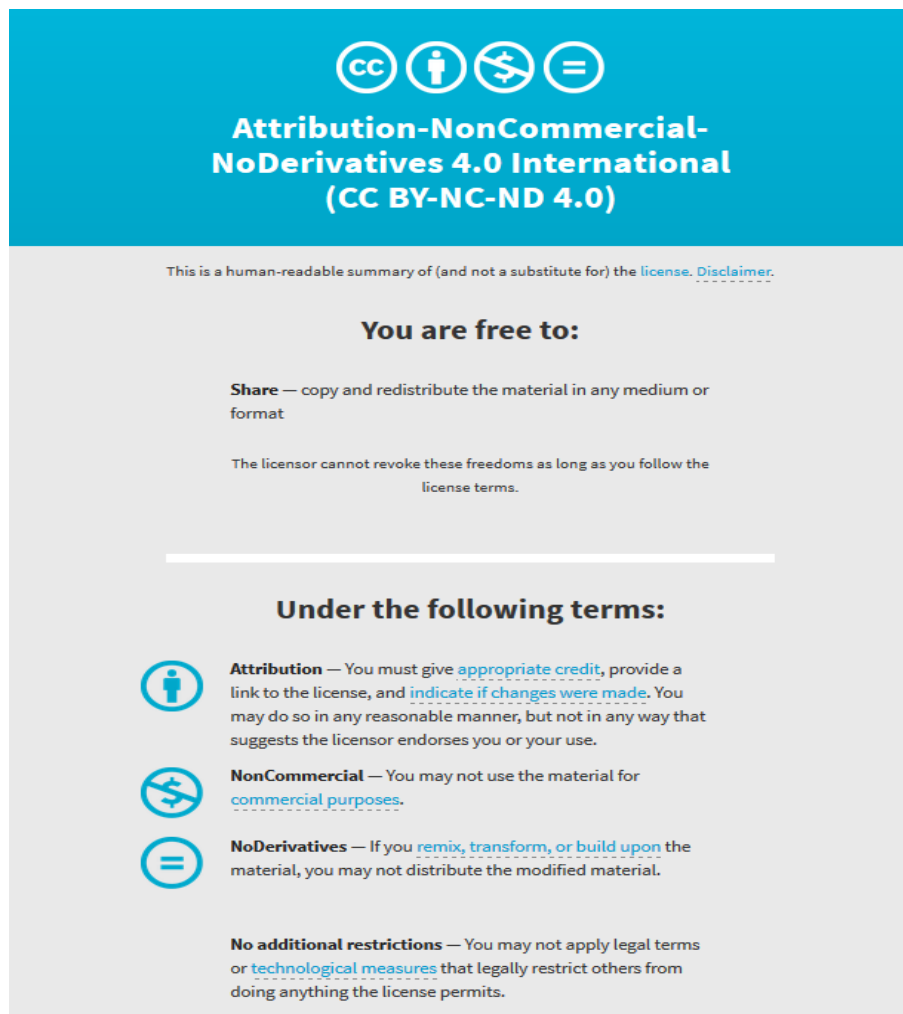
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The return of Trauner: Late style in 1970s and 1980s French film design

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It is a truth universally acknowledged that set designers create the space in which films take place. But, as Alessio Cavallaro reminds us, set designers 'never simply replicate reality: they always involve the artificial creation of a world ... carefully selected to generate a particular aesthetic or mood that draws the audience into the story'.¹

Hungarian-born production designer Alexandre Trauner (1906-93) fits neatly into this definition. Time and again, in his groundbreaking and highly evocative designs for a series of 1930s French Poetic Realist films — most notably *Le Quai des brumes* (1938), *Hôtel du nord* (1938) and *Le Jour se lève* (1939) — and his monumental, almost mythical sets for *Les Enfants du paradis* (1945) and *Les Portes de la nuit* (1946), Trauner created the visual and physical realm of the film and conceptualised sets consistent with the film's mood. Beyond the Hexagon, Trauner's abiding collaborations in Hollywood with directors like Howard Hawks, Orson Welles and, in particular, Billy Wilder (*The apartment* in 1960, *One, two, three* in 1961 and *Kiss me, stupid* in 1964) won him an Academy Award and the status as one of the post-war film industry's most influential and innovative production designers.

¹ A. Cavallaro, *Setting the scene: Film design from Metropolis to Australia* (Melbourne, Australian Centre for the Moving Image, 2008), p. 4.

Trauner's designs in both these French and American contexts intertwined familiar iconography with stylistic and decorative markers of excess, and covered numerous genres and historical periods, be it biblical epic, Shakespeare adaptation or medieval allegory. Famously, in both France and the US, he distilled an image of Paris even more Parisian than Paris itself — his exemplary iconic representations of the city in *Les Enfants du paradis* (1945) and *Irma la douce* (1963) were uniquely his, and today remain a time capsule of the capital's architectural and fashion trends. Throughout his career, Trauner reiterated that the role of the production designer was critical in establishing a visual mood 'so that the spectator has an immediate grasp of the character's psychology'.² Somewhat self-effacingly, he also suggested that the best designer should simply 'suggérer des choses'.³ Both these pronouncements — design-as-mirror and design-as-suggestion — consistently inflected his style. By distilling a visual concept from the thematic and psychological concerns of the screenplay, Trauner's skill was to appropriate realism and then simplify, stylise or accentuate it into an expressive, often highly memorable set of designs.

Yet there is also another story that needs to be told — Trauner's late career, in which he returned to France from the US in the mid-1970s to begin a third series of fruitful partnerships, this time with directors such as Joseph Losey, Luc Besson and Bertrand Tavernier. This chapter will concentrate on three of Trauner's Late French style films: *Monsieur Klein* (Losey, 1976), *Subway* (Besson, 1985), and *'Round midnight* (Tavernier, 1986). It will chart a continuity between Trauner's earlier work and these newer designs, and highlight how his creative methodology was incorporated into a new set of industrial and aesthetic contexts. Each of these films is set in Paris, and two of them are period films. All of them combine studio and location work, whether recreating the Vélodrome d'Hiver, the cavernous bowels of a metro station or a 1950s jazz club. Trauner's hyper-real production designs are reworked into a modern aesthetic of the spectacular, and underline the lasting importance of his decor in establishing mood and paraphrasing the narrative. For Trauner, the ideology of film design was clear: design was rarely neutral, unmediated or impersonal, for there was

2 'Alexandre Trauner interviewed by Carole Weisweiler & Annette Insdorf', *Film Comment*, 18: 1 (1982), p. 34. Many of Trauner's interviews, especially towards the end of his career, were conducted in English.

3 Quoted in P. Carcassonne and F. Cuel, 'Alexandre Trauner', *Cinématographe*, 76, 1982, p. 13.

always a willed compliance between the designer and the final aesthetic or functional demands of the narrative.

This late style Trauner has formal consistencies with his earlier work, and highlights a remarkable professional dependability. Perhaps most noticeably, his work reinscribes the importance of decor in the production process which had been gradually supplanted by the French New Wave film-makers of the 1960s. Trauner's work, and the combination of studio and exterior decor, continues to have a lasting impact on the amount of 'design' needed to tell a story.

Late style

I'm borrowing the term 'late style' from Edward Said, who, in a series of posthumously published lectures, developed the idea of late style to define a range of different artistic endeavours produced late in an artist's career that are characterised, not by serenity or harmony, but by intransigence and contradiction. At the heart of late style, Said noted, is 'an insistence ... not on mere ageing, but on an increasing sense of apartness and exile and anachronism'.⁴ Some artists, he argued, like Shakespeare, Rembrandt or Bach, find a 'new spirit of reconciliation and serenity' in last or late works — works that 'crown a lifetime of aesthetic endeavour'⁵; while other late artistic works are on the contrary unresolved and difficult. Ultimately, late style is the quality possessed by a work of art created late in an artist's career, after decades of creative output, which suggests not closure and resolution but rather the 'nonharmonious, nonserene tension'⁶ of an artist renewed with youthful energy in the face of imminent mortality.

The applicability of Said's term to Trauner's career is a potentially productive one. When we speak of the 'late phase' of a set designer like Trauner, we might perhaps imagine that this period was one imbued with a dynamic sense of artistic rejuvenation and creativity, in which long-cherished projects, ideas and design approaches were finally commissioned and incorporated into his work. Conversely, Trauner's late period might conceivably allow him to merge darker, grittier elements into his visual palette, choosing assignments that infer a less accessible and more distant designed world. This late style might also be attributed to encroaching illness

4 E. Said, *On late style* (London, Bloomsbury, 2006), p. 17.

5 Said, pp. 6-7.

6 Said, p. 7.

or the debilitating effects of old age.⁷ Yet it seems unlikely that any changes in attitude towards film design by Trauner later in his life (he died in 1993, aged eighty-seven) can be attributed to sickness. Trauner certainly never made any mention of illness, retirement or impending death in any of his interviews, but since he worked well into his seventies (he turned eighty during post-production on *'Round midnight*), it is tempting to read his later designs as a definitive attempt to both secure his reputation as an 'artist' and corroborate his own relevance within a film industry that had spent almost three decades moving away from building entire film sets in studios to shooting on location in the streets and cafés of Paris. In this sense, Trauner's late style is in fact a recycling of an earlier style, redeployed later in life: a circular trajectory that links all the parts of his career.

Billy Wilder once noted that Trauner would always read the script before beginning the design stage 'not simply to see what sets will be needed, but to understand what the film is about: characters, plot, atmosphere, even what music is appropriate'.⁸ This is both the epitome and the end point of Trauner's late style: collaborative, highly trained, receptive to the exigencies of the narrative and other elements of the *mise en scène*, and forever willing to manipulate the visually orthodox to create something at once uncompromisingly true to life and oddly Surrealist.

On decor

Before we look more closely at Trauner's late style, a brief overview of the 'Trauner touch' and the context in which it developed is necessary. Broadly speaking, the French film design tradition that preceded the *plein air* spontaneity of the Nouvelle Vague was a form of 'concentrated design'. Rather than having the camera drift arbitrarily across sets, entering and withdrawing from individual rooms or urban spaces purely to showcase the sturdiness of the set, designers tended to confine a film's action to one or two specific sets in which all the constituent elements of the decor 'talked'.

7 As Susan Tomes reminds us, 'lateness' is a problematic concept 'that in most cases can only be known retrospectively. It's easy to look back at what turned out to be someone's final works and label them "late", but to the individual artist they may have been just the next thing they happened to write, with plans for lots more. The artists would not have known which period of their lives they were in, unless they were both old and ill'. See S. Tomes, '*On late style* by Edward W. Said', *The Independent*, 19 May 2006, www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews (accessed 1 January 2014).

8 A. Trauner, *Alexandre Trauner: Cinquante ans de cinéma* (Paris, Cinémathèque Française and Flammarion, 1986), n.p.

It was this narrativising tendency of decor that Trauner excelled at, in the sense that his set designs represent a discourse of their own, producing a fascinating dialogue with other elements of the *mise en scène*, such as framing, lighting, costume and editing. Take the factory scene in *Le Jour se lève*. Director Marcel 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 Trauner's built set to create 'meaning': this is a dehumanising 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.

Trauner's own design methodology fits consistently within this narrativising, paraphrasing tradition. In their influential study of film design, Charles and Mirella Jona Affron categorise set designs according to various degrees of 'design intensities'. Their design taxonomy contains five categories — 'denotation', 'punctuation', 'embellishment', 'artifice' and 'narrative' — with film sets conforming to one or more of these qualities. The Affrons place Trauner at the embellishment level, defining this type of decor as '[v]erisimilitudinous yet unfamiliar and intentionally arresting; embellishing sets insist on values that are highly determining; they oblige the spectator to read design as a specific necessity of the narrative'.⁹ Trauner's sets move away from the essentially denotative — that is, sets that serve as descriptive indicators of place, temporality and genre — towards a more stylised, narrativised design. Many of these Trauner-designed films contained scenes in which the sets paraphrase the narrative. Thus the apartment block in *Le Jour se lève*, the bridge in *Hôtel du nord*, the Boulevard du Crime in *Les Enfants du paradis*, the castle in *Les Visiteurs du soir* and the metro station in *Les Portes de la nuit* are all impressive examples of this prominent, interventionist set design.

It is worth recalling that Marcel Carné directed all of these films. The relationship between director and set designer was a fruitful one, for Carné would frequently ask Trauner and the film's design team to sit in on script development meetings and encouraged them to make suggestions, adjustments or amendments to

9 C. and M.J. Affron, *Sets in motion: Art direction and film narrative* (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1995), pp. 82-3.

the film's overall visual strategy.¹⁰ Trauner's authority within the French industry in the 1930s and 1940s stemmed from the fact that he was frequently the first person to visualise the 'look' of a production, and was called upon at a very early stage to help realise Carné's initial vision. This stable director-designer nucleus worked doubly: the director could have the designer close at hand during the pre-production and filming process, and the designer was encouraged to comment on blocking and camera movement as the director developed the script. Trauner did not have complete autonomy; rather, he worked closely and collaboratively with the director to design the optimum narrative space. This became a set of working practices that Trauner adopted across his whole career, in various national and industrial circumstances.

Another key element of the Trauner style was simplicity: designs would be stripped down to their essential elements in order to highlight the symbolic properties of that which remained. Trauner always felt that any designer's best work should resemble 'le travail d'un sculpteur qui consiste à éliminer ... Il faut montrer juste les éléments qui sont nécessaires pour la compréhension et qui peuvent être variés, apporter de l'inattendu, mais un inattendu que les gens doivent accepter comme vrai'.¹¹ This insistence upon minimalism and visual sobriety implies that those objects that we do see in a Trauner-designed film are automatically flagged as crucial to the narrative. Instead of an excessive incorporation of props, objects or other decor fragments that might 'easily jam the clean development of the narrative with semantic static'¹², the flow of the narrative is unimpeded, and the film's design scheme becomes eminently 'readable'.

Trauner's best work in France in the 1930s and 1940s, the US in the 1950s and 1960s, and back in France for his late-style period in the 1970s and 1980s was characterised by a predominance of what we might call liminal sets. These are often extremely large sets that enclose and demarcate the fictional world and also stand as the narrative's organising image, the 'figure' standing for the narrative itself. To the aforementioned metaphoric spaces of Trauner's French Poetic Realist films (the bridge, the metro station, the apartment block), we can add the office building in *The apartment*, the hilltop palace in *The man who would be king* and the Great Pyramid in

10 Trauner collaborated with Carné nine times between 1936 and 1951.

11 M. Ciment and I. Jordan, 'Entretien avec Alexandre Trauner (1)', *Positif*, 223, October 1979, p. 8.

12 C.S. Tashiro, "'Reading" Design in *The go-between*', *Cinema Journal*, 33:1 (1993), p. 18.

Land of the pharaohs as examples of designs that construct a teeming, vibrant spatial arena and anchor protagonists to a particular place, time and genre. These liminal sets that bookend Trauner-designed films frame the narrative, even 'become' the narrative. It is as if they are almost too large for the narrative to contain, waiting to burst beyond the parameters of the frame and take on a life of their own. By virtue, then, of their simplicity and stripped-back, readable style, Trauner's sets move paradoxically towards a series of hefty, monumental designs.

Trauner in France ... again

Trauner's late style marks the end point of extensive criss-crossing between different film-making environments, from the autonomous and partnership-driven industry in 1930s France to the hierarchical and commercially driven 1950s Hollywood system, and then back again to a post-New Wave France inclined towards the *cinéma du look*. Any study of Trauner's French work in the 1970s and 1980s is therefore a useful test case to examine whether European cinematic sensibilities can be recalibrated or harmonised within the confines of an American tradition, and how that American tradition might then feed back into the French context. Trauner's participation in two different domestic film industries helped to provide diverse, unfamiliar and exotic cinematic images of both French-ness and American-ness. As with his earlier renditions of Paris from the 1930s, he was able to look at the locations he was required to reproduce with a considerable degree of unfamiliarity because he had not grown up in those environments. This lack of an ingrained, culturally specific understanding of Paris more often than not led to heightened, exaggerated versions of generic locations like cafés and courtyards, as foreign-born artists like himself often offered fresher, less timeworn depictions of these familiar Parisian spaces.

Trauner's design praxis was flexible enough to continually adapt to different sets of professional and commercial imperatives. It also continued to revolve around three key aspects: the deployment of architectural symbolism, the interplay between the monumental and the intimate, and the decor paraphrasing the narrative. Firstly, in all three films, Trauner alternates between pre-existing Parisian locations and studio or location reconstructions. Trauner's art increasingly tended towards this delicate balancing act: the incorporation of a constructed set that was imagined, drawn, modelled and then built, either on a studio set or within the confines of a pre-existing real location. He became an expert at deploying *découvertes*, whereby

a particular exterior space — usually a street, courtyard or town square — would be photographed, enlarged and then rephotographed until the required dimensions were achieved. These final photographs (often twenty metres high) would then be attached to, or hung from, the back wall of the set. When seen through the doors and windows of the built set, the *découverte* would maintain the illusion of location realism stretching towards a vanishing point.

By providing this *raccord* between the exterior and the interior, Trauner created a seamless link between inside and out, between real and constructed. For Trauner, 'les décors d'un film constituent un ensemble dont il faut respecter l'homogénéité. Un décor d'intérieur doit se poursuivre par le décor de la rue que nous apercevons par la fenêtre'.¹³ Throughout these late-style films, Trauner is also working at the interface of what we might call 'set dressing' and 'narrative design', or micro- and macro-design. Set dressing involves the careful selection of small objects and accessories that provide contextual clues to a character's emotional state, social status or relationship to the rest of their community, whereas narrative design represents the visually integrated, holistic film environment, in which all elements of the *mise en scène* interact to lend coherence and cohesiveness to the film's overall visual shape. Let us now look at the films in more detail.

Monsieur Klein (1976)

Set in Nazi-occupied France in 1942, Joseph Losey's *Monsieur Klein* is an acutely psychological examination of French unresponsiveness to the persecution of its Jewish inhabitants. Robert Klein (Alain Delon) is a wealthy Parisian art dealer who makes a living by exploiting his Jewish clients by purchasing their art at prices far below their actual worth. When he receives a Jewish newspaper addressed to him, he realises that there is another Robert Klein in Paris, a Jew disguising himself as a collaborationist Frenchman, and he becomes obsessed with finding the other man, his mirror image alter ego. The film's design reflects the decline into Kafkaesque territory: not only is the bureaucratic nature of the German occupation captured by Trauner's austere *mise en scène* and dark interiors, but Klein's own descent into a world of guilt, mistaken identity and constant suspicion is metaphorically cast in Trauner's rigid and severe set of spatial configurations. As Klein becomes increasingly pulled into his nightmarish world, both Losey's framing and editing and Trauner's compositional sense offer up

13 A. Trauner, 'Naissance d'un décor', *L'Ecran Français*, 63 (September 1946), p. 9.

an increasingly deterministic narrative environment that pins Klein down, locking him tightly within the frame in much the same way as Trauner and Carné had done with Gabin in *Le Jour se lève*.

Trauner is also attuned to the two distinct worlds in which the film's characters collide — on the one hand, there is the affluent Parisian middle-class universe of glass, mirrors and opulent furnishings; on the other, there is a dank hinterland where the dispossessed and marginalised hide. Throughout the film, Trauner's sets become increasingly claustrophobic, full of confined spaces that not only serve to emphasise the gradual erosion of personal space under such conditions of fear and paranoia, but are also a wider correlative for a very particular set of political and historical circumstances. Trauner's colour palette is particularly well deployed to accentuate these feelings of oppressiveness: the richer tones of yellow, brown and dark red become significantly muted and shift to blue and black as Paris is progressively drained of colour. As Klein's character, personality and awareness of events around him change, so, too, does the decor — from open to closed, accessible to claustrophobic — so that by the end of the film, Klein is swept along by the crowds in the Vélodrome, lost in a mass of people stampeding towards the cattle-trucks destined for the concentration camps.

Trauner would later state, in a series of extensive interviews in the film journal *Positif*, that his work could be characterised as an ongoing search for a stylisation: 'Mais il est très important, quand on fait un travail, même si c'est un travail sans grande prétention ... de trouver quelque chose qui devienne intéressant à un moment donné, de faire une sorte de prouesse. Je ne peux pas travailler autrement'.¹⁴ The 'quelque chose' he continually sought was an important element not just of French studio design, but also of the Trauner 'style', whether early, middle or late. The composition of the decor should, according to Trauner, be 'frappant', and remain lodged in the audience's memory long after the film is over.¹⁵ Regardless of the assignment, Trauner constantly sought ways to punctuate an essentially verisimilitudinous decor with instances of noticeable visual intervention, arrest the spectator's attention, and find a dominant visual idea that served to buttress the narrative.

An example of this 'something' in *Monsieur Klein* is the design and set dressing of Klein's Parisian apartment. David Thomson has noted how Losey's best films use 'interior setting as an extension of character' and find a 'unique suggestibility in

14 Quoted in Ciment and Jordan, p. 19.

15 Ciment and Jordan, p. 18.

the shapes and spaces within a house'.¹⁶ Much like the designs for the overcrowded London apartment in Losey's *The servant* (1963, designed by Richard Macdonald), Klein's apartment is crammed full of items that seem out of place, unconnected and randomly assembled — sculptures, mirrors, chairs and paintings. Perhaps the most striking 'something' is the large tapestry depicting a vulture pierced through the heart by an arrow. As Foster Hirsch observes, Trauner visually implies through this image Klein's dual identity as a predator and a victim: '[Klein] is a vulture, feeding off the misery of others as he buys paintings from fleeing Jews; but he too is pierced by the Nazi menace, vulnerable to its predatory attacks'.¹⁷

Here, then, Trauner's set dressing proposes a distinctive and deeply unsettling *ambiance* that perfectly suits its Kafkaesque subject. The muted colour palette, sombre lighting and claustrophobic interiors work together to sustain a mood of alienation, oppression and paranoia. Trauner's design underscores the film's treatment of its protagonist: Klein's own alternatives are progressively narrowed, and this is reflected in a visual scheme that suggests a man gradually being drawn into a moral and political impasse. Such an assertive, interventionist decor, which determines the 'look' of the film and provides a visual foil to the narrative, is a hallmark of Trauner's late style. In *Monsieur Klein*, he distilled visual concepts from the thematic and psychological concerns of Losey's script to create set dressings that became characters in their own right.

Subway (1985)

Subway, perhaps more than any other of his films, is the one with which Trauner seems to have the least affinity, at least on the surface. Luc Besson's 1985 work is a genre hybrid: blackly comic, infused with a punk chic, and inflected with musical, *noir* and fantasy properties. Besson was the standard-bearer of the *cinéma du look*, a key aesthetic mode in 1980s France. Will Higbee has defined the *cinéma du look* as

a spectacular visual style which manifests itself through a highly stylised *mise en scène* (elaborate framing, a preoccupation with decor and colour), a cinéophile

16 D. Thomson, *The biographical dictionary of film*, 4th edn (London, Little, Brown, 2003), p. 534.

17 F. Hirsch, *Joseph Losey* (Boston, Twayne Publishers, 1980), pp. 186-7.

tendency to reference or recycle from other films, and a focus on youthful protagonists who are often marginal or romantic figures.¹⁸

In *Subway*, this highly stylised *mise en scène* is most apparent in the Trauner-designed underground service tunnels beneath the Paris Metro system into which the film's protagonist flees after stealing a set of valuable documents at the start of the film.

Trauner designed the set for the metro station in *Subway* in the Paris Billancourt studio. The realism of his studio sets stems in part from their clever integration with real locations in the Paris Metro. In *Subway*, Besson and Trauner admitted that they did not wish to replicate specific or identifiable metro stations, but instead sought to construct a kind of 'space-station', in which the psychedelic colour schemes and fantastical interiors imbue the space with an artificiality rather than offering up a direct facsimile of the 'real'. As always with Trauner, there is an authenticity and a truthfulness to this construction: our familiarity with the Paris Metro — its mythic status, so to speak — is returned to us as a defiantly dreamlike, spatially unorthodox space — a 'clinical and timeless world'¹⁹ in which a subculture of misfits and the marginalised thrive. Via Trauner, the Metro, that most iconic of Parisian spaces, becomes a subterranean maze that beguiles the spectator by dint of the unfamiliarity of its familiarity.

Subway's rather flimsy narrative forms the pretext for a series of elaborate visual compositions by Trauner. His compositional framework 'respects clear geometric principles', with 'expressly modernist' interior spaces and 'clear-cut lines that exaggerate ... horizontal and vertical axes'.²⁰ *Subway*'s diverse genres and visual styles are brought into some kind of harmony by Trauner's imaginative production design — described by one critic as 'fashion magazine chic ... fused with pop-art surrealism'²¹ — which fashions a contemporary Parisian world that is simultaneously 'poetic' and 'realist'. Besson said his intention was to create 'un monde aseptisé, un peu

18 W. Higbee, 'Diva', in P. Powrie (ed.), *The cinema of France* (London and New York, Wallflower, 2006), p. 154.

19 D. Berry, 'Underground cinema: French visions of the Metro', in M. Konstantarakos (ed.), *Spaces in European cinema* (Exeter, Intellect, 2000), p. 14.

20 S. Harris, 'The cinéma du look', in E. Ezra (ed.), *European cinema* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 227.

21 A. Gargett, 'Subway', *Kamera*, <http://www.kamera.co.uk/features/subway.php> (accessed 1 January 2014).

intemporel'²² — and this wish to embed the narrative within a striking set of designs, and to place the realism of the metro setting alongside a deliberately exaggerated version, is ultimately clinched by Trauner's seductive, imaginative recreations.

Indeed, much of the pleasure in *Subway* derives not just from the way Trauner reimagines the metro space and from how he and Besson establish a nostalgically French generic framework (via references to the Metro, the *polar* genre, the accordion player and Cocteau's *Orphée*) but also from how a number of Trauner's designs consciously rework some of the key design choices of his career: location shooting versus studio reconstruction, the 'above ground' versus the 'below ground' of the Metro, and the *cinéma du look* aesthetic versus the sheen and texture of his 1930s films. All of these choices suggest Trauner's appreciation of the ludic and intertextual properties of film design.

Sets for Trauner were not just containers of action or stylistic resonators of narrative concerns, but also super-architectures designed to distract the spectator's attention. Indeed, according to Tim Bergfelder, Sue Harris and Sarah Street, Trauner's design practice demonstrates how the set could often be 'increasingly placed as a narrative and performative priority that exists as a counterpart to character and story, yet sometimes threatens to exceed both'.²³ The decor's sheer monumentality could override its purpose as container of action or denotative narrative backdrop, leading to such banal excesses as Trauner's sets for the Barbès-Rochecouart metro station in *Les Portes de la Nuit*.²⁴

In *Subway*, Trauner negotiates this precarious terrain by combining authenticity, the use of expansive space and an amplified, abstracted symbolic rendition of familiar architecture. It is a key example of what Susan Hayward has termed Trauner's 'hyper-reality' — those sets that 'become more significant than the original to which they refer and because of their excess obtain more signification than the narrative which

22 Quoted in S. Hayward, *Luc Besson* (Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 35.

23 T. Bergfelder, S. Harris and S. Street, *Film architecture and the transnational imagination: Set design in 1930s European cinema* (Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2007), p. 79.

24 By the mid-1940s, new cinematic trends were emerging that challenged pre-war studio practices. Thus, neo-realism of the kind seen in films like Roberto Rossellini's *Rome, open city* (1945) and René Clément's *La Bataille du rail* (1946) celebrated the authenticity of urban locations. Such films provided an ironic counterpoint to the studio-bound excesses of the Carné-Trauner collaboration, which, in this new climate, looked decidedly old-fashioned and unrealistic.

they are intended to illustrate'.²⁵ The excessive nature of Trauner's liminal sets in *Subway* and *'Round midnight* thus maintains the aesthetic congruities with his earlier work, and demonstrates the productive cross-fertilisation that took place once Trauner returned from the US and began working in a French context once more.

Trauner's late style in *Subway* represents a fascinating end point to a career that espouses the kind of production design priorities, ideologies and methods of control which he helped instigate during the classical period of the 1930s and 1940s in France. The Billancourt studios provided both director and designer with the thoroughly controlled synthetic environment they required, which could be modulated, coloured, framed and lit in a variety of ways to obtain the atmospheric realism to which the *cinéma du look* aspired. For Harris, 'the imaginative, often absurd stylisation of an environment is intrinsic to the form [and] the result of a highly professional, highly skilled attention to the very smallest details of cinematic composition'.²⁶ Trauner, late in his career, was clearly at ease with the familiar elements of control that the studio offered. His return to France in the 1970s suggests a domestic industry that was still receptive to older, more established modes of production design. Indeed, the pre-war studio aesthetic that Trauner did much to instigate and export would remain largely dormant in French film-making practice until the emergence of the *cinéma du look* and his collaboration with Besson. In *Subway*, by referencing his own earlier work *Les Portes de la nuit* — which also largely took place at a Paris metro station — Trauner was effectively revalorising 1930s-style set design in a modern aesthetic of the spectacular.

'Round midnight (1986)

Bertrand Tavernier's *'Round midnight* (1986), set against the backdrop of the 1950s Paris jazz scene, represented Trauner's last major contribution to a film project before his death. If the film is successful in marrying a typically French sensibility about mood, tone and atmosphere with an American grasp of jazz music, then it is Trauner's striking pictorial and compositional sense that is fundamental in linking the two. Writing about Trauner, Jill Forbes noted how the 'charm of Trauner's sets is the charm of recognition, the pleasure deriving from the fact that the physical environment is exactly as the viewer somehow always expected it to be, a second-

25 S. Hayward, 'Luc Besson', in Y. Tasker (ed.), *Fifty contemporary filmmakers* (London and New York, Routledge, 2002), p. 57.

26 Harris, p. 228.

level recreation'.²⁷ His sets combined meticulously rendered foreground realism with abstract background realism, and through the skillful deployment of *découvertes*, trompe l'oeil and forced perspective, Trauner manipulated and exaggerated space.

Throughout *'Round midnight*, the sets are a nostalgic, wistful recreation of 'recent-past' spaces. Many of Trauner's designs, regardless of the country in which they were set, were a cluster of tightly packed signs and symbols that audiences immediately recognised, anchoring them to the here and now. He was aware that sets should be recognisable and authentic, as well as rich in local detail. Long-disappeared or half-remembered places were reconstituted on the screen, creating sites of nostalgia for both on-screen protagonist and spectator. The rendering of these urban environments frequently hinged on the delicate detachment of a prior visual artefact from its original context and its employment as pictorial shorthand in the present. This explains the perpetuation of such spatial markers in *'Round midnight* as cobbled streets, angular rooftops and jazz club façades — such quotations allow the film to balance its realism with its more poetic spatial renditions.

As with *Monsieur Klein* and *Subway*, there is an ongoing interaction between real and built. This time Trauner recreated four locations — the Paris Blue Note jazz club, its adjacent side street, New York's Birdland jazz club (both club sets, notes Jonathan Rosenbaum, are 'made to glow like pirates' lairs'²⁸) and a Paris Left Bank hotel. There is also a sustained use of one of Trauner's trademark devices — 'action spaces'. These are usually brisk, fluid spaces, brought to life by the forceful movement of an actor. Because design can visually externalise feelings and moods, 'action spaces' are like a series of stages, where characters can 'play out' their emotional moments both to their on-screen counterparts and to the audience. Trauner's earlier 'big sets', for *Subway* or *The apartment*, could accurately reflect time and place and delineate the borders of their particular worlds. Sometimes, however, a more intimate 'action space' was required to burrow into character motivation and state of mind. This is base-level design: the sets wrap themselves around characters and tether them to the story. Hence the appearance of so many cramped, smoky, somewhat down-at-heel bars, clubs and cafés in *'Round midnight*: the restraint Trauner shows in depicting these particular urban spaces (no neon, no teeming pavements, no panoramic camera

27 J. Forbes, *Les Enfants du paradis* (London, BFI, 1997), p. 21.

28 J. Rosenbaum, 'An American in Paris: *'Round midnight*', <http://www.jonathanrosenbaum.net> (accessed 1 January 2014).

movements) mirrors the dreamlike, poetic nature of the film's visual gloss — and recalls Trauner's nineteenth-century Paris in *Les Enfants du paradis*, made forty years earlier.

Tavernier's striking widescreen frame establishes the rainy, smoke-filled world of the jazz film and allows him to capture his marginalised characters moving through coded and impermeable social spaces. His bold compositions also foreground Trauner's emphasis on each character's isolation and lonely status. Recall the shot that first binds together Francis and Dale: Dale plays a blues song at the Blue Note as the camera tracks through the long, low-ceilinged club and into the street. This long, languorous retreat showcases not just the ongoing technical expertise of Trauner and Tavernier's skill in linking together, via camera movement, the destinies of the two men, but also reiterates the importance of holistic, integrated, total design that Trauner first deployed fifty years earlier for Marcel Carné. As Trauner once noted, the best film decor is 'un décor qui dit le drame'.²⁹

* * *

This late part of Trauner's career has important industrial implications. It shows that seasoned professionals like Trauner could still adapt and recycle their own particular style to individual circumstances by deploying notions of adaptability, professionalism and authenticity where appropriate. His sets pushed at the boundaries of rigidly defined national cinema styles and incorporated the denotative, the symbolic and the artificial, so that designs became integral carriers of meaning. If his success in 1950s America saw him transcend infrastructural barriers and impose a distinctly French style on the US film industry, then his return to France, and his work on these aforementioned and other films in the 1970s and 1980s, illustrate how designers with a predilection for the monumental could still be stimulated by an industry eager to reappropriate the aesthetics of bold, spectacular decor interventions.

From assignment to assignment, the 'embellishing' capacity of Trauner's designs consistently emerged. His ability to work comfortably across a range of genres and locales — Occupation Paris or post-war Paris or Postmodern Paris — evinced a professional confidence and a willingness to experiment in different industrial circumstances. Trauner sought out design fragments that would affirm or annotate

²⁹ Quoted in J. Douchet and G. Nadeau, *Paris cinéma: Une ville vue par le cinéma de 1895 à nos jours* (Paris, Editions du Mars, 1987), p. 127.

underlying narrative themes and bolster the particular mood that each director required. Embellishment for Trauner was not an arbitrary incorporation of 'things', but clear, unambiguous choices that helped to decipher the story.

As critic Edward Rothstein, writing in *The New York Times*, wrote about Said:

What artist does not yearn, some day, to possess a 'late style'? A late style would reflect a life of learning, the wisdom that comes from experience, the sadness that comes from wisdom and a mastery of craft that has nothing left to prove. It might recapitulate a life's themes, reflect on questions answered and allude to others beyond understanding.³⁰

Thus the final act of Trauner's career — which began in the silent era, took in the Occupation, the Nouvelle Vague and the *cinéma du look*, via Hollywood, colour film and CinemaScope — is the culmination of a profession spent developing, honing and passing on a very specific visual style. Late style, Said ultimately suggests, expresses a sense of being out of place and time. True, Trauner's own professional trajectory was very much characterised by migration and adapting to different industrial practices, locations and personnel. But his late style remains as vibrant, innovative and experimental as his earlier, more celebrated work, and demands to be read not so much as mere 'Set Dressing', but as part of a 'Total Design'.

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³⁰ E. Rothstein, 'Twilight of his idols', *New York Times*, 6 July 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com> (accessed 1 January 2014).

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