

Helge Trimpert, Uwe Fleischer: Wie haben Sie's gemacht? Babelsberger Kameramänner öffnen ihre Trickkiste

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"In Xanadu did Kubla Khan / A stately pleasure-dome decree," wrote Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1798. He furnished his opium-induced "vision in a dream" with many fantastic images: a woman wailing for her demon-lover, dancing rocks, a sunny shell enclosing caves of ice. In 1912, Guido Seeber, a cameraman and technical director as equally attuned as the poet to the power of the visual, constructed from the remnants of an abandoned factory near Berlin his own pleasure palace, the film studio known as Babelsberg. From the stages and sets of this glass-enclosed atelier sprang such wonders of light and shadow as *Der Totentanz* (Urban Gad, 1912), *Der Student von Prag* (Stellan Rye, 1913), *Der Golem* (Heinrich Galeen, 1915), and *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927), among many, many others. In *Wie haben Sie's gemacht? Babelsberger Kameramänner öffnen ihre Trickkiste*, Uwe Fleischer and Helge Trimpert, long-time specialist in visual effects and director, respectively, offer both a history of Filmstudio Babelsberg Motion Pictures and a look behind the camera at how the artist-technicians there produced the special effects that continue to astound audiences.

The volume consists of eight interviews, some real, some imaginary but plausible, based as they are upon meticulous archival research. Artists highlighted range from Guido Seeber and Eugen Schüfftan, both active in German cinema during the early decades of the last century, to Uwe Fleischer himself, who still produces for television and teaches at the Babelsberger Filmhochschule. Each discusses his contributions to the art of creating film images, offering fascinating anecdotes about the various technical difficulties overcome. Though special effects would seem to have advanced significantly since the literal smoke-and-mirrors of the Weimar era to the virtual CG (computer generated) images of today, Fleischer claims that "[e]s ist eigentlich erstaunlich, dass schon in den zwanziger Jahren des letzten Jahrhunderts alle wichtigen Tricks von Filmpionieren erfunden waren und von der Folgezeit nur noch in Modifikationen ausgeführt wurden" (p.11).

Film stills and photographs, many of them from the 70s onward in color, adorn almost every page. The editors also include pictures of archival material such as a 1925 technical sketch for the stadium scene in *Metropolis* and the 1926 patent for the 'Schüfftan Process.' Fleischer and Trimpert add modern schematics to demonstrate how several well-known film scenes were staged. The textual explanations and sketches complement each other, allowing the reader to follow the multifarious reflections, refractions, and multiplications of a light path that ultimately produce a scene lasting but a few seconds. Anyone who remembers from first-year college physics reconstructing the Michelson-Morley experiment to measure the speed of light in the now-defunct ether wind will understand the

patience and precision required for the transformation of a kiosk into a lighthouse in *Moritz in der Litfasssäule* (Rolf Losansky, 1983).

If the book has any shortcoming it is the editors' self-imposed restriction to cover only films produced at Babelsberg. Thus, there is no mention of perhaps Germany's most famous (and expensive) film, *Das Boot* (Wolfgang Petersen, 1981), produced farther south in Bavaria Studios. Nor may English-readers be familiar with some of the later films mentioned, though they should be able to extrapolate the methods described for Hollywood productions (indeed, many German film artists also worked in the United States). The volume contains a helpful glossary of special effects terms. Because of the time span covered, Fleischer and Trimpert's book would be appropriate as a supplementary text in any number of film history courses, from Weimar to modern cinema. In these days when a child can manipulate images on a PC, picturing herself virtually anywhere, even deep within Coleridge's "caverns measureless to man", *Wie haben Sie's gemacht?* enables the reader to still marvel at the ingenuity of special effects masters old and new.

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