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Author(s): John R. Clarke

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Expressionism in Film and Architecture: Hans Poelzig's Sets for Paul Wegener's *The Golem*

JOHN R. CLARKE

This article discusses *The Golem* from several aspects, each of which relates in different degrees to the work Hans Poelzig did in designing the sets for the film. In order to understand the importance of the production, the history of its conception and execution has to be examined. Then, too, Poelzig's training and sources are vital to this discussion and to an analysis of the sets for *The Golem* in view of Poelzig's style.

The Golem's director, Paul Wegener, was convinced that the camera eye per se was far more capable than the novel or the theater of rendering the vision of the fantastic and mysterious which haunted the German romance of the first decades of this century. Wegener had been an actor under Max Reinhardt and was fully familiar with the content and aims of contemporary German theater. Wegener saw that the possibilities in the cinema to easily change points of view, to divide the screen, and to superimpose were all means of creating the strange mixture of reality and fantasy which was the heart of the German thriller.

Et il continue: "J'ai eu l'idée de mon GOLEM, de cette mystérieuse figure de terre glaise animée par le rabbin Loew, grâce à une légende du ghetto de Prague, et c'est avec ce film que j'ai pénétré plus profondément dans le domaine du cinéma pur. Tout y dépend de l'image, d'un certain "flou" où le monde fantastique du passé rejoint le monde du présent. Je me rendis compte que la technique de la photographie allait déterminer la destinée du cinéma. La lumière, l'obscurité jouent au cinéma le rôle que jouent le rythme et la cadence en musique.¹

The first *Golem* of 1914, which is now lost, mixed the story of the contemporary discovery of the Golem in Prague with the legend of Rabbi Löw's creation of the Golem around 1580.

The first *Golem* must have been close in style to *The Student From Prague* (1913) which, according to Eisner, is a unique precursor of the German expressionist films of the early 1920s.² Wegener most likely played the part of the

Golem in this first version, as in the 1920 version. Another version of *The Golem*, made in 1917, exists now in title only.³

In staging *The Golem* Wegener translated the dramatic lighting effects of Reinhardt's *Deutsches Theater* into cinematic terms. He availed himself of every opportunity to use light for specifically staged effects. For instance, the interiors of Rabbi Löw's rooms are carefully modeled in chiaroscuro for a warm effect; the illumination of the starry heavens in the silhouette shot at the beginning of the film produces a cold night effect. The subtleties of lighting which Wegener achieved in *The Golem* indicate his "expressionistic" conception of the film (his own protests to the contrary),⁴ but this expressionism is developed in organic rather than abstract, Cubist forms. The jagged edges and stark contrasts of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* are far from the continuous forms and subtle lighting of *The Golem*.

Wegener conceived the production in terms of a plastic, tangible expressionism which called for the organically conceived sets designed by Poelzig.

Poelzig met Wegener, whom he had known before the war, again in 1918. Because of the economic conditions in Germany, Poelzig was unable to get anything built. He gladly accepted the commission to do the sets for *The Golem*. He and Wegener shared interests in the mysterious and the fantastic; their mutual ideas about art made their collaboration on *The Golem* easy and fruitful.⁵ Poelzig understood that Wegener did not want a re-creation of an actual medieval village, but rather buildings, streets, and interiors which were a formal equivalent of the ideas of mystery and the supernatural which underlie the film. Poelzig created a three-dimensional space—a concept foreign to motion pictures up to that time—which forced the camera eye to view it obliquely. The unexpected shifts of the streets, the winding of the stairs, the proliferation of "Gothic" ornamentation, were all formal devices consonant with the "soft expressionistic" conception of Wegener and Poelzig.

The sketches for the *Golem* sets were executed by Poelzig, but the actual carving of the clay models was entrusted to his wife Marlene, a sculptor. She did the models on large tables in

her studio. They were taken to the lot where they were translated into the actual sets.⁶ In any case, Poelzig's responsibility for the designs is clear, and as such they stand as a great achievement in the art of cinema decor as well as a document of German expressionistic architecture of the postwar era.

Hans Poelzig was born April 30, 1869 at Schloss Poelzig, the son of a countess. At the Technische Hochschule in Charlottenburg he learned the structural techniques behind the architecture of the Middle Ages from Karl Schäfer. The period in which he learned architecture, 1890-1900, was one in which all the possibilities of eclecticism were open. He learned Classic and Renaissance revival decoration for steel-constructed shells, but he preferred the approach of Schäfer, who showed him the actual structural possibilities of the Romanesque and Gothic. Studying the construction methods of Gothic architecture from Viollet-le-Duc and Ungewitter, Poelzig learned the intrinsic connection between form and construction. Poelzig's later works, no matter how "unorthodox" they would have appeared to the hidebound revivalists, were based on principles learned from Schäfer; the expression of the functions of spanning and grouping prevailed.⁷

Poelzig received his certification after his second examinations in March, 1899, and with the patronage of Ludwig Pallat, he eventually became director of Pallat's Breslau art academy, a post he held from 1903 to 1916. Breslau was considered a provincial outpost of the Berlin ministry of education, but Poelzig was content to remain out of the mainstream of the then current *Jugendstil* and "applied arts" architecture. At a time when Otto Wegner's group in Vienna produced Joseph Olbrich's "Darmstadt baroque," with its mannered details, and Theodor Fischer did "Neue Bewegung," an architecture subservient to the crafts of metalwork and ceramics, Poelzig remained firm in the conviction that one must not forget the architectural tradition in the effort to express the sensuous.⁸

Perhaps Poelzig's most significant early accomplishment was his water tower at Posen of 1910 (pictured in Heuss, p. 115). Here, disdaining the decorated architecture then in vogue, Poelzig used structures expressive of their steel construction rather than cladding this construction in historicizing and eclectic decorative systems. In 1916 and 1917 Poelzig was working on plans for two Dresden buildings: a fire station (Heuss, p. 120), and a City Hall (Heuss, p. 121). The fire station consists of bands of Romanesque arches in an oval structure reminiscent of the Roman colosseum. The City Hall is a stepped pyramidal mound sculpted in vertical ribs of lights and darks. Both models show great interest in the expressive possibilities of repetitive light and shadow bundles on a curving mound shape.

The projects which brought him the most fame before his work on the sets for *The Golem*, however, were his interior of the *Grosses Schauspielhaus* in Berlin (1919) (Fig. 22), and his several projected plans for a *Festspielhaus* at Salzburg (1920-1921). The first edifice was a triumph of lighting technique, from the repetitive dome-lit, stalactite-covered ceiling to the papyrus-sheaf light columns of the entryway (Heuss, p. 140). Poelzig imaginatively handled the interior of the theater in a theatrical way. The second project seems more directly involved with the mound and pyramidal forms Poelzig had been using in his work on the two Dresden projects. Each

successive plan shows an interest in the building as a kind of ceremonial hill which is deeply textured both by the actual material and by its repetitive piercing with rounded arches (Heuss, p. 141). This kind of massive, dramatically sculptured architecture seems very much at the heart of his sets for *The Golem*.

In reference to his sets for *The Golem* Poelzig said that he was acquainted with expressionism and that he saw that one could express in the facade of a structure all of the dynamic, ecstatic, fantastic, and pathetic elements which constitute the psychic nature of the life within that structure.⁹ Comparison of Poelzig's sketches for *The Golem* with the actual sets clearly illustrates how the architect achieved this consistent organicity of both silhouette or "facade" and interior space.

If one compares a sketch for Golem city (Fig. 2) with the silhouette seen in an early shot of the film (Fig. 1), it becomes clear that the dynamism of the mutually supporting, asparagus-shaped forms arises out of sketches wherein the individual pencil strokes build up organic forms. The kind of massing evident in the sketch results from thinking, as it were, of the core of the apple before the skin; Poelzig worked from the inside of the form to the outside. The eventual movement of the peaked roofs, which are the only part of the sketch to appear in the silhouette, is the product of Poelzig's organic drawing style.

The same qualities of bundling shafts of pencil strokes into masses is seen even more dramatically in the tower structures pictured in Figs. 3 and 4. Here again a silhouette with tower and rooftops is achieved, but only from a buildup and bundling of units which are conceived of as basically three-dimensional and dynamic. The curving of the peaked roofs is expressed two-dimensionally in Figs. 5 and 6. Even in the black silhouettes of Fig. 5, the stepped effect of the light and shadow pattern of overhanging peaked roofs seen in Fig. 4 is expressed. This watercolor sketch also gives a sense of the basic chiaroscuro conception of the film, with a full tonal range from deep black silhouette to unwashed white. The conception of detail and depth is conveyed by the pencil sketch (Fig. 6).

It is the same pointed shafts of Fig. 2, grouped together and arching, which form the buildings of Fig. 8. A possible application of this sketch, in the steps and archways of the street scene, is seen in Fig. 7.

Another configuration which appears in Poelzig's sketches for *The Golem* has wide application in both interior and exterior sets for the actual film. It is the configuration of Fig. 10, where a seemingly flat plane is cut into in a curving triangular shape, thereby twisting the plane and revealing a vaulted section of the interior. This configuration, once again, is traceable in the *gesture* of Poelzig's pencil, the free upward curve and the insistent buildup of forms, where not contour but the freegrowing mass of the form determines how the eventual structure is read. If the gate in the city wall with its parapet (Fig. 9) appears extremely massy and tortured, it is because Poelzig created a structure whose gesture, with deeply recessed gate and outward curving wall, suggested mass and hand-modeling.

Marlene Poelzig's hand in the execution of the *Golem* sets, namely, the sculpting of the model, is witnessed in the sculptured monuments on which the Poelzigs collaborated. The tombstone of Carl Hauptmann (Fig. 12) executed in

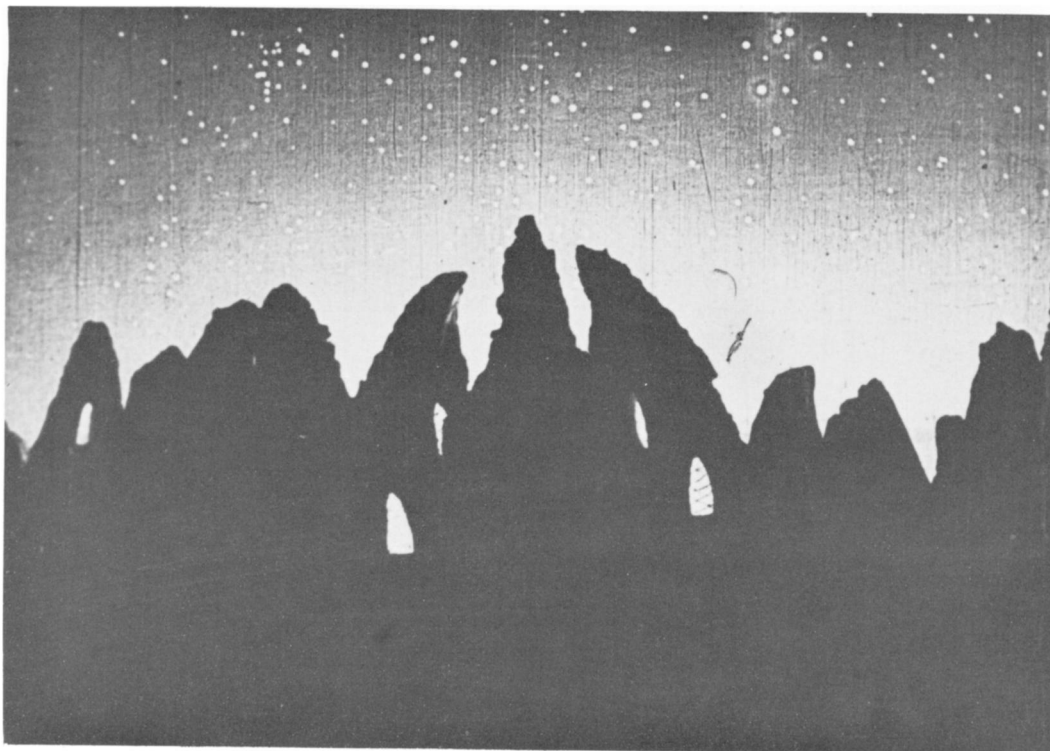


Fig. 1



Fig. 2

WINTER, 1974/75

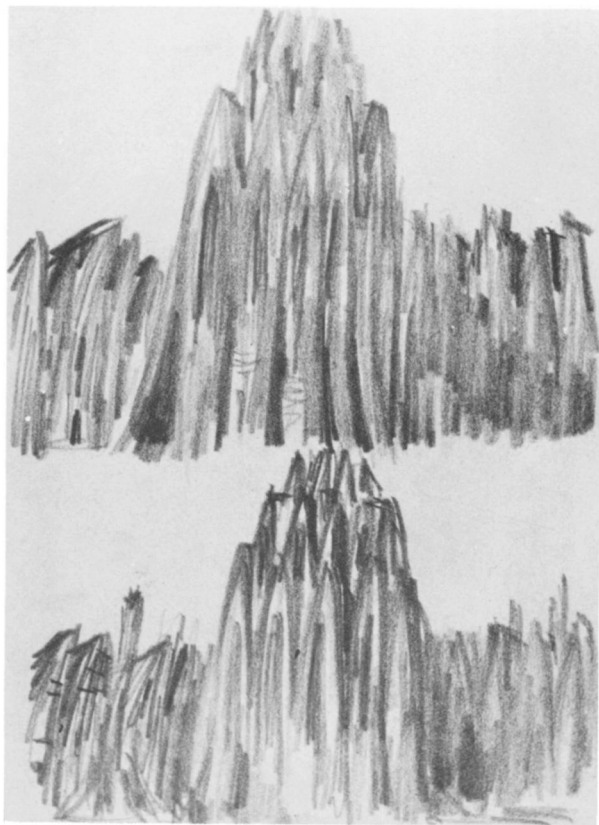


Fig. 3

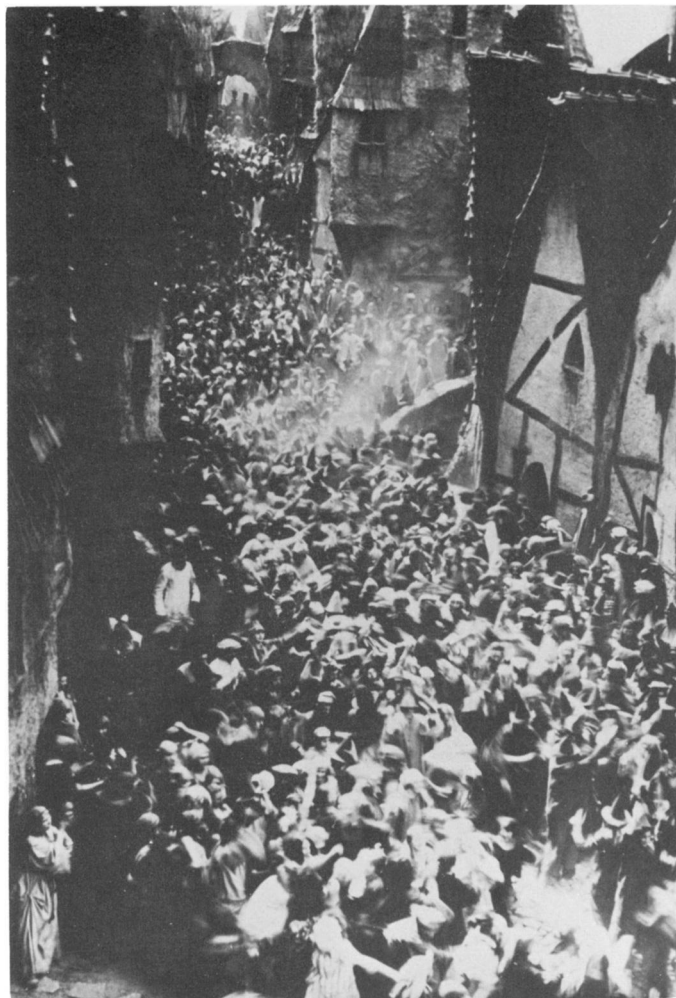


Fig. 4



Fig. 5

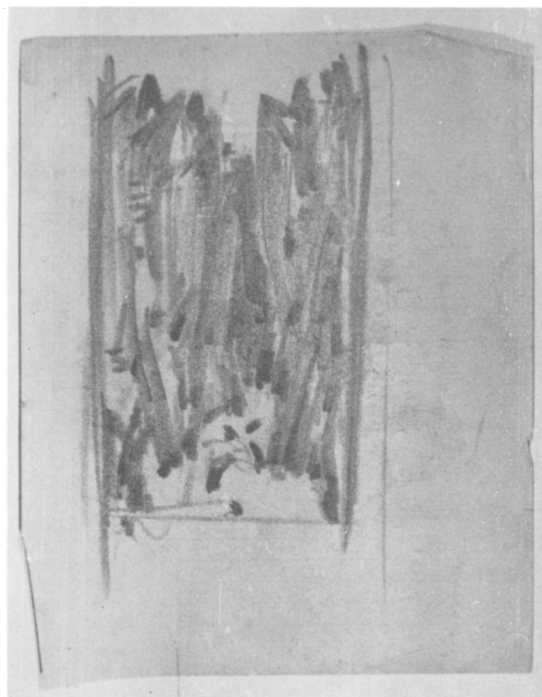


Fig. 6

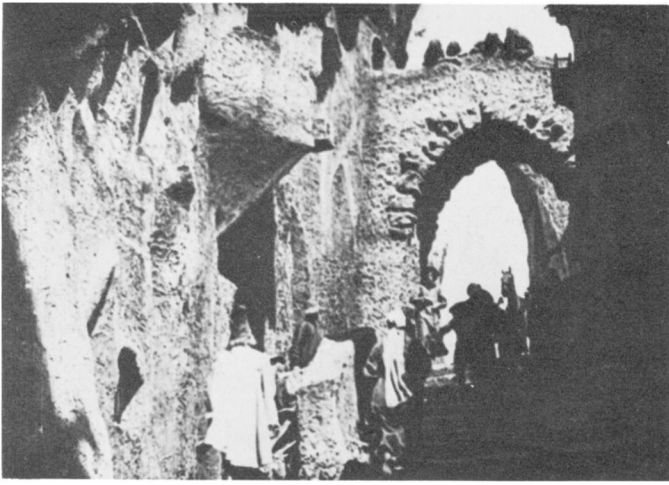


Fig. 7



Fig. 9

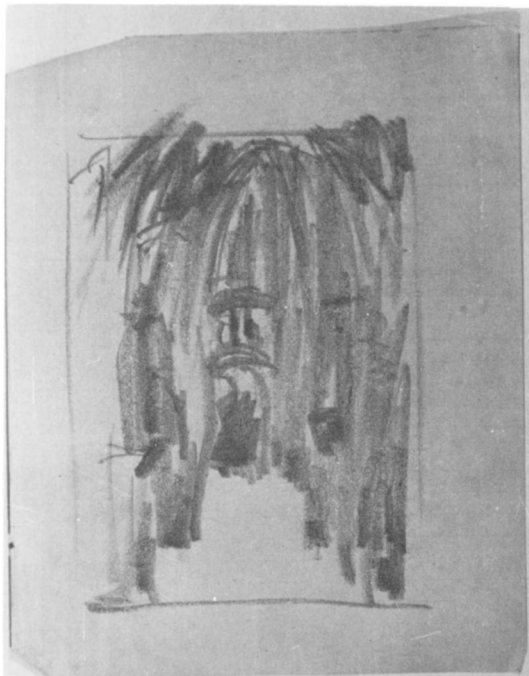


Fig. 8

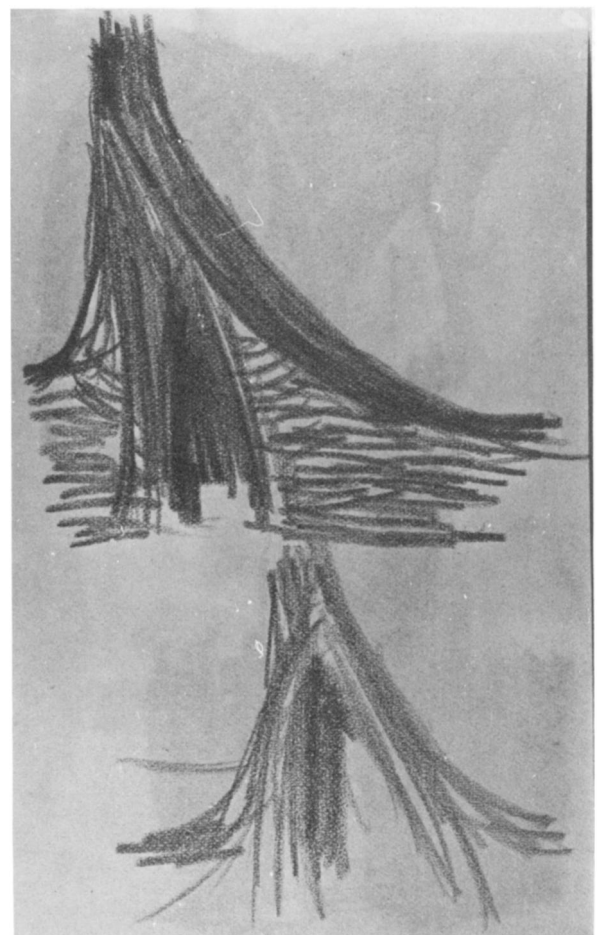


Fig. 10

1922, and even more, the fountain of the same year (Fig. 13), show an interest in the spiral buildup of forms which characterizes the town gate (above, Fig. 9), and both interior and exterior stairways of the *Golem* sets. The tombstone has an indefinitely twisting base from which the flamelike tongue of the headmarker emerges. The fountain at Hannover shows that when thinking in horizontals Poelzig used the structure of the opening bud. This structure, however, is complicated by the central diagonal which prevents the leaves from being arranged in simple petal fashion. This oblique movement splits the fountain in two. The same buildup of spiraling sheaves is evident in the design of the figure of the madonna and child in the right-hand edge of Fig. 11.

Poelzig's stairways are inevitably spiral; variations abound. The exterior stairs wind around a tubular mass, which is actually the building curving in on itself (Fig. 14). Poelzig created the impression of mass by his emphasis on the curved edge and the varied texture of the walls. The piercing of the

walls with the familiar Romanesque arch and the rough texture are characteristics visible in his Dresden Bismarck Memorial (Fig. 15) from 1919-20.

In the interior stairs of Löw's house Poelzig used the form of a conch shell in section, through which the Rabbi spirals and eventually emerges (Fig. 16). The supporting shafts are



Fig. 11



Fig. 13



Fig. 12

purposely irregular. The stairway of the 1911 Posen water tower interior conveys the concept of the Golem stairway. The slant of the stairs and the evident structure of the supporting ribs convey a similar sense of movement.

If the ultimate source for the shape and ribbing of the interior spaces themselves (Figs. 17, 18, 19) was the flamboyant Gothic, Polzig so transformed the regular, functional quality of this system of ribs and vaults that their clear structural properties are lost. Instead, the ribs, as in Figs. 17 and 19, come alive and autonomously follow the hollows of the spaces designated as individual rooms and alcoves in the set. The ribbing is never a functional element of the design; it

is conceived more as expressionistic ornament or accentuation, especially in such configurations as the pendant “keystone” of the room in Fig. 17.

As noted above, Wegener and Poelzig agreed on the fantastic conception of *The Golem* as a story told in light and shade, in “painterly” rather than “linear” expressionism. That lighting was a determining factor in Poelzig’s designs is evident from his sketch for the *Beleuchtungskörper* (Fig. 21), where light emerges from scalloped, pendant shapes. These scalloped shapes are mirrored in the fantastic sofa of Fig. 20. More directly, this *Beleuchtungskörper* was put to use certainly in the room which this sofa is made to match, namely Löw’s study, pictured in Fig. 23. This room is extremely reminiscent of Poelzig’s Berlin *Grosses Schauspielhaus* in its stalactite formations and, particularly, in its system of lighting (Fig. 22).

Poelzig’s conception of depth depended upon light also for definition. The lighting of the successive beams of the ceiling in Fig. 24 (designed to collapse) creates a feeling of depth, a feeling which comes across much better in the sketch (Fig. 25) than in the finished product, where the overhead structure is either overcropped or underbuilt. The decorative detail of Fig. 24 seems to be an elaboration of that pictured in Poelzig’s sketch (Fig. 26).

Poelzig’s later work up to his death in 1936 seems dry and antiseptic in comparison with the more fantastic buildings and plans of the ’teens—not to mention his sets for *The Golem*. Perhaps the financial considerations were uppermost: uncon-



Fig. 15



Fig. 16



Fig. 14

ventional buildings were simply not approved for construction. The fantastic designs of Finsterlin, Bruno Taut, and Wasily Luckhardt, never actually built, look in many ways like Poelzig’s sets for *The Golem*, or his plans for the Salzburg *Festspielhaus*. The designs of Taut and his circle constitute the burden of what was called expressionistic architecture, yet it was expressionism as a way of life, rather than as an ideology for designing buildings, which was at the core of their architecture of fantasy.¹⁰

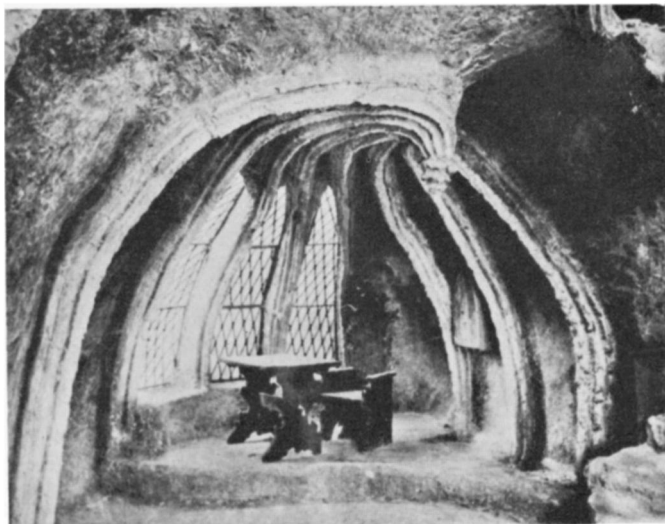


Fig. 17



Fig. 20



Fig. 18



Fig. 19

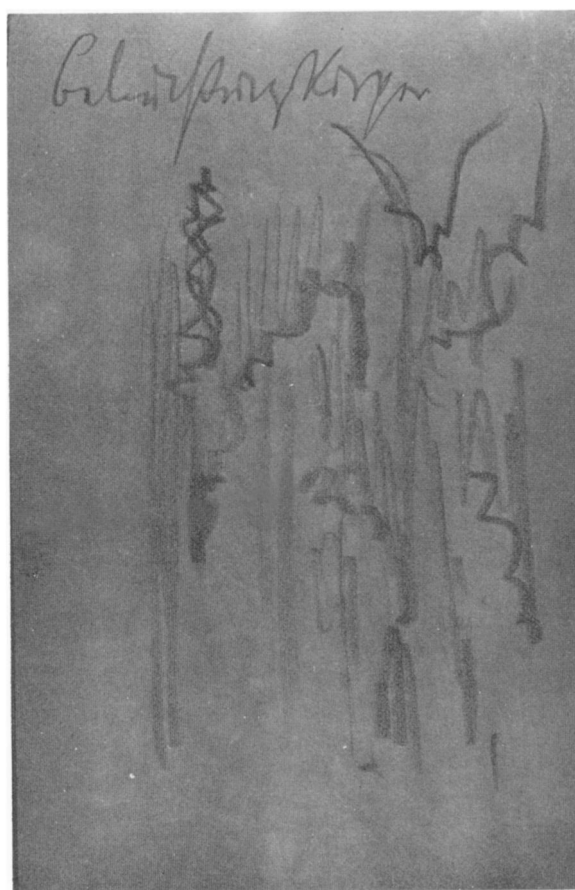


Fig. 21

Poelzig's sets for *The Golem* had a limited influence on designs for the sets of later films. Iris Barry notes the minimal effect of any of the German expressionist films on the American cinema.¹¹ Lotte Eisner, on the other hand, notes how Poelzig's sets were echoed in Pabst's *The Treasure* (1923) and Leni's *Waxworks* (1924).¹² In her discussion of Lubitsch's *Sumurun* she notes that he was never timid about borrowing his sets from other films, as seen in the adjacent houses and clay-fashioned stairs which Lubitsch took from *The Golem*.¹³



Fig. 22

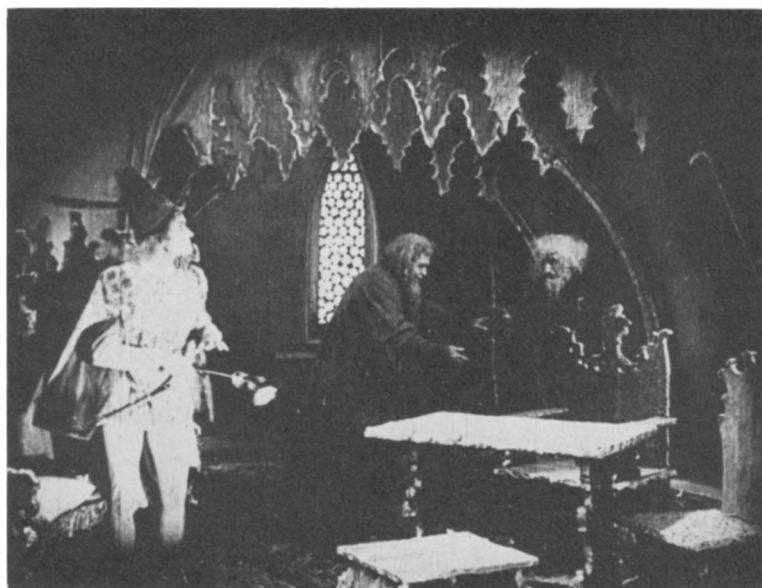


Fig. 23

A final film whose sets seem to show Poelzig's influence is Murnau's *Nosferatu*, although the general breadth of the architectural conception in this film is far from the claustrophobic *Golem* sets.

Wegener's conception of the film and Poelzig's execution of the sets for it were the result of a fruitful and creative collaboration. The production was a major one, whose expressionism was, in contrast to the linear, angular *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, painterly and sculptural. The film was well received critically both in the United States and in Great Britain, although it was recognized as a typically German product and not copied by American or British producers. Poelzig's early work with free-style Romanesque and Gothic

architecture, seen both in his fantastic, unrealized projects, and in his Posen water tower and Berlin *Grosses Schauspielhaus*, prepared him well for the design of the *Golem* sets. Because of the financial circumstances surrounding the other architects of the fantastic in the postwar era, the sets for *The Golem* supply unique and invaluable visual evidence for the ideas of expressionistic architecture. ■

I wish to thank Professor Standish Lawder of Yale University who suggested the lines of research presented here and also provided many photographs from his personal collection.

¹ Lotte Eisner, *L'écran démoniaque*, Paris, Le Terrain Vogue, 1965, p. 39. From Wegener's comments at a conference on "The Artistic Possibilities of the Cinema," held April 24, 1916, recorded in Kai Möller, *Paul Wegener*, Hamburg, Ernst Rowohlt Verlag, 1954, pp. 102–13.

² Lotte Eisner, *L'écran démoniaque*, p. 48.

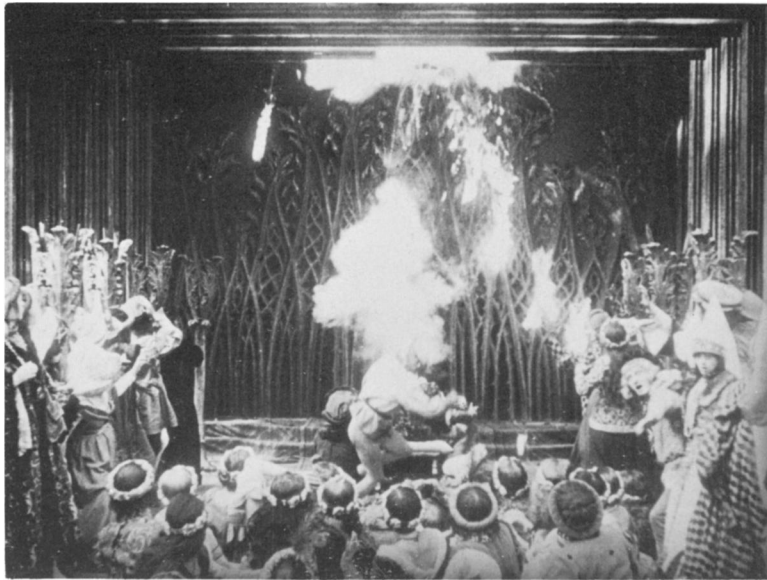


Fig. 24

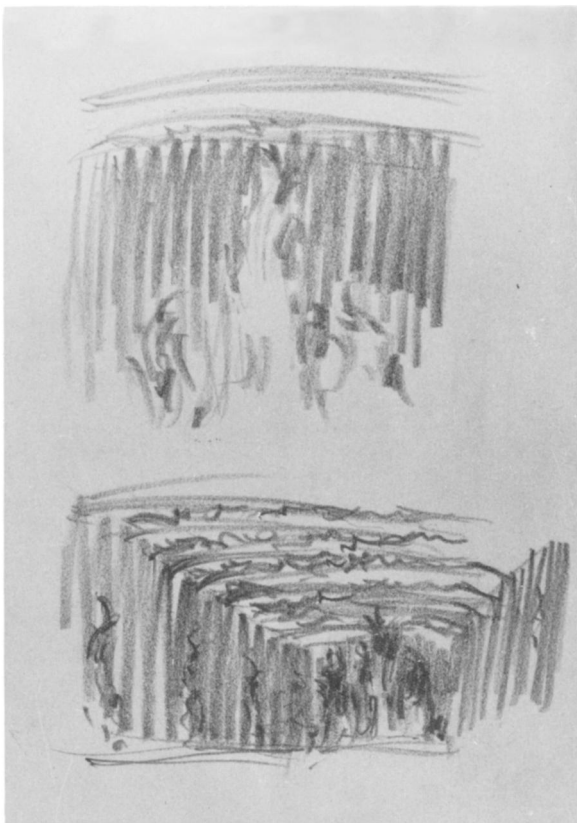


Fig. 25

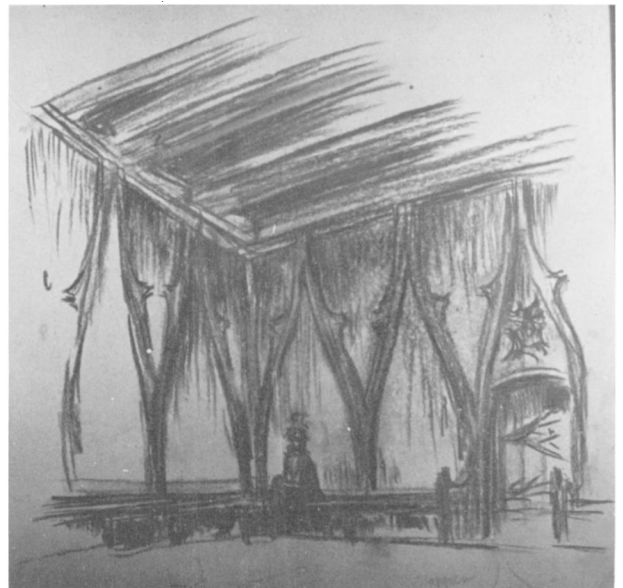


Fig. 26

³ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁵ Theodor Heuss, *Hans Poelzig: Das Lebensbild eines deutschen Baumeisters*, Tübingen, Wasmuth, 1948, p. 69.

⁶ Lotte Eisner, *L'écran démoniaque*, Appendice IV, p. 251.

⁷ Theodor Heuss, *Hans Poelzig*, pp. 12–16.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁹ Lotte Eisner, *L'écran démoniaque*, p. 48, notes that Poelzig made this statement to Rudolf Kurtz, *Expressionismus und Film*, Berlin, Verlag der Lichtbildbühne, 1926. Richard Byrne, *German Cinematic Expressionism: 1919–1924*, Ann Arbor, Michigan, University Microfilms, 1962, p. 179, lifts the phrase directly from Eisner.

¹⁰ See Museum Leverkusen, *Die gläserne Kette: Visionäre Architekturen aus dem Kreis um Bruno Taut 1919–1920*, Berlin, 1963. For the ideology of expressionist architecture, see O.M. Ungers, *Die Erscheinungsformen des Expressionismus in der Architektur*, Cologne, 1964. See also Dennis Sharp, *Modern Architecture and Expressionism*, New York, 1966, pp. 39–58.

¹¹ Iris Barry, "Film Notes," *Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art*, XVI, 2–3, 1949, p. 59.

¹² Lotte Eisner, *L'écran démoniaque*, p. 117.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 57, n. 2.

John R. Clarke is an Assistant Professor of Art History in the Visual Arts Department at the University of California, San Diego. His book on the black and white mosaics of imperial Rome will be published by Yale University Press.