

Close-up on the photo album of *Woman in the Moon* by Fritz Lang

The album

A film, some photos

In 1929, the German director, Fritz Lang filmed *Frau im Mond, Woman in the Moon*. Against a background of amorous intrigue, the film recounts the fictional adventure of the first trip into space, with many special effects and sound scientific knowledge.

The film, produced by Fritz Lang-Film GmbH, the director's production company, was distributed by the UFA¹, one of the largest cinema companies of the 1920s.

At the time, Fritz Lang was an internationally acclaimed director, honoured as a cinema master thanks to the success of *Dr. Mabuse*, as well as both *Nibelungen* and *Metropolis*. The welcome that *Woman in the Moon* received was, however, lukewarm. Although film critics applauded its technical virtues, they were critical –as for *Metropolis* – of its weak script.

While talking films, which appeared two years earlier, were enjoying success which outshone silent films, Fritz Lang refused to add sound to *Woman in the Moon*. This was to be his last silent film, the last demonstration of his artistic work in the UFA studios.

The legacy of this adventure is of course the film, but also a rare piece of work: the photo album of the set, donated by Fritz Lang to the Cinémathèque française in 1959.

This 4-volume album, includes over 700 images. It recounts both the ploy of the film and the UFA's filming methods; and presents Fritz Lang as a film director.

It also demonstrates the importance of the movie set photographer, whose images constitute both works and documents for the history of the cinema. Only a few films benefit from such a large number of preserved photos from their sets.

A short history of the album

The set photographer

Woman in the Moon was filmed between October 1928 and June 1929 in the UFA studios in Neubabelsberg, close to Berlin. During this period, Horst von Harbou was in charge of taking photos of the shoot and images of scenes from the future. We know very little about this movie set photographer, apart from the fact that he was born in 1879 and joined the profession in spectacular fashion rather late in life, as the first film he worked on was no less than the *Nibelungen* diptych (1922-1924).

¹ UFA: Universum Film AG (Aktien Gesellschaft)

His cinema career was doubtlessly linked to his family ties: he was the eldest brother of Thea von Harbou, the second wife of Fritz Lang and the script-writer, for amongst others, *Metropolis* and *Woman in the Moon*. The technical and artistic qualities of Horst von Harbou's images bear testimony to the obvious talent that allowed him to make a career in German cinema up until the end of the 1950s.

From set to album

It is likely that Horst von Harbou, the set photographer, was also the author of the album. In all the photos taken, he had to choose, probably alongside Fritz Lang, the pictures which seemed most suited to the vision of the film and the filming itself. If, as from this time, most films benefited from the presence of a movie set photographer, the creation of an album was not systematic, and the luxury product was produced in one single copy. In fact, photographs were used first and foremost to ensure films received exposure amongst the press and operators, often even to obtain funds prior to filming. 'Exploitation sets', made up of a small selection of images representing the film, (often accompanied by photos illustrating the filming), were sent to them. The images making up these 'exploitation sets' were probably selected by both the photographer and the advertising department, from the photos in the album.

The Album's vocation

An album's main aim was to keep a lasting memory of the filming. Copies that make it to us are very different from one film to another. The formats, materials, photograph sizes and layout are never the same. Some include few or no filming images, others separate the set from the filming while others mix the two. This is the case of the album of *Woman in the Moon*. It was without a doubt commissioned by Fritz Lang himself. We know that other films by Lang also had albums made of them – the Cinémathèque française is home to several of these, (including that of *Metropolis*). For the director the aim is to keep a lasting memory. But a useful memory; the aim is also to create a tool, 'showing the film's continuity and the way in which certain technical problems were resolved²'.

From Germany to the Cinémathèque

In 1933, Fritz Lang escaped Nazi Germany. He left behind many documents particularly his personal copies of his films. But he brought with him the album of *Woman in the Moon*: "When I left Germany, I saved approximately 400 set photos of *Frau im Mond*³". The document came with him to his temporary place of exile in France, then to his new home in the US. After the war, Fritz Lang who was in close contact with Lotte Eisner⁴, the head curator of the Cinémathèque française collection, made his first donation in 1955. Then Fritz Lang gave a new series of documents to the Cinémathèque in 1959. These included the albums of several films, including that of *Woman in the Moon*.

² Fritz Lang, "Mémoire, à propos d'un film sur la première fusée spatiale américaine sur la Lune", non-dated text reproduced in *Trafic*, March 2002, n° 41.

³ In fact, over 700 photos. Fritz Lang, "Mémoire, à propos d'un film sur la première fusée spatiale américaine sur la Lune", non-dated text reproduced in *Trafic*, March 2002, n° 41.

⁴ Of German descent, Lotte Eisner was first a film critic in her home country, which led to her meeting Fritz Lang. Fleeing the Nazi regime, she took refuge in France in 1933.

Album fluoroscopy

Physical description

The film's album is made up of 4 volumes. Covered with embossed black leather binding held in place by a cord, each volume is numbered with a roman numeral followed by the film's title, printed in golden letters. 32.5 cm high and 45 cm wide, the volumes are made up of 24 to 41 boards in brown card, punctured and sewn. Inside, the photographic plates have been fixed onto white paper supports, stuck onto the boards. Between each board, a fine and fragile sheet of tracing paper, called 'serpente', is placed to protect the prints from dust and handling marks.

The photographs

Spread across 4 volumes, the 704 original prints are all numbered on one of their corners, (Vol. I: 1 to 157, Vol. II: 158 to 325, Vol. III: 326 to 502, Vol. IV: 503 to 704). With the exception of that of photos 14 to 97, etched onto the print, the number of each image has been marked in ink on the negative. One print disappeared, (number 549). The photographs vary in size, but their format is generally around 12 x 16 cm. There are 597 photographs in horizontal format and just 107 in vertical format. These gelatine-silver prints, typical of techniques from the period, are mounted on white paper, which is stuck to the sheets of the album's volumes.

Content

The *Woman in the Moon* album contains two types of image: set photographs and filming photographs. The set photographs look very similar to what we see on the screen. They illustrate the scenes and shots of the film, and give an idea of the lighting and frame the director was aiming for. There are also images of sequences cut during editing. The filming photographs show the technical teams, behind the scenes and the filming equipment, (camera, projectors, etc.), the actors being filmed or resting.

80 % are set photos while 20 % are filming photos. This difference is explained by the purpose of the images. The set photos, close to the film's images, or even identical, were used to promote the film, while filming photos were only used on rare occasions.

The photographs, in groups of two, three or four, are arranged on the front and back of the album's pages. Filming and set photos are presented together, by scene but following a different order to the film's chronology.

Necessary restoration

In order to ensure the album's conservation, restoration work, entrusted to a specialist⁵, took place in 2001. After years of handling, the album had been damaged, (wear and tear, loss of material and mechanical weaknesses). The albums were first taken apart. Work was carried out on the binding to strengthen the back, to restore any gaps on the covers, edging and corners, to re-dye areas faded through wear and tear and to strengthen punctures. The photographic prints had also suffered: dust, finger marks, dog-eared or scratched photos, etc. The restoration of the boards involved dusting and repairing any tears. The photos were cleaned with solvent, and those with scratches were touched up. The worn out crystal paper,

⁵ Sabrina Esmeraldo, advice in the conservation and restoration of photographs.

Source: "La BiFi en 2001", Information letter from the Bibliothèque du film, Special edition.

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separating the boards, was replaced with sheets of neutral paper in order to avoid chemical contact which would be detrimental to the conservation. The albums, put back together and placed under a protective case, were then numbered.

The film album

A film summary

Wolf Helius, a young and talented entrepreneur, builds a rocket to fly to the Moon. In this way he hopes to fulfil the old dream of Georg Manfeldt, a wacky astronomy professor, convinced of the presence of gold on the Moon. His best friend, Hans Windegger, and Friede Velten, the fiancée of the latter, with whom Helius is secretly in love, are also on the trip. But the owners of gold mines, worried by the project, steal the rocket blueprint. They force Helius to take Walt Turner, their spy, with him. Gustav, a child crazy about astronautics, secretly sneaks onto the rocket. Following the Moon landing, the professor heads off to search for gold. He finds some in a cave, but he disappears into a crevasse. Turner, having followed him, then discovers the cave. He takes samples of the nuggets before returning to the rocket. He decides to take off alone while the others are looking for the professor. But Friede manages to stop him and warns Helius and Windegger. The latter kills Turner. But because a bullet damages the air supplies, one of the travellers is condemned to remain alone on the Moon. Destiny chooses Windegger. But Helius, out of love for Friede, decides to take the place of his friend. He drugs Windegger and shows the little Gustav how to fly the rocket. Helius watches the rocket head back to Earth. On his return to camp, he discovers Friede, who has chosen to remain behind with him. Together they wait for help to arrive.

Importance of set photos

Excepting a scene of which no photos exist, (the film on the first non-inhabited moon flight, broadcast to a group of industrialists), all the sequences of the film are illustrated in the album of *Woman in the Moon*. Horst von Harbou was able to take images while reproducing the film's ambiance as Fritz Lang conceived it. This constitutes the difficulty associated with set photography. Just another technician during the film's shooting, the set photographer is the only one not to participate in its creation. On set he has to jostle for position, as priority is given to those creating the film, (camera team, continuity men and women, stagehands, etc.). The size of photography equipment, often free-standing, is another handicap. It is therefore probable that photo shoots were organised immediately after the filming of a shot or a sequence. The photographer had to merge into the team to grasp the film's atmosphere. Von Harbou's images capture the spirit of the story, while reproducing the light and the decor sculpted by Fritz Lang and his teams. The importance of set photos is twofold: to show the continuity of the film and to give movie-goers the desire to see the film. The immense majority of photos feature characters in action, while pointing up the actors and the sets. The importance of the latter is considerable in *Woman in the Moon*. This is why a lot of photos give priority to scenes taking place in the rocket and on the Moon.

Different types of shots

The photographer never reproduces identically the individual images making up the film, (known as 'photograms'). The frame often varies slightly as well as the angle of the shot. The device is slightly shifted forward at the bottom, at the top or on the side of the camera. The photos taken from the same point of view as the camera are exceptional. A study of the shots reveals three types of set photos, corresponding to three shot moments:

- those taken prior to the filming, when the actors were rehearsing scenes in costume with the sets and lighting of the film. More than the set photos, it is the filming photos which allow them to be identified: we can see the reverse angle of the image, where Fritz Lang is miming the actor's movements and where the camera team is watching the actors rehearsing. There is even a photo of an actor being replaced by an extra.
- the second type of photo corresponds to those taken during the shots, that is, during the real filming. It is when we compare them to the film's shots that we are able to identify them: locations, actors' gestures and expressions are rigorously identical.
- the third type of shots were taken post-filming. The photographer requested that the actors pose while miming scenes. The actors had to reproduce their gestures, expressions and emotions. But these 'posed' photos can be distinguished from the others due to their theatricality.

Traces of the invisible

The album also contains images which are invisible in the film. Photos corresponding to shots excluded during the editing phase⁶. Horst von Harbou took 3 shots showing Heliuss, below the rocket, saying goodbye to the foreman of his factory. But there is no trace of this shot in the film. We also find in the album photos of several scenes which were not staged: a sequence between Heliuss and professor Manfeldt taking place in an observatory (8 shots), the arrival of professor Manfeldt at Heliuss' house (12 images), a melodramatic scene between Friede and her fiancé Windegger (17 shots) and a dream sequence, in which the little Gustav imagines he is with his hero Heliuss fighting space pirates (11 photos).

The filming Album

The importance of filming photos

The set photographer's second mission is to create a photographic report of the filming. These photos represent a part of the memory of the film and are mainly created for the production archives. Filming photos show behind the scenes images, the film being created. We see sets, lights, cameras, technical teams and actors during filming preparations, rehearsals and shoots. These images reveal a hard working yet simple team.

Fritz Lang, Master of the House

Fritz Lang, director and master builder of the whole project, is omnipresent on the filming photos, a veritable director of everyone and everything. Just as in the photo album of *Metropolis* or in the published photos of *M*⁷, the images show 'Fritz Lang filming, giving orders, directing actors and technicians⁸'. We are able to pin point his eye for detail in the care he took with the sets. He assisted with their construction, shoulder to shoulder with workmen and honed small details at the last minute. The photos show 'what Lang wanted to see and

⁶ The version used is that of the DVD commercialised by the Murnau Stiftung, the institution holding the film rights.

⁷ Noël Simsolo, Bernard Eisenschitz, Gérard Legrand, *M, le Maudit*, Paris, La Cinémathèque française, Plume, Calmann-Lévy, 1990.

⁸ Robert Delpire and Bernard Latarjet, "Champs et contrechamps" in *Metropolis, un film de Fritz Lang : images d'un tournage*, Paris, Centre national de la Photographie, Cinémathèque française, 1985, p. 5.

Close-up on the photo album of *Woman in the Moon* by Fritz Lang

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how he obtained what he wanted⁹". He rehearsed with actors and extras, and directed them during the filming of scenes. Always beside the camera during shooting, he monitored the frame, lights and staging. He also acted as a props man, helping out the cameraman, like on this photo, where the camera takes a close up shot of handwritten text, a shot we see in the film. Thanks to obvious complicity with the photographer, Fritz Lang wished to be portrayed by these staged photos, as the film's one-man-band.

Team work

Between shots or after a day of work, Horst von Harbou photographed members of the team. We see, for example, Fritz Lang striking a pose next to Professor Hermann Oberth (physician, specialising in astronautics and the film's scientific advisor) and next to little Gustl Stark-Gstettenbauer, who plays Gustav in the film. Thea von Harbou, co-scriptwriter and Lang's wife, also appears alongside Lang during filming. Other photos show the construction of sets, particularly a large series dedicated to the creation of the Moon sets. Under the direction of the film's architects, (Emil Hasler, Otto Hunte and Karl Vollbrecht), workers built a wooden structure measuring over 3 000 square metres and installed a large canvas at the end, painted with mountainous landscape, fake rocks and tons of white sand. The presence of dozens of workers and the gigantism of the sets testify to the care and also the significant financing accorded to this production. Finally numerous shots were taken of the camera and light teams. Apart from the head cameraman, Curt Courant and his team, they reveal the materials used, such as a Mitchell camera brought over from the US. The photographs also bear witness to the heaviness of the lighting equipment needed for the shots, (ceiling light tube ramps, arc lamps) and the many stagehands needed to operate them.

Actors

Four of the six main actors in the film had already starred in Fritz Lang's films. The film's two protagonists, Gerda Maurus and Willy Fritsch (who play Friede and Helius, the film's two heroes), feature in the credits of *Spies*, his preceding film (1928), as well as Fritz Rasp and Hermann Vallentin. Fritz Lang therefore worked with actors he knew well, informing them of the attitudes, gestures and positions he wanted them to adopt, even taking their place – as he was used to doing – to show them what he wanted. We see him retouching an actor's make-up, checking Helius' costume and showing an actor where to look. Concentrated and demanding during shoots, he appears relaxed and gracious on the photos in which he features during breaks from filming, having fun with the actors, far removed from the image of the tyrant he was so often described as. Very protective of his image, Fritz Lang appears in photos in his best light.

⁹ *Ibid.*

Around the album

Promotion and release of the film

Due to the reputation of the man and of his films, each new film by Fritz Lang was an event. The first screening of *Woman in the Moon* took place on 15 October 1929 at the UFA-Palast am Zoo cinema in Berlin with an audience of over 2,000. Exceptionally broadcast on German radio, the evening was a society and cultural event, which took place in the presence of well-known ministers, intellectuals and artists. Over 100 German journalists and foreign correspondents were invited to the filming of *Woman in the Moon*. Prior to its release, the company press team promoted the film with sector professionals, (distributors, cinema directors, etc.) in articles which were often very positive about the film. When the film was released, public cinemas also broadcast the event. In general, the journalist summed up the plot, accompanied by a few photos of the main scenes, with attractive images of the rocket and the lunar landscape. But critics were divided. While they applauded the technical qualities and scientific plausibility, journalists criticised the uneven script, in which the commonplace love story is unable to gel with the space adventure.

Fritz Lang and the UFA

Founded in 1917, with support from the Reich and large industrial firms, as of the start of the 1920s the UFA¹⁰ became the main German cinema company. In charge of studios and a network of cinemas, it absorbed its competitors, particularly in 1921 Decla-Bioscop led by Erich Pommer. The latter then became production manager at the UFA, bringing with him his colleagues, including Fritz Lang. Going into directing in 1919 with *The Half Breed*, Fritz Lang enjoyed his first public success with *The Spiders* in the same year. But it was under the aegis of the UFA that he proved himself with the critics thanks to the film, *Destiny* in 1921.

He continued with a series of films which made him into one of the decade's key film makers: *Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler* (1922), *The Nibelungen* (1923), *Metropolis* (1927). Thanks to Erich Pommer and the UFA, Lang became surrounded by talented technicians and actors and had great financial means at his disposal allowing him to film his super productions, while continuing to experiment and innovate on a technical level.

But this partnership broke down in 1926-1927. Faced with economic problems, the UFA publicly criticised Fritz Lang for the astronomical cost of *Metropolis*. Meanwhile, the director was yearning for greater independence and founded his own production company, Fritz Lang Film. He still went on to co-produce his two following films with the UFA, *Spies* in 1928 and *Woman in the Moon* in 1929. But tension between the studio and Lang became stronger. Faced with the growing success of talking cinema, the UFA put pressure on the director to add sound to his galactic saga. But the film maker refused; for him the cinema, 'is a fundamentally pictorial art form, an art of the vision', and talking films were something new which, 'first needed to be completed, honed and tested'¹¹. Just one month after the release of

¹⁰ UFA: Universum Film AG (Aktien Gesellschaft)

¹¹ Carl Rohr, "Vers l'avenir avec Fritz Lang", in *Cinéma*, September 1929.

Woman in the Moon, the UFA officialised the break up with Lang. *M*, his following film, a speaking production, filmed with an independent producer, was released two years later.

From Metropolis to NASA

The Metropolis rocket

Two years before *Woman in the Moon*, Fritz Lang had already become interested in space travel. He in fact, envisaged a different ending to his film, *Metropolis*: Maria and Freder, the two protagonists of the film, were supposed to fly off into space on a rocket. Finally, the film maker gave up on the idea and opted for a general reconciliation scene in front of the city cathedral. But the temptation of a space travel-themed film returned very quickly indeed. Lang, who was deeply interested in technical progress, discovered the book, *Die Rakete zu den Planetenräumen (By Rocket into Interplanetary Space)* by Professor Hermann Oberth. Just after, he became passionate about the subject and decided to make a film about it. As usual, he found out a great deal of information and placed Thea von Harbou in charge of writing the script.

A plausible rocket

The middle of the 1920s was marked by the appearance of the pioneers of aeronautics, the invention of the first rocket engines and trials of miniature rockets. Germany was at the cutting edge, with men who went on to become legends: Hermann Oberth, Fritz von Opel and later, Wernher von Braun. Thanks to Willy Ley, a physician, and author of *Die Möglichkeit der Weltraumfahrt (Space Travel)*, Lang got to know Hermann Oberth, whom he asked to become his scientific advisor for *Woman in the Moon*. The professor, assisted by Willy Ley, created a model of the rocket and constructed a 12 m high rocket. The UFA's advertising department even announced the launch of a real rocket for the film's release, but the overly ambitious project had to be abandoned. Despite this technical failure and several improbabilities, (such as the presence of breathable air on the Moon), Lang's film was a success from a scientific and aesthetic point of view. He fixed the image of the rocket and the space flight for decades. Several years later, the Nazis destroyed copies of the film due to the many similarities with the V1 and V2 flying bombs developed by professor Oberth's students.

Rocket Story

Fritz Lang had not finished with the theme of space travel. In 1948-1949, he contacted several US producers to propose the project *Rocket Story*. He didn't write the script but suggested to them a production set in the 'immediate future'¹²: the modern story of the construction of a rocket in the USA and its attempt to fly to the Moon¹³. The idea stopped there, but it showed Lang's continuing interest in the subject. The film maker remained friends with Willy Ley, who, just like him, took refuge in the US and became the author of scientific popularisation works about astronautics.

Posterity of Woman in the Moon

Forty years after its release, *Woman in the Moon* remains a benchmark film. In 1968, Lang was invited to a scientific seminar at the spatial research centre in Huntsville (Alabama) to

¹² Fritz Lang, "La nuit viennoise : une confession de Fritz Lang", *Cahiers du cinéma*, August 1965, n° 169.

¹³ Fritz Lang, "Mémoire, à propos d'un film sur la première fusée spatiale américaine dans la Lune", non-dated text reproduced in *Trafic*, March 2002, n° 41.

speak about his film. His rocket and the use of the countdown, which he claims as his own idea, are still used as models by teams of academics. Saturn V, the launcher of the Apollo programme, which allowed US astronauts to walk on the Moon, was developed by Werner von Braun, a former student of Hermann Oberth, the inventor of the *Woman in the Moon* model. Forty years later, this moon landing concretised the film's introductory phase: "For human engineers, nothing is impossible. It's all a matter of time".

The Cinémathèque française photo album collection

Everyone knows what a photo album is; we have all made our own. It is perhaps less known that it was the cinematography industry which invented the production of this type of object. The Cinémathèque française collections are home to 554 albums, the oldest dating back to 1898, and the most recent from 1990.

A work tool

Research carried out and testimonies allow us to identify a few of the uses which gave rise to the birth of these documents. Until the 1970s, the photo album was an important work tool for production companies.

It could be used to:

- show developments in the film's shooting and to obtain financing for this to continue or to be finished off,
- to give potential distributors an overview of the work in progress and give rise to a reservation,
- to promote the finished film with those who we call today 'opinion leaders'.

Sometimes the album was put together by the director or by an artistic team member of the film, either in order to organise a documentation, (work notes of the decorator Serge Pimenoff, the photographer Vincent Rossell, or albums put together by the collector Will Day), or with a purely memory saving aim, as a visual eye witness account of a set or a particular event, (the trip by Gérard Philipe to Berlin in 1955, the Paramount Congress in 1935, etc.).

The album can therefore contain not only set photos, but also pictures showing the film being made, set building, rehearsals with actors, the set atmosphere, portraits, etc. In all cases, these objects, which are often made with sumptuous backings, are passionate study documents for researchers, film restorers and historians.

History of the collections

Since it was founded in 1936 and up until 1970, the Cinémathèque has been involved in collecting photo albums. A little less than a half of the collection was thus constituted by the experience of Henri Langlois, founder of the institution. We find extremely important and prestigious elements about films by Georges Méliès, Abel Gance, Fritz Lang, Louis Feuillade, Jean Renoir, Marc Allégret, etc. This is the occasion to recall the immense debt the Cinémathèque française owe to its curator, Lotte Eisner. She is in fact behind the precious donations made by Fritz Lang, particularly the albums of several of his most important films from the German period: *Spies*, *Woman in the Moon*, *M*, as well as *Liliom* filmed in France, not forgetting *Metropolis*, of which the 800 photos were supposed to make up, to begin with, a series of albums. From the 'Langlois' collection there are also a few special albums of films

Close-up on the photo album of *Woman in the Moon* by Fritz Lang

9

by Abel Gance, including two volumes for *Napoleon* and an album for the silent version of *I accuse*, as well as the luxurious original signed prints destined for the promotional album of *Nanook of the North* by Flaherty, and other gems. This collection continued to be enriched following Henri Langlois' death. The Archives françaises du film offered around one hundred albums when the Bibliothèque du film was created in 1993. Over 220 albums were added to this list in the last 15 years, up until the very recent acquisition by the Cinémathèque of the Marcel Carné/Roland Lesaffre funds, which includes many albums regarding *Les Enfants du paradis*. These enrichments also include albums concerning recent films, (*Les palmes de Monsieur Schutz*, *Liberté-Oléron* for example), testifying to the survival of this practice until the start of the 2000s.

A fragile heritage

This collection is particularly delicate to put on display to the public due to its fragility and precious nature and the complexity of the photos that constitute it. It is today entirely inventoried. The policy of the Cinémathèque française regarding the conservation is to preserve the albums in their physical integrity wherever possible. Each volume is conserved in special boxes, often made to measure. A conservation audit permitted us to determine the albums requiring immediate restoration. Around twenty volumes have been restored and digitalised since 2001, (including all the Gance and Lang works), and will be available for consultation on screen at the Bibliothèque du film by 2011.