



# A survey of the representation of modern architecture in the cinema

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## Abstract

Modern architecture, a reaction to the industrialization of the 19th-century, is characterized by a lack of applied decoration, exposed structural members, materials kept in their natural state and “flat” roofs. It developed in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s, particularly in Germany, the Netherlands and France, and spread to the rest of the world after World War II. Depending on your point of view, Modern architecture can either be exciting and exhilarating or inhuman and oppressive. This article surveys these two opposite representations of Modern architecture in the cinema, beginning from its first appearance in the 1920s until today. Films directed by Marcel L’Herbier (*The Inhuman Woman*, 1924), Alfred Hitchcock (*North by Northwest*, 1959), Jacques Tati (*Mon Oncle*, 1958, and *Playtime*, 1967), Jean-Luc Godard (*Contempt*, 1963, *Alphaville*, 1965, and *Two or Three Things I Know About Her*, 1967), as well as several from the James Bond series (*Dr. No* [Terence Young, 1962], *Goldfinger* [Guy Hamilton, 1964], and *Diamonds are Forever* [Guy Hamilton, 1971]) are highlighted. Culminating in a survey of like-minded films since the 1980s, the article concludes that Modern architecture in the cinema is here to stay and will continue to play an integral role in the making of films.

*Keywords:* modern architecture, cinema, Alfred Hitchcock, Jacques Tati, Jean-Luc Godard, James Bond Films,

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Modern architecture, a reaction to the industrialization of the 19th-century, is characterized by a lack of applied decoration, exposed structural members, materials kept in their natural state and “flat” roofs (that is, at least, they look like they are flat). It developed in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s, particularly in Germany, the Netherlands and France, and spread to the rest of the world after World War II. This study is a comparative analysis of the representation of Modern architecture in the cinema between the first appearance of the style until today, focusing on the period between the 1920s and 1960s.

Depending on your point of view, Modern architecture can either be exciting and exhilarating or inhuman and oppressive. One of the earliest films to praise Modern architecture (or at least highlight it) was *The Inhuman Woman* (*L'inhumaine*, 1924), directed by Marcel L’Herbier, which utilized contemporary artists and architects in the design of the sets<sup>1</sup>. The painter Fernand Léger created the laboratory interior for the character Einar Norsen, a Swiss scientist/inventor. This set, a mix of Cubist and Russian Constructivist elements, represented the new, Modern style as a place where original and innovative ideas thrive to produce new inventions. Rather than working in an old-style interior, Norsen’s laboratory is without historical precedent, even futuristic. The architect Robert Mallet-Stevens designed the exterior of Norsen’s house, as well as the exterior of the main

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<sup>1</sup> Other contemporary designers were involved with individual objects, all in the Modern style: Paul Poiret (costumes), Pierre Chareau (furniture), Raymond Templier (jewelry), René Lalique (glass objects) and Jean Puiforcat (silver items).



character's house, in his personal white, cubic and geometric style, again projecting the image that the characters were not stuck in the past but had an eye on the future. The Modern interiors of the main character's house were designed by architect Alberto Cavalcanti (who would later become a film director) and designer Claude Autant-Lara. Cavalcanti's dining room design consisted of a U-shaped table set on an island in the middle of a pool, surrounded with geometric constructions of all kinds. Autant-Lara's winter garden design consisted of oversized, abstract leaves and his burial vault for Norsen was comprised of a simplistic, abstract plinth framed with bare fluorescent lights set in a zig-zag, almost saying that even in death Norsen was looking to the future.

After watching *The Inhuman Woman*, Modernist architect Adolph Loos described it as a "dazzling song about the greatness of modern technology" (Frank 1996: 941). The director himself saw the film as a forerunner to the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes* that would be held one year later in Paris (Shanahan 2004: 55), an event that spread the notion around the world that the new century deserved new forms of art, architecture and design and was a way for many artists, architects and designers to eventually transition into the "High Modernism" of the mid-twentieth century.

Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) and William Cameron Menzies' *Things to Come* (1936) are also famous for their depiction of exciting and exhilarating Modern architecture. Set in the future (respectively, 2000 and 2036), these films reinforce the belief that this new style was the way forward and would dominate the built environment in the coming years. Chappell (1975: 293) has described the futures depicted in both films as "absurd," but he was writing from the advantage of a half century after these films were made, not understanding the context of Lang's and Menzies' optimistic attitude toward the impending future.

Following World War II, Modern architecture became prevalent elsewhere besides Europe, which paralleled the general forward-looking attitude of the world after successfully defeating the Axis Powers. Although some architects, like Frank Lloyd Wright, had been practicing their own versions of Modern architecture since the turn of the century, the style became widespread in North America at this time. Despite this general acceptance of the style (or because of it?), the representation of Modern architecture in the cinema shifted from optimistic visions of the future to a more sinister portrayal, where "characters who are evil, selfish, obsessive and driven by the pleasure of the flesh" inhabited (Rosa 2000: 159).

In Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* (1959), Phillip Vandamm's house atop Mt. Rushmore is reminiscent of Frank Lloyd Wright's "Fallingwater" (1934), as well as an unrealized hilltop house for Ayn Rand (1947), with horizontal limestone layers, wide expanses of glass, a central fireplace and a large cantilever jutting out from a hill<sup>2</sup>. The house also has the more general Modern characteristics of a free-flowing floorplan, a geometric massing of volumes and a flat roof. Although lead set designer Robert Boyle has claimed that the film's script, not his will, was the reason for an open-plan, glass-walled and cantilevered house (Affron and Affron 1995: 66), the message here is that Modern architecture is an audacious style appropriate for the international villain/spy Vandamm<sup>3</sup>. The style also conveniently matches the theme of the trappings of luxury that the film illustrates, along with other contemporary architectural examples including Emery Roth & Sons' 430 Park Avenue (1953), and Harrison & Abramowitz's Commercial Investment Trust Building (1957) and United Nations Headquarters (1952)<sup>4</sup>. In the opinion of Jacobs (2007: 312), "Although its daring modernism is connected to the psychopathology of the master criminal, the luxury and

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<sup>2</sup> Hitchcock is said to have asked Wright for a design but did not want to and/or could not pay the fee that Wright proposed (<https://hookedonhouses.net/2010/03/15/north-by-northwest-hitchcocks-house-on-mt-rushmore>, last accessed 2 August 2022). *North by Northwest* was filmed in August and September of 1958. Since Wright died in 1959, this might or might not be the case. Set designer Robert F. Boyle is given credit for Vandamm's house.

<sup>3</sup> Boyle was assisted by art directors William A. Horning, Merrill Pye and set decorators Henry Grace and Frank McKelvey (Jacobs 2007: 296).

<sup>4</sup> Non-architectural examples of the trappings of luxury in *North by Northwest* include Cadillac limousines, Mercedes roadsters, Lincoln Continentals, the Twentieth Century Limited train, Bergdorf Goodman wardrobes and Van Cleef & Arpels jewelry.

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domestic qualities of the Vandamm house [...] are unmistakably seductive,” ironically rendering Hitchcock/Boyle’s design a proponent of Modern architecture.

This message of Modern architecture being bold and for misfits also appears in the depictions of the hideaways for many James Bond villains of the 1960s and 1970s, especially those designed by set designer Ken Adam. Although most of these hideaways end up being blown to smithereens at the conclusion of each film, they nonetheless put in front of the audience a vision of a new world that perhaps that might not have seen before.

The villain’s lair in *Dr. No* (Terence Young, 1962) features industrial facilities such as a nuclear reactor, bauxite processing facility and a radiation decontamination hall that could have come from any number of Modernist architects whose work could be seen as quite industrial style (Peter Behrens, Walter Gropius, Albert Kahn, amongst others). Adam’s design for the “tarantula” interrogation room in *Dr. No* is the essence of minimalism – with plain walls, a large oculus with a square-gridded grill, and one chair and one table. It is a composition of light, shadows and geometric shapes that says Modern architecture = evil.

In *Goldfinger* (Guy Hamilton, 1964), the villain’s lair near Fort Knox, also Wright-esque with its exposed wooden beams at extreme angles and large open plan, contains a Modernist game room with wood-paneled walls and a stainless-steel fireplace hood. Adam’s rendition of the interior of Fort Knox – completely fictional – was another industrial environment worthy of Behrens, Gropius or Kahn, so much so that “United Artists was inundated with angry calls from people demanding to know why a British team was allowed to film inside of Fort Knox where even the President of the United States was not allowed to enter” (Frayling 2004). Also in 1964, Adam worked as the designer for Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), creating, amongst others, a war room with Modernist detailing worthy of any mid-century glass skyscraper boardroom.

For the villains’ winter retreat in *Diamonds are Forever* (Hamilton, 1971), an actual building was used rather than a set: John Lautner’s futuristic Elrod House (1968) in Palm Springs. Described as “sybaritic modernity” (Hess 1999: 18), the house literally represents “life on the edge” with its hilltop siting, views out to the landscape and infinity pool<sup>5</sup>. Adam’s work for Bond director Lewis Gilbert – *You Only Live Twice* (1967), *The Spy Who Loved Me* (1977) and *Moonraker* (Gilbert, 1979) – relied not on real places but on fantasy industrial complexes instead, a kind of *Dr. No* on steroids. These films feature designs by Adam for, respectively, a lair inside of a fake volcano complete with helipad and rocket-launcher, a supertanker capable of swallowing submarines with a corresponding underwater lair, and its space station equivalent in orbit.

No account of Modern architecture and film would be complete without mentioning the “exaggerated Modernism” (Jacobs 2007: 311) of Jacques Tati’s *Mon Oncle* (1958) and *Playtime* (1967). Both films are critical of the new plain, geometric and minimalist style that became the norm in France after World War II. The ultra-modern Arpel House in *Mon Oncle* (production design Henri Schmitt) is criticized for being more interested in aesthetics than function, complete with a garden path that takes a circuitous route to the front door, a bubbling fountain activated only for guests, chairs uncomfortably low for a table and an ultra-hygienic white kitchen composed of mostly knobs and buttons, reminiscent of Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky’s “Frankfurt Kitchen” (1926)<sup>6</sup>.

*Playtime* (production design Eugène Roman) has been described as “a movie where architectural material, matters pertaining to architecture as well as to architecture's matter, has a starring role” (Kahn 1992: 22). The over-arching critique of the film concentrates on glass architecture and its

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<sup>5</sup> “questionable characters also inhabit Lautner houses in *Body Double* (Brian de Palma, 1984) [The Chemosphere, 1960], *Lethal Weapon 2* (Richard Donner, 1989) [Garcia House, 1962], and *The Big Lebowski* (Joel and Ethan Coen, 1998) [Sheats-Goldstein House, 1963].” (Jacob 2007: 311).

<sup>6</sup> In all fairness, Tati also critiques aspects of the non-Modern town illustrated in the film: the vegetable sellers who are enjoying a cocktail at 10:00am, the street sweeper who carries out a long debate (on what topic?) instead of cleaning, and the fruit seller who angles his truck so as to “tip the scale” in a more favorable direction. His architectural critique comes from the main character’s circuitous route to his apartment throughout almost the entire building (a product of the house being chopped up into apartment over the years).

associated layers of transparency, reflection, surveillance and framing. The hapless main character gets lost in a world where he can see his destination, yet he is never able to actually arrive there. In one memorable scene, this character shatters the glass door of a jazz club but is able to hide this fact by holding the handle in mid-air, simulating the opening-and-shutting of that door. In another scene, a worker asks an office building doorman for a light, but both do not realize the glass pane between them until cigarette and lighter bump into it, forcing them to move over to an open door (which is, of course, made of glass).

Another critique of Modern architecture seen in *Playtime* is the anonymity or heterogenous nature of the style. Posters for London, the USA, Mexico and Stockholm at a travel agency, for example, all contain the same bland – Modern – building, curiously very similar to the Esso Tower at La Defense, Paris (Jacques and Pierre Gréber, 1963). Tati famously constructed the entire 162,000 square-foot Modernist city-set for *Playtime* from scratch near Vincennes, outside Paris<sup>7</sup>. This set is also primarily made up of the same building found in the travel agency posters – extending the gag to Paris. Indeed, the first and final scenes of the film were shot at the brand new and shiny Orly Airport, one of the few real buildings used in the film.

Tati's criticism of the Modern environment can be considered light-hearted when compared to that of his countryman Jean-Luc Godard. The minimalist apartment of the main characters in *Contempt* (1963) can be seen as either a result of or metaphor for the breaking down of their relationship. The apartment and its furnishings "are part of the problem, as their inhumanly geometric contours contribute to the couple incomprehensions and miscommunications" (Brody 2008: 165). Later in the film, it is the Modernist icon Villa Malaparte (Curzio Malaparte with Adalberto Libera, 1938-42) on Capri that serves the same purpose: it is in this building, with its geometric simplicity and windswept rooftop overlooking an infinite sea, that the wife of the main character is caught kissing another man. This "fascinating hybrid between theater and architecture" (Iacovou 2021: 260) serves as a stage set for the collapse of a couple's feelings for each other, rendering Modern architecture as the place (or even reason?) where that happens.

Godard's *Alphaville* (1965) is even more extreme in its criticism of the Modern environment, linking it hand-in-hand with government surveillance. The film "depicts a world of disembodied computerized voices, flashing signals, directive arrows, tall towers, dark streets and fluorescent interiors (Borden 2002: 217). Lastly, Godard's *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* (1967), which has been called "a critique of Gaullist urban development as a form of generalized prostitution" (Smith 2015: 23), takes place amongst the transformation of suburban Paris during the construction of its ring road (*périphérique*). The film takes place within in an alienating environment of concrete highways and barren esplanades connecting dispersed, anonymous apartment blocks. Here, the government uses the Modern environment not for surveillance purposes, but to promote conspicuous consumption (buy more cars, shop at out-of-town shopping malls, etc).

Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) continued this theme into the 1970s and by the 1980s, when the criticism of Modern architecture reached its peak via "post-Modernism," such representations became common, especially in science-fiction films such as in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (1985), and Paul Verhoeven's *Robocop* (1987) and *Total Recall* (1990). It seemed as if the future was dystopian and Modern architecture was to blame. This equation of Modern architecture with dystopia had a resurgence in the 2010s, albeit not necessarily in films set in the future, with Gary Ross' *Hunger Games* (2012), Pete Travis' *Dredd* (2012), Denis Villeneuve's *Enemy* (2013), Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2014), Drake Doremus' *Equals* (2015), and Ben Wheatley's *High Rise* (2015, set in the 1970s) being a representative selection.

Modern architecture depicted as thrilling, fashionable and chic never went away, it was just subsumed by the more popular dystopian theme. Modern homes designed by John Lautner are particular favorites, not just for James Bond films, having starring roles in Brian de Palma's *Body*

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<sup>7</sup> The *Playtime* set used 65,000 cubic yards of concrete, 42,300 square feet of plastic, 34,200 square feet of timber and 12,600 square feet of glass (Kahn (1992), citing a 1978 NYU PhD by Lucy Fischer entitled *Home Ludens: an Analysis of Four Films by Jacques Tati*).

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Double (1984) [The Chemosphere, 1960], The Coen Brothers' The Big Lebowski (1998) [Sheats-Goldstein House, 1963] and Tom Ford's A Single Man (2009) [Schaffer House, 1949]. This trend also reappeared in the 2000s in the spacious and sleek lake house of Simon West's When a Stranger Calls (2006); in Luca Guadagnino's I Am Love (2009), which utilizes Piero Portaluppi's Villa Necchi Campiglio (1935) as the residence of a rich industrialist; in Roman Polanski's The Ghost Writer (2010) where the eponymous character lives in a sleek minimalist house with a muted color palette; and in Joanna Hogg's Exhibition (2013), which utilizes James Melvin's own house that he designed for himself in 1969 (re-designed by Sauerbruch Hutton in the 1990s).

Most recently, Bong Joon-ho's Parasite (2019) contrasts the expansive and luxurious Modern house of a wealthy family with the cramped and meager accommodations of their home help and Sam Levinson's Malcom & Marie (2021) takes place during the course of a night in the open-plan, airy, and Modern Caterpillar House designed by architect Jonathan Feldman (2011). A final nod here belongs to Kogonada's Columbus (2017), which does not necessarily portray Modern architecture as exciting and thrilling, but certainly highlights the collection of architectural masterpieces located in that Indiana town from Eero Saarinen, I.M. Pei, Venturi Scott Brown, Cesar Pelli and Richard Meier, amongst others.

In conclusion, the representation of Modern architecture in the cinema is either favorable – resulting in bright and futuristic scenes – or unfavorable – resulting in dark and oppressive scenes, matching the particular tone of each film. Whether portrayed as exciting and exhilarating or inhuman and oppressive, Modern architecture has played and will continue to play an integral role in the making of films to come.

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## Resume

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