MODERNIST NOIR

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VILLAINOUS MODERNISM

Films use architecture as visual shorthand to tell viewers everything they need to know about the characters in a short amount of time. Only a few seconds are required to impart who the players are and whether they are on their way up, or down. Modern architecture plays a specific role in this dialogue. The occupant of the stark compositions and straight white lines of modernism with their defined light and shadow is not just a rascal, but a cold-blooded evildoer associated with calculated reasoning. In contrast cheerful and inviting faux-Tudor or fieldstone-clad houses denote homely domesticity to the viewing public. For example, the inhabitants of Wysteria Lane might be as disposed to desperation in a house designed by 1930s film set designer Cedric Gibbons, or a restrained minimalist glass and concrete Manhattan loft, but would find it difficult to retain their identity as housewives with the network viewers.

Not all filmic malefactors are linked through Modern architecture but those who are embody the chill sophistication, icy restraint, and utter lack of humanity of their perfectly proportioned stainless steel and glass interiors. Examples of villainous modernism include the films of Jacques Tati, especially *Playtime* (1967) in which modern architecture beleaguers both Parisians and American tourists. Modern architecture also links the evil villains from German Expressionist films of the 1920s, through Hollywood film noir in the 1930s and 1940s, to the James Bond franchise. In Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1925) modernism and modern technology appear as monstrous and lacking in humanity, devouring individuals and individualism. In *Spies* (Lang, 1928) the crime kingpin is identified with his Modern lair and its smooth, polished, streamlined surfaces.

In the 1920s French architect Robert Mallet-Stevens complained that Modern film sets were used exclusively to suggest louche settings, such as night-clubs, or the vamp's pad. Despite Mallet-Stevens' unhappiness with modernism as the set for the

demi-mondaine, the inhabitant of the villa he designed for *L'inhumaine* (Marcel L'Herbier, 1927) is a man-eating opera singer incapable of human feelings just as the décor of the villa, while being the embodiment of expression of abstraction and style, is devoid of emotional content.

In the 1934 film, *The Black Cat* (Edgar R. Ulmer) the villain is so nasty, he is not only an ultra-Modern architect and engineer, but also both Satanist and World War I traitor. On top of it all, in case you missed that he is a baddy, he is played by Boris Karloff and resides, of course, in a modernist house whose striking features include a glass block wall, open-tread steel staircase, and latest communication devices. Modern design also appeared on the other side of the camera. In the 1920s and '30s, dictatorial director Josef von Sternberg's Hollywood office was built in steel and glass, with a goldfish pond as "moat" around the exterior and furnished in the streamlined moderne style.

THE EVIL GENIUS OF RICHARD NEUTRA, RICHARD MEIER, AND JOHN LAUTNER

Perhaps the unconscious association on the part of the movie-going public of modernism and villain is because both share a desire for global dominance. This was exemplified when Henry Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson named the cubist form, clean white lines, steel, glass, and concrete of Richard Neutra, the International Style to express its expected universality. Despite being designed to promote good health through light and space, Richard Neutra's Lovell House in *LA*

Confidential (Curtis Hanson, 1997) becomes the abode of crooked developer Pierce Morehouse Patchett, whose name suggests sharpness, extensive building, and cover ups. The simple geometry and white, angular planes that make Richard Meier's buildings so easily recognizable also lend themselves as villainous settings. In Michael Mann's *Manhunter* (1986) the High Art Gallery in Atlanta, Georgia stands in for a chilling penitentiary. Not unlike Mallet-Stevens's cool design to represent the coolness of the "inhuman" occupant, the steel and glass becomes an ultramodern prison to incarcerate evil incarnate in the form of literal man-eater Hannibal Lecter.

Art director Ken Adam, who designed the war room in *Dr Strangelove; or how I learned to stop worrying and love the bomb* (Stanley Kubrick, 1964), also created stylish modernist film sets including villain's lairs galore in Bond films replete with transparent acrylic stairs, stainless steel wall panels, multi-layers, and angled ceilings. While making *Diamonds are Forever* (Guy Hamilton, 1971) he asked producer Cubby Broccoli for access to some houses in Palm Springs so that he might choose among them for location shots to complement his set designs so the film would have a coherent look and style. Broccoli, whose connections with reclusive millionaire Howard Hughes enabled the filmmakers to close Las Vegas streets and casinos as required to shoot the film, made a phone call and the next thing Adam knew, a black limousine collected him and took him on a tour of whatever houses he liked. He chose Kirk Douglas's residence for the setting where Tiffany Case finds Plenty O'Toole in her swimming pool, and John Lautner's Elrod House as the location where female bodyguards Bambi and Thumper keep inventor and magnate Willard White captive.

The concrete petal shells of the roof, skylights, expansive circular living room, and natural rock attracted Adam to the Elrod House. The house seems to grow out of the rock cliff, and the curved swimming pool frames the horizon. Lautner trained with Frank Lloyd Wright and expressed many of his ideals about site and natural materials. Lautner's houses are not designed intentionally to be photogenic, as are Mallet-Stevens's, but must possess a particular appeal, as filmmakers use them frequently. Often built on hills, his houses allow panoramic views, either of the expanse of the desert, or of the sparkling grid of lights of Los Angeles. Designed to joyously express all life's activities, the free flowing spaces of the open plan living rooms also lend themselves to camera movement.

In *Lethal Weapon 2,* (Richard Donner, 1989) modernism in the form of Lautner's barrel-vaulted Garcia House, whose glass façade represents the syncopation of the rhythms of jazz, directly contrasts with the fundamental stability of hearth and home represented by the pitched roof, gables, dormer windows, and cozy front porch of the solid family man. The location shots effectively utilize the metal walkways, ramps, and spiral stairs necessary to access the house on its steep

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A still image from *The Black Cat*, by Edgar R. Ulmer, 1934

hillside site and lend themselves to interesting framing on both exterior and interior as the good guys sneak up on the corrupt diplomats within.

The vertical and horizontal steel structure, mullions, gates, and balustrades of the Garcia house are white and transparent. When the consul closes the door of his residence, it also looks as though he is shutting himself in prison. The house is a character in the film, and its demolition represents the destruction of the evil villains who reside within. The precariousness of modernism is represented in the simple expedience of attaching a rope to one of the metal supports and pulling the house down with a pickup truck. This scene was created by the construction of two full-scale models of the Garcia house. One was built on a sound stage, with a hydraulic system to tremble and rock the house with the actors in it and another exact full-scale model was constructed on a hillside just outside Los Angeles. Since the script determined that actors and crew had to be on set during the destruction, municipal ordinances dictated that it have a solid structure. Foundations on caissons and steel, driven more than 10 metres into the ground supported the plywood and timber set. In order to capture the collapse from all angles (and acknowledging that this was only going to happen once), nine cameras filmed as, on the signal from the director, the house plummeted to the bottom of the hill.

In Robert Altman's *The Long Goodbye*, (1973) upstart mobster Marty Augustine rests his penny loafers on the glass walls of a Lautner house, with the view of the city spread out below him, as if the city is at his feet. He dominates the city, while the house itself is a contradiction, with its floor to ceiling glass walls, kitsch timber panelling, and "faux" 19th century furniture. The true villain, icy and emotionless as his settings are lacking in ornament, would have the *über*-Modern glass and steel furniture as well as all the mod cons of domination and control.

Inspired in many ways by Altman's film (as well as by Howard Hawks' *The Big Sleep*), in *The Big Lebowski*, (1998) the Coen brothers wished their villain to also live in a Lautner house. They chose the Sheats residence, and made it look as if it is on the beach at Malibu, rather than on the Beverly Hills hillside where it is situated. The triangular coffers of the concrete roof plane house 750 small glass lights that mirror the glass tables of the built-in furniture that includes long couches on concrete plinths. The house is not only triangular in plan and structure, but in section as the roof plane rises at an angle. The Sheats residence appears in other films such as *Bandits*, (Barry Levinson, 2001), *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle* (McG, 2003), and Andrew Blake's *Unsheathed* (1996) that provides an unusual exterior view of the built-in waterfall.

In *Twilight*, (Robert Benton, 1998) private detective Paul Newman shoots villain James Garner in Lautner's Jacobsen House – a house so irresistibly evil, it turns a good cop bad. Not all Lautner's houses provide residences for villains, but they do feature prominently in film noir. *Body Double* (Brian De Palma, 1985) uses the Chemosphere as residence for the voyeuristic protagonist who becomes enmeshed in murder and intrigue.

None of this explains why the baddy always gets the best design. Despite Adolf Loos's assertion that "ornament is crime," in film, the opposite appears to be true. The look and style of modernist houses and architecture will continually re-appear in countless films, emphasizing the code of emotionless evil, as film continually quotes itself.

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