Modernist Malice

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In Hollywood's lexicon of visual style, modernist design is a persistent signifier of menace and malice—whether manifested in the stark, rectilinear forms of the International Style or the more biomorphic, futuristic shapes of mid-century designers. Cruelty and control form the artistic range of modernism's walk-on parts in films, despite the fact that its origins partly involved a utopian attempt to counter the horrors of social and economic inequality. Directors from Fritz Lang to Stanley Kubrick have used design and architecture as an ominous presence in the dramas that unfold on the screen—silent players that speak volumes about 20th-century villainy and vanity.

From the very beginning, modernism has been directly aligned with the machine, and the marriage of the two has become Central Casting's shorthand for any number of social pathologies. As if in direct response to Frank Lloyd Wright's proclamation, "My God is machinery, and the art of the future will be the expression of the individual artist through the thousand powers of the machine," Fritz Lang's Metropolis (1927) opens on an explicit visual connection between the two: a lingering shot of a rectilinear skyscraper superimposed with the pumping pistons of some infernal machine.

Joh Fredersen, the "Master of Metropolis"—the archetypal architect and urban planner writ large—lives in luxury in an aerie whose only view is the modernist ziggurats that slice the sky. There is no sign of nature from Fredersen's vantage point save a few scudding clouds—the only non rectilinear element in the entire cityscape. The urban engine is, of course, fed by the sweat and blood of an underclass that lives, quite literally, underground. As much as scenes in Fredersen's realm are marked by geometric regularity and orderliness, the subterranean realm seethes with disarray and insect chaos. The film's messianic character—the poor but beautiful Maria—points out Lang's main argument against modernism when she exclaims, "Between the mind that plans and the hands that build there must be a Mediator, and this must be the heart." The film's narrative arc follows the toppling of Fredersen's rarefied architectural atmosphere and the establishment of a workers' paradise.

Modernism's call-to-order may have originated from the desire to create mass-produced buildings and objects for the emancipated proletariat, but its rectilinear grid creates Caligari-reminiscent visual cages for the hapless characters who encounter it in the movies. Alfred Hitchcock, for one, consistently uses architectural styles to mirror internal states of mind and, in some instances, even employs them as instigators of conflict, confusion, and slipped identity. In an essay in Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock, Slavoj Zizek goes so far as to trace Norman Bates' psychotic split to his inability to locate himself between the anonymous modernist box of

Bates Motel and his mother's Gothic house on the hill—a state that is echoed in the chaos of Lang's Metropolis, which also lacks a mediation between head and heart, past and present. (Of course mediation—historical or otherwise—was never Modernism's goal. In fact, its Bauhaus practitioners dismissed all remnants of an architectural past as bourgeois and geared up a utopian effort to "start from zero.")

Hitchcock's North By Northwest (1959) is another suspense film that stars modernist design in the role of chaotic catalyst, whether in the sweeping plazas and marble masses of the United Nations, Henry Dreyfuss's luxury 20th-Century Limited train, or the foreign spy Philip Vandamm's cantilevered glass-and-redwood house near Mount Rushmore. (So enamored of mid- century style was Hitchcock that he even cast Eve Kendall, the chilly blonde double-agent, as an industrial designer.) It is against all three modernist backdrops that North By Northwest's lead character, the debonair but hapless Roger Thornhill, becomes literally trapped by architecture. The UN complex—perhaps the century's prime example of modernism as utopian new world order—becomes the scene of a murder and the beginning of Thornhill's escape north and west; the train provides the circumstance for the no-exit cat-and-mouse between Thornhill and the police, not to mention the initial erotic engagement with Kendall; and, finally, the gigantic L-shaped cantilever supports of Vandamm's house provide an opportunity for Thornhill to eavesdrop and get caught.

Often the association between arch-villainy and high-style architecture carries with it an underlying xenophobia—most often Anglo-American in nature. North By Northwest's Philip Vandamm, played by James Mason, is distinctly un-American in appearance and accent. Unlike the straight-shooting, square-shouldered Thornhill (Cary Grant), who inhabits the plush, comparatively baroque settings of the Plaza and upper-East-side apartments, Vandamm's villainous tastes seem to run continental. The interior of his glass house—reminiscent of those built by celebrated European émigrés like Richard Neutra, John Lautner, and Pierre Koenig—is far removed from the clubby atmosphere of late-50s Manhattan, susupiciously replete with low-slung coffee tables, geometric textiles and Danish-modern armchairs.

A more explicit association between xenophobia and design is made in 1960s-era James Bond films, which feature monomaniacal scoundrels of exquisite modernist tastes like the Sino-German scientist Dr. No, who inhabits a bunker on Jamaica made out of rough-hewn rock that's kitted out in austerely Miesian splendor. James Bond, for his part, is first and foremost a man of the British Empire. In the opening scenes of Dr. No (1962), the first Bond film ever made, he is seen at ease in green-walled, oak-floored flats amidst strictly Georgian appurtenances. In fact, the closer Bond gets to any kind of modernist design, the more in danger he seems to be, and the more malevolent a character, the more fastidiously modern his interior. An intermediary micro-villain, the geologist Professor R. J. Dent, literally falls somewhere between Bond's classicism and Dr. No's rectilinear strictness; his office exhibits a softer modernism reminiscent of the Eameses and certain Scandinavians. When Dent visits Dr. No's hideaway to warn him of Bond's presence on the island, he enters a marble chamber that houses one chair, one table, and a skylight that casts an oppressive gridded shadow—modernist minimalism at its most stringent and alienating.

If Dr. No presents modernism as the backdrop for high-stakes Cold War power plays, Stanley Kubrick uses it in A Clockwork Orange (1971) as the site of yobbish "ultraviolence." (By having Alex and his "droogs" speak a hybrid slang peppered with Russian words like "moloko" and "divotchka," A Clockwork Orange makes its own potentially xenophobic commentaries.) Design plays a vital role in evoking writer Anthony Burgess's filmic dystopia, which blends elements of 1960s Swinging London with near-futuristic urban visions.

Not surprisingly, one of the most brutal attacks in the movie takes place in a modernist manse in the countryside, all glass and extreme angles. The woman of the house, who is violated and then killed, is first seen emerging from a space-age white plastic pod—a latter-day Venus from the shell—to answer the door to a murderous Alex. Once inside, Alex literally uses the interior design as an accessory to crime. He dances on the curvilinear red furniture and positions himself to choreograph his victim's humiliation and death. In Kubrick's hands, Le Corbusier's aspirations for the clean, well-lit space as a "Machine for Living" quickly turn into a perverse machine for dying.

Modernism's most iconic object, the glass house, recently took center stage in an eponymously titled "taut psychological thriller" whose actions unfold in a sprawling house in the hills overlooking Malibu. Two tragically orphaned children are taken under the wings of guardians, whose modernist complex offers up certain fun in the sun but ends up being an accessory to sinister actions and hidden intentions. "In this perfect house," intones the movie trailer, "there are secrets she can't uncover." The hackneyed and less-than-subtle inverse relationship between the house's transparency and the guardians' opacity is played out in expressionistic visual tableaux featuring dramatic architectural elements like jagged, back-lit staircases, wall-sized glass windows, and jutting balconies. The film's paranoiac atmosphere is emphasized by the intricate surveillance system that is set up inside the house—an additional stripping away of privacy within a structure that offers little privacy in the first place. The nuclear family dynamic of mother-father-daughter-son is disrupted in The Glass House, and the household follows suit: Gone is that American myth, the domestic nest, that is impenetrable, protected, private.

Modernism in the movies is more often than not marked with a distinctly European brand of maniacal control—one that not only threatens to blow up the world, but also to take away the soft, padded accoutrements of Anglo-American domesticity. Tom Wolfe, in From Bauhaus to Our House, points out that

European proponents of modernism like Mies van der Rohe were largely guilty of perpetrating crimes of discomfort against America's white-collar class—the only demographic that could actually afford modernism's "worker architecture"—and American architects were all too glad to follow suit. "In the great corporate towers," he writes," the office workers shoved filing cabinets, desks, wastepaper baskets, potted plants up against the floor-to-ceiling sheets of glass, anything to build a barrier against the panicked feeling that they were about to pitch headlong into the streets."

Today, of course, such a description of architectural vertigo seems oddly prophetic of those images of desperation preceding the World Trade Center collapses. In this instance, however, Hollywood has gotten it all wrong. Disaster, when it came, was not doled out by a diabolical and dapper villain tricked out in modernist minimalism and equipped with high-tech gadgetry, but by people hiding out in caves armed with more disdain for Western bourgeois ideals than any Bauhausler could ever muster.

1 — Slavoj Zizek, "In His Bold Gaze My Ruin is Writ Large,'" in Slavoj Zizek, ed., Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock) (London and New York: Verso, 1992), pp. 231-32.
2 — Tom Wolfe, From Bauhaus to Our House (New York: Bantam Books, 1981), p. 61.

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