

MID-CENTURY MODERN DESIGN AS A CINEMATIC VISION OF DYSTOPIA BASED ON SELECTED EXAMPLES OF 21ST-CENTURY FILMS AND TV SERIES

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Mid-century modern design embraces a wide range of stylistic tendencies that emerged in post-war American aesthetics and was particularly pronounced within the realm of architecture and design.¹ The emergence of the style has multiple cultural foundations being a combination of progressive ideas taken directly from European modernism as well as new tendencies which were a direct answer to both the cultural and political situation after 1945. The text aims to investigate various uses of mid-century modern period pieces in the production design of films and TV series developed after the year 2000. The choice of time frame for the analysis was motivated by the desire to showcase the lasting connotation between the mid-century modern and contemporary visions of the future. Various takes on set design were selected in order to present a wide spectrum of narrations regarding the future and its cultural dimension in particular productions. For conciseness, the discussion was narrowed down to visions of dystopian future with the widest possible cross section of cinematic visions and concepts utilizing assorted disturbances within the concept of societal and cultural development in the near and distant future.

The modernist tradition, the dominant aesthetic trend in the United States after World War II, was present in the country thanks to the former leading Bauhaus figures who emigrated overseas due to the political situation

¹ D. Bradbury, *Mid-Century Modern Design: A Complete Sourcebook*, Thames & Hudson, London 2020, pp. 6–124.

in Europe.² The movement was coupled with political and propaganda activities related to the construction of post-war reality. To its supporters and many followers, it appeared to be the embodiment of modernity and progress, quickly becoming an aesthetic weapon deployed by the Americans on the frontline of the Cold War.³ The rational functionalism of modernist design was perfectly suited to the post-war societal needs of simple yet functional and affordable design, while becoming the synonym of new modernity in the United States. American designs rooted in the European tradition had developed various stylistic nuances ranging from Neutra's minimalism, to the Eamses' innovative approach and Nelson's oriental connotations, to Knoll's luxurious yet cold modernist revival.⁴ It is particularly important to underline that the pluralism of aesthetic tendencies present in that period was a direct reflection of global cultural and societal changes which were closely linked to scientific developments and a desire for progress.

Simultaneously to modernism, post-war design developed two other cultural and stylistic tendencies present in architecture and industrial design: Atomic Age design and Space Age design. The Atomic Age period began in 1945 with the Manhattan Engineer District (MED) Project aimed at using nuclear energy to produce weapons, followed by Operation Trinity—an experiment involving the controlled detonation of an atomic bomb, which is considered the beginning of a new era that ended at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s with the accident at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant in Pennsylvania in 1979 and the 1986 nuclear disaster at the Chernobyl power plant.⁵

The interest in the atom seen in the culture and design of the United States can be traced back to the 1940s. The popular narrative equated it

² A. Powers, *Bauhaus Goes West: Modern Art. And Design in Britain and America*, Thames & Hudson, London 2019, p. 188–255.

³ G. Castillo, *Cold War on the Home Front: The Soft Power of Midcentury Design*, University Of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis–London 2010, pp. 31–58.

⁴ L. Kaukas Havenhand, *Mid-Century Modern Interiors: The Ideas that Shaped Interior Design in America*, Bloomsbury Visual Arts, London–New York 2019, pp. 35–128.

⁵ R. Rhodes, *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*, Simon & Schuster, New York 2012, pp. 443–520.

with modernity and rapid progress in many fields. Drawings and models of the atom, although often incomprehensible to the wider audience, became a visual inspiration that was unambiguously associated with futuristic visions. After the beginning of the Atomic Age was announced in 1945 in *The New York Times*,⁶ mass-produced everyday objects began to be designed on three-dimensional atomic models. It should be noted, however, that Atomic Age design cannot be defined solely by its connotations with the particle, as it escapes obvious stylistic frameworks.

The launch of Sputnik 1 in 1957 triggered an increased interest in the theme of space exploration, which significantly influenced the design of the 1960s and the narrative surrounding it. This period is referred to as the Space Age and its design evolved naturally from the design of the Atomic Age, growing out of the same enthusiasm for technical innovation and rapid civilizational progress. Many motifs and shapes used by the designers of the time, such as the sphere or organic lines, were inspired by the information transmitted to the media by NASA, which the general public, aware of the Space Race, closely followed.⁷ Therefore, the two directions are commonly treated as synonymous, which is appropriate from the point of view of the aesthetics of form but ill-suited if you look at the narrative aspects they provide in terms of production design in films and TV series.

The use of mid-century modern design can be divided into several categories which clearly stand out in 21st-century filmmaking. The distinction is based on the various connotations which arose around the global concept of mid-century design. Some of them can be clearly linked to the image of the society presented in the advertisements of the 1950s and 1960s, the majority of which focused on the private life of the protagonists. Others were usually related to the rapid technological progress, particularly vivid within the narration of the Cold War, and associated with the workplace. In both cases, mid-century design brings different qualities to the narration, depending on what aesthetics it uses. Productions focused on the societal aspects spotlight a particular lifestyle or pursuit of the characters, which may be either traditional or set in the future, meaning that the designs are

⁶ H.M. Davis, "We Enter the New Era—the Atomic Age," *The New York Times*, 12.08.1945, p. 3.

⁷ P. Garner, *Sixties Design*, Taschen, Hong Kong-London-Köln 2008, pp. 94–99.

either similar to the contemporary ones or progressively modern, usually epitomized by Space Age⁸ forms, which give the impression of unfamiliarity and strangeness. The same scheme can be noticed in the case of workplace representations, which use the development of office spaces during the mid-century modern period as a reference to over-productivity, dehumanization, and anonymity. On top of the stylistic choices, the condition of the objects seen in dystopian films can also be meaningful. Visible signs of wear and tear in opposition to sterile and brightly lit environments may evoke the idea of chaos, destruction, and downfall.

One of the significant visions of dystopia presented in contemporary filmmaking is strictly related to the distorted image of office work. Those representations are usually formed in two visually opposite ways. The first type consists in bright spaces filled with state-of-the-art electronic equipment and furnishings, giving an almost laboratory-like impression. Those spaces are inhabited by characters who seem not to realize that the skin-deep “perfect” workplace is over-exploiting them by leaving them with no time and resources for any private life. On the other end of the spectrum, there are offices way past their heyday. The setting is dark, showing signs of wear and tear, dirt, and neglect, giving the impression of stagnation and obsolescence. This vision is usually reinforced by the overall disposition of the characters, who seem over-tired, uninspired, yet unable to leave the vicious circle of exploitation. Those two depictions of the near and/or distant future refer to the arguably most significant sphere of life and one which occupies the majority of human time: work. Being highly exploitive, with no visible chances for improvement, it becomes both a radical and traumatizing vision, however scarily relatable for the majority of viewers. The visual representations of the dystopian offices intentionally make use of the most iconic office designs which came into production in the 1960s America, being later popularized worldwide. In spite of the differences in the approach to design and the degree of involvement in the presentation of modernism as a prophetic style inside and outside of the USA, it is possible to notice the overall idea of glorification of rationalism and its

⁸ E.S. Rosenberg, “Far Out: The Space Age in American Culture,” in: S.J. Dick (ed.), *Remembering the Space Age: Proceedings of the 50th Anniversary Conference*, NASA, Washington, DC 2008, pp. 157–184, pp. 178–182.

close connection with modernity identified with progress in its broadest sense. Especially on the American soil, the modernist idyll was synonymous with a progressive welfare society, which was perfectly exemplified by the coupling of the aesthetics of the international style with the propaganda slogans of the Marshall Plan.

The beginning of the American interest in office space can be linked to the inter-war period, when the so-called white-collar jobs became a vast part of the economic and societal structure, particularly in big urban agglomerations. The post-war period in the United States was marked, on one hand, by the ideological tensions of the Cold War and, on the other, by the beginning of the economic growth of the generation of baby boomers. In-between these two states, the new design forms commonly known as mid-century design emerged. Characteristically, the layout of the office spaces of the 1950s was the direct reflection of the hierarchy of the “social and power structures.”⁹ When describing the societal roles of the office at the time, Christopher Budd used the example of Billy Wilder’s film *The Apartment*,¹⁰ which not only depicts the aesthetics of the office space at the time but also accentuates the privileged panorama of the white-collar class consisting exclusively of white males, with no representation of women and people of color. This aspect is particularly significant in terms of cinematic dystopia, often built upon the factor of discrimination, exclusion, and injustice, shown under the disguise of a highly modern work environment.

The most significant office model of the 1950s, developed by architects and designers working under the aegis of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill LLP (SOM), can serve as the antonym of the inclusive workspace. Its main goal was to highlight the hierarchy of the staff via the location, size, and the overall standard of individual units or rooms. In this model, individuality was reserved for those who have reached a certain level of power, while the ordinary employees’ spaces lacked any character, being purely subordinated to functionality and efficacy of work. This produced endless rooms filled with desks and/or cubicles, giving the impression of anonymity

⁹ C. Budd, “The Office: 1950 to the Present,” in: P. Antonelli (ed.), *Workspheres: Design and Contemporary Work Styles*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York 2001, pp. 26–35, p. 26.

¹⁰ *The Apartment*, directed by Billy Wilder, United Artists, 1960.

and never-ending work. The idea derives from such management theorists as Fred W. Taylor (Taylorism), who supported the linear approach to the workplace hierarchy based on the principles of constant control. “Sadly,” as Budd pointed out, “this approach also allowed for extreme cellularization, standardization, anonymity, and conformity, which run counter to its goal.”¹¹

One of the most interesting uses of mid-century design office hierarchy is the new Marvel series *Loki*, which explores the events happening to the god of mischief during his disappearance in the *Avengers: Endgame* film (fig. 1). The plot is focused on an organization called the Time Variance Authority, which supposedly exists between space and time.¹² As a bureaucratic body monitoring various timelines, it is presented as archaic, out-of-date, and stagnant, yet possessing certain state-of-the-art technology. The entire decor of the place uses late 1960s and early 1970s pieces of mostly American design to accentuate the feel of long-gone modernity and progress. However, the main office spaces inhabited by rank-and-file employees show many signs of wear, which evokes the feeling of stagnation and no visible prospects for a better future. The contrast is striking, given that the interiors are mostly furnished with the most futuristic mid-century pieces commonly associated with the Space Age and Atomic Age design. Their organic shapes and bright colors as well as the imaginary landscape behind the panoramic windows reinforce the sense of being in the future. However, the warm, dimmed light and the overall impression of attrition create the atmosphere of hopelessness and work-related oppression. The situation looks much different when it comes to the high-ranking officials’ quarters, which represent typical mid-century modernism,¹³ most often equated with cold professionalism. Its universality and anonymity, if used in a proper way, can conceal any traces

¹¹ C. Budd, op. cit., p. 30.

¹² *Loki*, written by Michael Waldron, Disney+, 2021, ep. 1–10.

¹³ H. Stoilas, “Loki’s production designer on the Modernist inspiration behind the show’s stunning visuals,” *The Art Newspaper*, published online 10.07.2021, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2021/07/10/lokis-production-designer-on-the-modernist-inspiration-behind-the-shows-stunning-visuals> [accessed 23.04.2022].

of personal life of the characters, adding the desired element of uncertainty.¹⁴

The research on innovative office interior design, linked to the emerging idea of the human factor, was conducted at Herman Miller, one of the leading design companies of the time.¹⁵ The designs were developed in collaboration with furniture companies and the US State Department, using advanced technology and productivity-enhancing strategies to test the new solutions and military technology before they



Figure 1. *Loki*, 2021, production design: Kasra Farahani

were implemented by the intelligence agencies.¹⁶ In the case of Herman Miller, the leading figures responsible for the new office design were Robert Propst and Ray and Charles Eames, all working within a separate unit called Herman Miller Research Corporation. Propst's research on office behavior and productivity helped identify the behaviors which were the most desired within the office space. The conclusion was to make movement part of the work environment in order to increase the overall welfare and productivity of workers. The design, being a joint effort of Robert Propst and George Nelson, was the first modular furniture system, which allowed customization

¹⁴ For more on the use of modernist aesthetics in contemporary cinematography see: C. Oppenheim, A. Gollin, *Lair: Radical Homes and Hideouts of Movie Villains*, Tra Publishing, Miami 2019.

¹⁵ See: A. Auscherman, S. Grawe, L. Ransmeier, *Herman Miller: A Way of Living*, Phaidon Press, London and New York 2019.

¹⁶ R.M. Daniel, "Herman Miller's Action Office: Corporate Interiors in the Cold War," *Interiors: Design*, Vol. 6(1), 2015, pp. 5–20, p. 8. DOI 10.2752/204191115X14218559960114.

and personalization to meet the needs of the workers.¹⁷ It was also an answer to the German Bürolandschaft: an office landscape which was meant to free the employees from closed cubicles or raw layout of desks. As far as the theoretical background is concerned, “the Action Office was undoubtedly indebted to the widely published writings of management theorist Peter Drucker. In Drucker’s 1959 influential *Landmarks of Tomorrow*, he argued that the early twentieth-century Taylorist paradigm of office worker-as-paper-processing-automaton was obsolete. For Drucker, the contemporary office worker of the Cold War era was not a robot but could better be described as a ‘knowledge worker’ whose principal tasks were to organize information and choreograph decisions.”¹⁸ In 1967 the company launched an improved version of the system, Action Office II, which allowed for further customization and created more privacy when desired thanks to light and flexible partition walls. The most significant part of the system was the science-based instructions which allowed to implement heavily researched design principles into interior design. A distorted idea of the Action Office II system emerged as a result of using counterfeits which lacked the scientific backbone that was crucial for the quality of work. However, the production designs of many dystopian films and TV series implement the global concept based on its visual aspects. The latest example drawing on the aesthetic strategies of the 1960s concept is the thriller TV series *Severance*¹⁹ based on the idea of separating work-related memories from those connected to private life (fig. 2). The work environment is very austere, focused on productivity, yet based on the principles of welfare developed in the 1960s. The undertones of green, which from the psychological standpoint is considered the color of calmness and relaxation, are meant to give a delusive impression of a place designed to prioritize human needs. The set designer for the production Jeremy Hindle drew inspiration from the 1967 French comedy *Playtime*,²⁰ which used a similar concept of work optimization, as well as from The John

¹⁷ On account of its futuristic style, Action Office I was featured in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, written and directed by Stanley Kubrick, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1968.

¹⁸ R.M. Daniel, op. cit., p. 10.

¹⁹ *Severance*, written by Dan Erickson and directed by Ben Stiller, Apple TV+, 2022, ep. 1–9.

²⁰ *Playtime*, written and directed by Jacques Tati, Specta Films 1967.

Deere World Headquarters in Moline, Illinois designed by Eero Saarinen.²¹ The idea of the ideal workplace which might be sufficient to replace other aspects of life has been a recurring vision of dystopia, having an even stronger message when combined with the state-of-the-art interior design. Given that the progressive ideas of the 1960s have forever shaped the way office spaces are designed, it remains the primary vision for cinematic productions. As Hindle pointed out, those concepts came from a place of genuine concern: “[A]ll those companies in the 50s and 60s, they had so much style, they had the most beautiful spaces, and they were proud of what they were doing. They believed in it and their aesthetic was part of that. It was about power and control and commerce and everything rolled into one.”²² In this case, the issue of power, namely control over the employees, was used to establish a distorted vision of the future. The fact that the set design does not feature pieces genuinely made in the golden age of office design but objects that resemble them is dictated by the plot, according to which all the furniture was manufactured by the mysterious company Lumon to deprive the protagonists of any contact with the outside world,²³ deepening their feeling of entrapment and isolation.

Another way how mid-century modern design is used within the cinematic context of a dystopian future revolves around the everyday life of the characters. The domestic sphere of movie heroes or villains most often offers non-verbal clues regarding their nature, interests, relationships, etc. For this reason, the interior design is meticulously crafted to reveal a somehow hidden or not fully exposed side of the protagonist by showing their most personal and intimate environment. Entering a person’s home sphere, we come closer to understanding the intricacy of their true character

²¹ R. Martin, “What Is a Material,” in: E-L. Pelkonen, D. Albrecht (eds.), *Eero Saarinen: Shaping the Future*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 2006, pp. 69–82, 69–73.

²² W. Chapman, “How ‘Severance’ Turned the Workplace Into a Demented Playground,” *Variety*, published online 1.04.2022, <https://variety.com/2022/artisans/news/severance-production-design-apple-1235220628> [accessed 23.04.2022].

²³ E. Stefansky, “How *Severance* Made Its Office Prison Look so Inviting,” *Thrillist*, published online 24.02.2022, <https://www.thrillist.com/entertainment/nation/severance-apple-tv-plus-set-design> [accessed 23.04.2022].



Figure 2. *Severance*, 2022, production design: Jeremy Hindle

which may otherwise be concealed behind the facade of appearances. A very vivid example is the science fiction thriller *Ex Machina*,²⁴ whose two main characters, a programmer by the name of Caleb Smith and his employer Nathan Bateman, a CEO of a technology company, meet in the latter's house to conduct a test involving artificial intelligence (fig. 3). Serving as Bateman's home is Juvet Landscape Hotel designed by Jensen & Skodvin Architects.²⁵ From the architectural standpoint, the building combines two opposite qualities: deep connection to nature as well as stark modernity and a contemporary feeling. Situated in the woods, in the vicinity of rocky mountains and a waterfall, the hotel stands out from the landscape. At the same time, it gives an odd feeling of connection with nature through panoramic windows and massive rock formations which have been coherently integrated into the architectural structure. It is worth noticing that modernist houses, mainly belonging to film villains, do not usually bear traces of such duality. They are meant to create an austere atmosphere which feels alienating and strange precisely because the lack of any connection

²⁴ *Ex Machina*, written and directed by Alex Garland, Universal Pictures, 2014.

²⁵ K.O. Ellefsen, "Detoured Installations: The Policies and Architecture of the Norwegian National Tourist Routes Project," *Architectural Design*, Vol. 85(2), March/April 2015, pp. 64–76, 73–74, DOI 10.1002/ad.1878.

to nature. In this case, the architectural design seamlessly combines industrial and natural elements to highlight the complexity of human nature entering the uncharted territory of robotics and humanoids. Designed by the tech billionaire, the female humanoid Ava quickly becomes the centre of the story, provoking questions on consciousness, ethics, and finally the fine distinction between humans and androids, which is becoming less and less obvious. The same level of duality and contrast was achieved by the film's set designer Mark Digby, who married striking mid-century modern designs, futuristic projects of the 21st century, and Scandinavian design classics. In his own words, "it ended up being a mid-century classic with a Scandinavian tilt. I think for both the purity and the simpleness, but also the effectiveness of Scandinavian design. And it was driven by the fact that we were in a Scandinavian country. You're reminded of it although the film is supposed to be set in Alaska. But I think much of the design is in empathy with that sort of landscape, hence it fits very well."²⁶ The eclectic combination of futuristic-looking design and commonly used pieces associated with cosiness and nature produced the visual tension reflecting the dystopian plot.

A different take on the relationship between people and artificial intelligence was presented in the 2013 film *Her*.²⁷ The story revolves around Theodore Twombly, a man who works for a company specializing in fabricating emotional letters for people who are unable to express their



Figure 3. *Ex Machina*, 2014, production design: Mark Digby

²⁶ M. Fairs, "Hard shiny surfaces are for the bad guys' says *Ex Machina* production designer," *DeZeen*, published online 22.05.2015, <https://www.dezeen.com/2015/05/22/ex-machina-set-designer-mark-digby-interview-alex-garland-juvet-landscape-hotel-norway-jensen-skodvin-architects> [accessed 21.04.2022].

²⁷ *Her*, written and directed by Spike Jonze, Annapurna Pictures, 2013.

feelings (fig. 4). The entire set design focuses on accentuating emotions through colors and forms. Theodore's apartment combines cold features such as large windows with an urban view with warm-toned wooden floors and many light points, which shows the contrast between his current life and certain reminiscences of the past. The furnishing operates in a similar way, with mid-century modernist pieces, mainly Herman Miller designs, coming in warm colors and with leather or soft fabric upholstery.²⁸ The entire story, focusing on the question of whether it is possible to sustain a fulfilling relationship with AI, is set in almost flawless interiors. The lack of reality mirrors the protagonist's experiences. Flashbacks of Twombly's past look familiar and cosy, while his current attempts to have a meaningful relationship take place in a very bright setting that lacks the element of familiarity. Design pieces seen in those environments are carefully selected to look both cosy and casual, yet make a futuristic impression due to their unusual forms which did not make it to the global mainstream. It is worth noticing that the image of "perfection," so characteristic for dystopian visions, is often achieved by the overuse of light and bright colors, which might feel sterile and laboratory-like at times. To counterbalance that impression pastels and gentle shades are usually added, often resulting in sets that seem slightly cartoonish, yet beautiful. A very similar effect was achieved in the dystopian vision of a seemingly perfect life, the latest adaptation of *The Stepford Wives*.²⁹

Yet another production set in the near future and exploring the potential harmful effects of current technology is the British anthology series *Black Mirror*.³⁰ Every episode tells a separate story whose starting point is an over-development of present-day technologies or ideas. Its visual familiarity with the present makes the dystopian vision of near future relatable to contemporary audiences. The production design of the series seamlessly mixes numerous mid-century classics with time-neutral projects (fig. 5). The incorporation of stand-out pieces referring to the futuristic tendencies of the 1960s creates the dual feeling of familiarity and strangeness desired

²⁸ A. Karaoghlanian, M.J. Ahi, *The Architecture of Cinematic Spaces: by Interiors*, Intellect Ltd, Bristol 2020, pp. 73–80.

²⁹ *The Stepford Wives*, directed by Frank Oz, Paramount Pictures, 2004.

³⁰ *Black Mirror*, written and created by Charlie Brooker, Channel 4/Netflix, 2011–2019, ep. 1–22.



Figure 4. *Her*, 2013, production design: Keith "K. K." Barrett



Figure 5. *Black Mirror*, 2011–2019, production design: Joel Collins

in the context of dystopia. Variations in employing the design pieces can be observed between the episodes. The Space Age design is mainly used within sterile, unfamiliar interiors to emphasize fear and coldness, while mid-century modernism conjures up a progressive, yet homey vision of everyday life thanks to the use of such popular materials as wood and fabrics. The clash of the two opposite tendencies provides the desired level of aesthetic coherency, while allowing for the differentiation required by the plot of particular episodes.

Two visually contrasting visions of a dystopian future are also presented in the live-action series *Cowboy Bebop*³¹ based on the anime TV series under the same title. The plot revolves around Spike Spiegel, a bounty hunter and a former member of the Red Dragon Crime Syndicate, who tries to escape his past (fig. 6). The locations he visits as well as the eponymous Bebop spaceship are meticulously designed to show the future as a remnant of the glorious past. This was achieved by creating an environment consisting of worn-down mid-century modern designs, mainly Atomic Age-centered, with visible signs of handmade alterations. The entire set design points to the downfall of a once flourishing society that is currently taken over by lawlessness and anarchy. Most design pieces incorporated into the set design resemble iconic objects produced by such leading companies as Knoll Inc.³² or Hermann Miller.³³ The fact that they are commonly known and became deeply rooted in the tradition of visual representation of the future made it possible to evoke the feeling of nostalgia, which has become very common in filmmaking of recent years.³⁴ The worn-down pieces, once associated with a highly progressive future, became symbols of decline, stagnation, and hopelessness, while remaining somehow safe and familiar. The same concept was applied at the spaceship, where old nostalgic elements were used to build the cosy atmosphere of a safe harbor for the characters.

The house of Spiegel's nemesis, Vicious, a high-ranking member of the Syndicate remaining in an abusive relationship with Spiegel's former lover, is full of stark contrasts. The apartment was designed to highlight the old-world glamour, featuring high ceilings, a decorative fireplace, and stained-glass windows to give the impression of past glory that is only available to those who are in the position of power. The furniture includes Danish modern pieces designed by Hans Wegner representing an austere

³¹ *Cowboy Bebop*, written by Christopher Yost, Netflix, 2021, ep. 1–10.

³² D. Albrecht, E. Pelkonen (eds.), *Eero Saarinen: Shaping the Future*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2006, pp. 246–265.

³³ A.J. Pulos, *The American Design Adventure*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 1988, pp. 50–110.

³⁴ K.D. Tembo, "Carrying That Weight: Shinichiro Watanabe's *Cowboy Bebop* and Nostalgia," in: K. Pallister (ed.), *Netflix Nostalgia: Streaming the Past on Demand*, Lexington Books, London 2019, pp. 219–234.



Figure 6. *Cowboy Bebop*, 2021, production design: Gary MacKayep

yet sophisticated style that is a mix of noble, natural materials and avant-garde forms. Scandinavian classics in this context are the synonym of the old order, resembling the distant forms characteristic for futuristic aesthetics. The refined shapes and luxurious interiors standing in contrast with the outer world are used to create the impression of fear just like any environment which is too sterile and proper to fit into the given reality. Overall, *Cowboy Bebop* is a very good example of how design pieces from the same historic period can evoke various feelings, from nostalgia to fear.

While discussing the luxurious aspect of mid-century modern design, it is worth mentioning that certain period pieces, particularly the high-end designs which did not make it to the mainstream, often serve the purpose of accentuating a character's position of power. Unique shapes in combination with unrealistic surroundings create a mystical yet universally relatable setting. The most vivid recent example of such production design was *Blade Runner 2049*.³⁵ The dystopian vision of the future festering with social conflict and slavery is painted with contrasts and visually diversified scenography (fig. 7). Artifort's pieces of furniture of extravagant forms situated in an oddly lit empty space create an unfamiliar and unfriendly environment inhabited by the high-ranking members of the upper class. The same concept was

³⁵ *Blade Runner 2049*, directed by Denis Villeneuve, written by Hampton Fancher and Michael Green, Warner Bros. Pictures 2017.



Figure 7. *Blade Runner 2049*, 2017, production design: Dennis Gassner

implemented within the set design of the *Maze Runner*³⁶ trilogy, where the headquarters of the World Catastrophe Killzone Department (WCKD) are presented as highly futuristic, within the realm of many mid-century modern references, in opposition to the low-key facilities where the characters seek refuge.

Mid-century modern design as a spectrum of various stylistic tendencies was vastly popular in post-war America. Because of its primary focus on progressive ideas, new materials, and forms, it was broadly associated with the design of the future. The cultural and societal moods fueled by the Space Race and the Cold War propaganda, and closely linked with the forward-thinking aesthetics, produced a design movement that was innovative and, in certain aspects, ahead of its time. Despite never becoming the golden standard of interior design, some of the designs remained familiar thanks to the mass media and are often used as a visual reference to the future.³⁷ Cinematic visions of a dystopian future are more often than not filled with mid-century modern pieces. This is possible thanks to their previously mentioned familiarity, which makes the plot more real and relatable.

³⁶ *Maze Runner: The Scorch Trials*, directed by Wes Ball, 20th Century Fox, 2015.

³⁷ P. Kirkham, S.A. Lichtman, "Introducing Screen Interiors: From Country Houses to Cosmic Heterotopias," in: P. Kirkham, S.A. Lichtman (eds.), *Screen Interiors: From Country Houses to Cosmic Heterotopias*, Bloomsbury Visual Arts, London and New York, 2021, pp. 1–30, 20–21.

The most pronounced variation can be observed in the way mid-century pieces are used to portray the characters—their position, life situation, and most of all importance to the plot. The hierarchy goes from sterile and pristine modernist pieces seen in high-end locations, to familiar yet modern Space Age pieces which are often chosen for domestic environments, to worn-out props and run-down interiors that offer vague glimpses of their former glory. This strategy makes it possible to depict social hierarchies and portray the onscreen world with the use of the retro-futuristic mid-century modern aesthetics.

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- Figure 1. *Loki*, 2021, production design: Kasra Farahani, photo Marvel Studios via www.theverge.com/22525909/loki-director-kate-herron-interview [accessed 25.04.2022].
- Figure 2. *Severance*, 2022, production design Jeremy Hindle, photo Apple TV+ via <https://www.thrillist.com/entertainment/nation/severance-apple-tv-plus-set-design> [accessed 25.04.2022].
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Abstract

The text aims to investigate various uses of the mid-century modern period pieces in the production design of films and TV series developed after the year 2000 and presenting various visions of a dystopic future. The choice of time frame for the analysis was motivated by the desire to showcase the connotations between the mid-century modern and 21st-century visions of the future which can be broadly described as retrofuturistic. On account of its primary focus on progressive ideas, new materials and forms, mid-century modern has always been broadly associated with the design of the future. The author discusses various takes on set design

to highlight a wide spectrum of narrations regarding the future and its cultural dimension in selected productions incorporating iconic mid-century design pieces and, more importantly, the non-verbal message they carry.

Keywords: design; mid-century modern design; retrofuturism; culture; film; TV series