DEMOCRATIC MOVEMENT AND THE SPACES OF AMERICAN MODERNITY IN EARLY 1930S WOMAN’S FILMS

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Abstract: In this article, I deploy a chronotropic analysis of early 1930s woman’s films to flesh out semiotic and phenomenological representations of American modernity through the figure of the modern woman. I emphasize how concrete film spaces—the private spaces of modern apartments and the public and work spaces of hotels, office buildings, and department stores—function as expressions of the modern woman chronotope in both semiotic—as producers and conveyors of meaning—and phenomenological senses—permitting a certain way of being. This will serve to show how a progressive vision of American modernity was articulated through the figure of the modern woman in early 1930s Hollywood films, and that as a chronotope, the modern woman was intimately linked with a hopeful conception of American democracy.

Keywords: woman's films, American modernity, 1930s, Bakhtin, classical Hollywood, set designs

In a recent article on women's relationships to cityscapes in early 1930s films, Lucy Fischer claims that, although women have long been associated with
the city—cities often being referred to as feminine—“modern architecture and design conspire to erase or expel the female element from the metropolitan scene.” For Fischer, Busby Berkeley’s films, among others, display an alarming concern with the elimination of women from the modern city. An “Art Deco aesthetic” was used by men—“the authors of Art Deco”—as a way of controlling women’s bodies and sexuality. To support this claim, Fischer puts forward a “gendered” conception of space and, more specifically, of Art Deco architecture and design. While straight lines, angularity, and geometric shapes are associated with masculine rationality, curvilinear shapes, ornaments, and decorative flourishes are associated with the feminine. Using select films, Fischer then goes on to show how modern apartments and workspaces are inhospitable environments to women who are in constant danger of being sexually harassed. These living and workspaces, moreover, are typically located on top of high-rise buildings (a phallic symbol if there ever was one), from which women, particularly “loose women,” are often shown either jumping to their death or being pushed off by mobs of men. These deaths, she argues, alleviate both the desire and anxiety the woman on screen caused the male subject. “In the 1930s,” Fischer concludes, “filmmakers’ . . . viewpoints did not bode well for the modern urban woman.”

While Fischer makes a convincing case, a close look at Depression-era films shows that the high-rise building is associated with both female and male characters’ deaths. Indeed—and despite the Hays office’s explicit recommendations against such imagery—Secrets of a Secretary (George Abbott, 1931), Manhattan Tower (Frank Strayer, 1932), The Miracle Woman (Frank Capra, 1931), Counselor at Law (William Wyler, 1933), and Employees’ Entrance (Roy Del Ruth, 1933) all feature men committing or trying to commit suicide by throwing themselves off tall buildings. Most explicitly, the 1933 poverty-row A Shriek in the Night (directed by Albert Ray, starring Ginger Rogers) opens with an unusually graphic view—and scream—of a millionaire falling to his death from his modern penthouse balcony. These spectacular deaths were no doubt inspired by the actual wave of suicides that occurred following the 1929 stock market crash, when jumping from bridges and buildings became New York’s second-most popular form of suicide after gas poisoning. Perhaps more fiction than fact, the imagery of droves of Wall Street speculators and bankrupted bankers lining up to jump to their deaths spread very quickly immediately after the Crash.

Fischer’s gendered partitioning of both space (public-masculine/private-feminine) and Art Deco aesthetics (functional and angular: masculine/or ornamental and curvilinear: feminine) is, I believe, questionable. While Joel Sanders makes a similar point in his study of masculine architecture (1996), Katharine McClinton is careful to avoid the dichotomy. Rather, McClinton posits a distinction between two major approaches: “the traditionalists who tried to adapt the forms and techniques of the past to the demands of modern life and the innovators who rejected the past and accepted the materials and possibilities
of the modern machine.”

Fischer’s analysis of the relationship between women and modernity is premised on a conflation of these two trends identified by McClinton, namely between Art Deco proper and modernism. Like modernism, Art Deco was associated with a rich spectrum of ideas and values. Unlike modernism—with its emphasis on novelty—Art Deco entertained a more direct (if playful) relationship with previous architectural movements. A distinction between Art Deco and modernism is key to understanding on-screen women’s relationships to American modernity, as the modern woman is strongly associated with modern architecture and design and contrasted with Art Deco. Unlike Art Deco, which constantly recalls through its ornaments traditional conceptions of femininity, modern designs set a blank, open stage that allows female characters to express and display their individuality as equals.

In his early essay “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity,” Mikhail Bakhtin claims that spatial configurations are manifestations of the protagonist, that they are part of the “whole of the hero.” In my discussions of woman’s films, I emphasize how concrete film spaces—the private spaces of modern apartments and the public and work spaces of hotels, office buildings, and department stores—function as expressions of the “modern woman” chronotope in both the semiotic sense—as producers and conveyors of meaning—as well as in the phenomenological sense—permitting a certain way of being. In the cinematic representation of such spaces we can see the emergence of a public sphere, in the sense described in the political philosophy of Hannah Arendt. A progressive vision of American modernity was articulated through the figure of the modern woman in early 1930s Hollywood films, and, as such a chronotope, the modern woman was intimately linked with a hopeful, progressive conception of American modernity.

AMERICAN MODERNITY AND MODERN SET DESIGN

To claim that the modern woman is a chronotope is to argue that she is the structuring spatiotemporal knot around which a number of films from the early 1930s are organized, that she possesses concrete and distinct socio-temporal markers, and that she functions as the physical ground for the articulation of abstract ideas. It also means that, as a character, she is intimately tied to the spatiotemporal dimensions of the film, which are, as Bakhtin puts it, “self-manifestations” of her. A chronotopic analysis of the modern woman therefore goes beyond an analysis of her visual and narrative characteristics and looks at the spaces and temporal coordinates of modernity her presence generates. Rather than seeing architecture and set designs as spaces—stages—where human subjectivity is enacted and performed, chronotopic analysis sees it as an expression of the character itself. Special attention must therefore be paid to
how modern spaces were created in order to permit the enactment of modern subjectivity.

In *Designing Dreams*, Donald Albrecht provides an in-depth account of architectural trends in the United States and Europe from the 1920s to the 1940s as they intersect with their incarnations on screen.¹⁴ Like McClinton, Albrecht shows that there was never a consensus when it came to a definition of modernism, even among modern architects. Perhaps because *movement* is central to modernist architecture, the question of *direction* never ceased to arise. Albrecht nevertheless situates the emergence of modernist architecture at the 1927 Exhibition of the *Deutscher Werkbund* in Stuttgart, where modern architects were the sole exhibitors, and the following International Exhibition at New York’s MOMA in 1932, when modern architecture was fully embraced in the United States. The overarching philosophy guiding the modern style was a desire to bring architecture into the machine age and to improve working and living environments through functionality. By removing walls and favouring large windows as well as generous and natural lighting, modernist architects sought to create a feeling of lightness, freedom, and “openness” for their inhabitants. Walls, pillars, and other structural elements are designed so as to appear to float in weightlessness. These qualities were explicitly understood in gendered terms, as indicated by Sheldon Cheney in his 1930 book *The New World Architecture*:

> Many times I have mentioned “openness” as an ideal of the new home building. I use the word with more than a spatial connotation. It seems to me clear that there is going on a *freeing process* in regard to both our physical and our mental lives. While the old walled-in house, the essentially castle-refuge sort of structure, is giving way before less-confined living space, women are discard- ing most of their clothes, and human minds are freeing themselves slowly of old superstitions, old limiting religions, old narrowly selfish motives. This is a general coming-forth—which seems to me calculated for the better health and the greater happiness of mankind.¹⁵

Modernism was conceived as a cosmopolitan, egalitarian, and progressive hope in a future where work is valued and working and living environments are pleasant and healthy: “Modernists argued that the new age required nothing less than excellent design for everyone.”¹⁶ A pleasant and healthy environment, in the context of confined urban cities bursting with life and crowded with people, noise, and pollution is one that is understood as “open,” free from excessive decorations and “de-cluttered.” In many ways, this cluttering was central to Art Deco, which originated in the early 1900s and culminated at the Paris *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes* of 1925. “Art Deco” as it
came to be known, “was essentially a conservative style,” claims Albrecht. In fact, “many Art Deco designers transformed late-eighteenth-century neo-classical models into generously proportioned furniture in rare and exotic materials such as ivory, heavily veined wood, tortoiseshell, and lizard skins.” This emphasis on luxurious materials and decorative collectibles clashes with modernism’s no-nonsense functionalism and its utopian visions of a classless society. Early advocates of modern architecture such as Adolf Loos and Le Corbusier violently attacked Art Deco’s “superfluous,” “diseased,” “parasitic,” and “degenerate” ornamentations. A symptom of a society’s primitive state, “no ornament can any longer be made today by anyone who lives on our cultural level.” So while Art Deco and modernism often intertwined in the mid-20s—creating what is often called “déco moderne”—modernism defined itself in large part in opposition to and as a departure from Art Deco sensibility. This is particularly significant in the context of a study of American modernism because extravagant Art Deco remained associated with the Old World of Europe. For Terry Smith, Art Deco was a short-lived foreign import in the US until it developed its own “American” modern designs centering on “novelty, speed and change.” “Although the explicit distinction between Art Deco and modernism was not made until the later 1930s,” Smith writes, “these differences were quickly spotted.” While the United States declined to participate in the Paris Exhibition, Herbert Hoover judging they could not fulfill the organizers’ stipulations that “all items displayed be modern” after 1927, it fully embraced a modern style whose industrious nature aligned perfectly with American sensibilities.

Alastair Duncan posits a similar distinction when admitting that Art Deco style “defies precise definition.” The original iconography, which included “stylized bouquets of flowers, young maidens, geometric patterns including zigzags, chevrons, and lightning bolts, and the ubiquitous biche (doe)” and other various influences from “high fashion, Egyptology, the Orient, tribal Africa and the Ballets Russes” were superseded, after 1925, by “the growing impact of the machine” and, after 1930, by streamlining. Futuristic streamlining invoked speed and movement: its “visual message was the promise of smooth sailing through the elimination of friction; its aim was to sweep through resistance of all kinds.” For streamlining advocate Norman Bel Geddes, it “functioned as a metaphor for progress, prosperity, and modernity.” In France, Duncan claims, Art Deco “manifested itself emotionally; with exuberance, colour and playfulness. In the rest of Europe, and later in the United States, its interpretation was more intellectual, based on concepts of functionalism and economy.” Although Art Deco was an important influence on American architecture in the 1920s and 1930s, its details and ornamentations were a constant reminder of the movement’s European origins. Much like in Europe, Art Deco and modernism overlapped and cohabitated for several years, some architects (Frank Lloyd Wright, for instance) working in both styles. “The modern,” Lary May concludes in his
discussion on theatre design, “presented a cultural critique of the old order as well as a model for the future.”27 We can easily see how Art Deco and modernism entertain very different relationships not only with history but also with temporality: Art Deco is turned toward the past, while modernism looks toward a utopian, always-changing future.

On a vernacular level, the introduction and dissemination of Art Deco and modernist design in the United States spread through the movies and movie palaces. Benefitting from the influence of German émigrés, the movie sets and fashions embraced Art Deco designs as early as the 1920s. Once part of film, the connotations associated with modern sets and designs transcended what modern architects had envisioned. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, motivated by their own aesthetic inclinations, but also mandated to represent their studio’s signature aesthetic, the look by the specific film’s genre, and convey the right level of authenticity, “art directors created a free-wheeling eclecticism that borrowed liberally, and often simultaneously, from traditional and contemporary sources of architecture and design.”28 The architects’ and set designers’ modernist visions encountered resistance and were confronted with prejudices and preconceptions—often their own—regarding the nature of the public and the private realms. Modern architecture, Paramount’s set designer Hans Dreier believed, has

its place in the world of today, particularly in America. For skyscrapers, broadcasting stations, steamships, factories, warehouses and other structures of an industrial and impersonal nature, having few ties with the past, Contemporary design and material are indicated. The more functional the better. But in the home, the emotions as well as the intelligence have their place. As an institution it is ageless, and its design should express the many ties and facets of its essentially intimate role in our lives.29

Dreier’s comments call attention to the implicit association of modernity with the public realm, change, and the fluidity of the flow of time and, on the other hand, of the home with an “ageless,” unchanging stability. Indeed, according to this view, the essence of the home lies in the stability it provides in an ever-changing world. We can see in Dreier’s comments—and in his desire to cordon off the home—a certain resistance to modernity. As a repository of patterns, the home is a “familiar point of reference in time, space, and society” furnishing, ideally, a solid anchor to people.30 As such, it can fulfill deep-seated emotional needs.

The cinematic modern woman’s domestic interiors, however, rarely shied away from adopting modern designs. This is particularly the case for unmarried, successful women. In Blondie Johnson (Ray Enright, 1933), the apartment that Blondie (Joan Blondell) shares with Mae (Mae Busch) and Lulu...
(Toshia Mori) exemplifies modern architecture’s penchant for large, open spaces and colossal windows (Figure 1). Both Alison Drake’s (Ruth Chatterton) office and home in Female (Michael Curtiz, 1929) exemplify functional and elegant modern design. As seen in Figure 2, Drake’s office opens onto a massive window through which her car factory can be viewed. Her home—Frank Lloyd Wright’s Ennis-Brown house—displays similar horizontal lines with high ceilings and an absence of partitions (Figure 3). Susan Lenox’s (Greta Garbo) lavish rooftop apartment also displays openness, as no room is ever closed off, every partition being thinly veiled at best (Figure 4). High ceilings, a rooftop balcony, and large windows opening onto the cityscape (Figures 5 and 6) further contribute to people’s free-flowing movement within a space that seems to hover over the city. The “storefront aesthetic” is probably at play here, as movie sets came to be seen as models for home renovation and decoration.31 To borrow Mary Ann Doane’s words—written in a different context and pertaining to female spectacle—in these instances, the frame can be said to function as a shop window.32 The transparency offered by the glass partitions and the absence of walls certainly offered viewers a better view of the products and designs. However, these also functioned to highlight the modern open-mindedness of their inhabitants—usually women—and their desire to see and be seen. This, in return, need not be associated with female narcissism. Rather, it signals women’s willingness to break the Victorian taboos regarding women’s bodies and the chastity and modesty that was expected of them.

America’s democratizing spirit and its ideal of a class-free society reached far and wide, including daily, intimate life. Of this, Daniel J. Boorstin believes, we find no example more vivid or neglected than the story of glass, which came to be used as windows and transparent walls.33 Once large flat-glass sheets became sturdier, mass-produced, and cheap, “glass was now revealed on a grand scale as a medium that could erase old barriers”; “the consequence for everyday experience was to give a new ambiguity to where people were and to confuse the boundaries of place.”34 What was once a “fragile luxury material of the Older World became a sturdy medium” of democratization. As such, it became a “symbol of the modern American spirit” as it removed the “sharp visual division between indoors and outdoors” and “blurr[ed] the distinctions among people.”35 This way of conceiving architecture is congruent with Henri Lefebvre’s double understanding of space as semiotic and phenomenological.36 A result of “past actions, social space is what permits fresh actions to occur, while suggesting others and prohibiting yet others.”37 Lefebvre argues that the production of space is primarily about performances of power through spatial practice, representations, and representational spaces.38 In phenomenological terms, these become perceived (perçu), conceived (conçu), and lived (vécu). Although one might be tempted simply to divide spaces into types (an urban development map of a park would be classified as a representation of space, the act of walking...
Figure 1: Blondie Johnson’s living room. 
Source: *Blondie Johnson* (1933)

Figure 2: Alison Drake’s office. 
Source: *Female* (1929)

Figure 3: Picture window in bedroom. 
Source: *Female* (1929)

Figure 4: See-through partitions in *Susan Lenox*. 
Source: *Her Rise and Fall* (1931)

Figure 5: Susan’s rooftop apartment lobby. 
Source: *Her Rise and Fall* (1931)

Figure 6: Bedroom overlooking the city. 
Source: *Her Rise and Fall* (1931)
or using the park on a daily basis would be a social practice, etc.), Lefebvre specifies that all three dimensions are interconnected: space is at once perceived, conceived, and lived.39

Archie Mayo’s Street of Women (1932) contrasts the modern woman’s apartment with the older, society woman’s home. We first meet Natalie (Kay Francis) as Larry Baldwin comes (to what appears to be) home following a visit of the Baldwin Skyscraper, whose construction is visible through the apartment’s large window. Natalie, we soon find out, is a women’s fashion designer who owns her company. Both partners seem equally successful, and their ease, shared interests, and equal professional determination results in what appears to be overwhelming happiness. A recurring theme of the film is Larry’s overcoming of midlife lethargy after meeting Natalie. Larry attributes his success—and the building of the skyscraper—to them both, claiming she gave him back a hunger for life. “Behind every skyscraper” and “every successful man” is a woman, claims Larry. But not just any woman.

A liberal ease and informality pervades the early scenes taking place in Natalie’s apartment, a fact embodied in the character of Mattie (Louise Beavers). Frequent banter and laughs are exchanged with the various guests, and her relationship with Natalie is one of informality rather than blind obedience. As such, she is presented as a worker rather than a servant.

In the next scene, however, Larry comes home again. This time, it is a different home, and he is greeted by a dutiful English butler. A parallel composition invites the viewer to contrast the two dwellings (Figures 7 and 8), as both doorways are framed with chairs: the first, mismatched modern low-rising oval chairs, the second, Victorian and over-sized. This is Larry’s “real” home, the one he shares with his wife of seventeen years, Lois, and their daughter. The couple has clearly drifted apart for some time: Larry appears to care nothing for his wife’s social agenda, while she is clearly resentful of his recent devotion to “building things.”

Throughout the film, we witness Larry Baldwin’s skyscraper being built through Natalie’s window (Figure 9). The construction of the building itself seems to depend on his relationship with Natalie, since she provides him with the hunger and passion to build and develop the city. The nation’s development does, in fact, appear to depend on heterosexual coupling. The skyscraper may have been the ultimate symbol of modernity, but the building industry had been the hardest hit during the Depression. Building activity declined from $4 billion in 1925 to $1.5 billion in 1930 to $400 million in 1933. It is estimated that 80 per cent of all those working in the building industry were out of work during the worst years of the Depression, and that this workforce made up 30 per cent of the nation’s unemployed.40 The absence of construction projects and urban development, which occurred immediately after the construction of landmark skyscrapers, came to represent the concrete effect of economic stagnation.41
According to Gabrielle Esperdy, “prior to the Depression . . . modernization was regarded as a real estate strategy concerned with ends and not means since the modernized building was more important than the act of modernization.” After 1929, however, “modernization was repositioned as a central building industry activity capable of producing jobs, increasing demand for materials, and generating economic revival.”

The Depression was largely thought to be prolonged due to industrialists’ hoarding away their money instead of injecting it back into society. The New Deal may be remembered as promoting a philosophy of “pulling together to whip the depression,” but it had much to do with “coax[ing] reluctant capital out of hiding.”

Tellingly, a man’s career in architecture is associated with beating the odds to achieve success in *Mothers Cry* (Hobart Henley, 1930), *The Lady Refuses* (George Archainbaud, 1931), *The Guilty Generation* (Rowland V. Lee, 1931), and *Ann Carver’s Profession* (Edward Buzzell, 1933). Men “building things” is a powerful visual analogy for the nation’s recovery, and women are credited for inspiring men to join or pursue the profession.

In an intimate discussion with his daughter—who is entering the social realm as a debutante—Larry implores her not to follow her mother’s upper-class aspirations, but rather to find a creative man and help him achieve success. Lois’s “social scheme” demands much human sacrifice. Belonging to the upper class requires one to leave all passions behind and devote one’s life to appearances, suppressing all traces of authenticity. It is, moreover, a world that devalues creative and economic endeavours: one proves one’s social and economic standing *precisely* by not working. After much tribulation and one-too-many plot twists, Larry obtains a divorce from his wife. As he and Natalie embrace in the final scene, the camera pans right to show the newly finished Baldwin building (Figure 10).

The basic plot of *Street of Women*—a man made lethargic by his stale upper-class domestic life who meets an energetic, young woman who gives him back a hunger for life and productive enterprises—is common to a number of films in the early 1930s. Analyzing popular representations of women in newspapers, Adams, Keene, and McKay have noticed a similar trend starting in the 1920s: Aging and married women, the authors claim, paid the price of the twin cult of youth and body image. While the slim, young body was a visual embodiment of modernity, the older, heavier body became a symbol of days past. The modern woman’s “vibrant physicality” and easy mobility—both physical and social—can be seen as signifying her relief of the weight of Old-World baggage.

Released in 1934, *Upper World* (Roy del Ruth) adopts a similar narrative line. The fundamental disagreement between husband (Warren William) and wife (Mary Astor) is encapsulated in the fact that she wants their young son to go to a reputable and expensive military school, while he wants their son to attend public school. It may be a sign of changing times that his mistress, a modern woman (Ginger Rogers), is killed by the film’s end, and husband and wife—a
wife who now realizes the error of her ways—embark on a transatlantic liner to start afresh in Europe. The wife’s “redemption” is made possible here, we could hypothesize, by her youthful appearance and slender body. Social climbing was merely a wrong turn to be rectified. But it is also a redirection of energy from the social scene to their romantic life. Indeed, they vow to avoid all the “nonsense” of social calls and obligations that brought them apart. They also pledge to renew their vows every year by visiting a different country, extending their travels to Asia and South America in the process. Being an international tourist, regardless of the destination, is synonymous with freedom (freedom from social ties, but also freedom of movement), with prosperity, and, in a way, with an idealized vision of modern Americanness, as it symbolizes the modern American’s ability to face, adapt, and manoeuvre in any situation. It is, furthermore, a marker of status potentially available to anyone who can afford it.46 Tourism, according to Zygmunt Bauman, exemplifies the loosening of temporal and spatial attachments of liquid modernity; “being in but not of the place”:47
The tourists want to immerse themselves in a strange and bizarre element . . . on condition, though, that it will not stick to the skin and thus can be shaken off whenever they wish. . . . This makes the world seem infinitely gentle, obedient to the tourist’s wishes and whims, ready to oblige. . . . One may say that what the tourist buys, what he pays for, what he demands to be delivered is precisely the right not to be bothered. 48

The tourist fantasy affirms one’s capacity for detachment and ability to escape, untouched, from any earthly encroachments. But the tourist’s capacity to move through space at will and at great speed also enacts a mastery of time and space, a refusal to be determined by either.

One can see from these examples that it is not unusual for women to make a home in high-rises and modern designs. In fact, these perfectly suit a certain type of woman: the successful, modern, workingwoman. These women represent a hopeful progress into the future, and it is therefore unsurprising that they came to be associated, narratively and visually, with the building of skyscrapers themselves. The apartment’s design and overview of the cityscape reflect the woman’s character and personality, and are constitutive of the modern woman as a chronotope. The open designs lead their inhabitants to ease in movement and general comportment and informality. Inhabitants are often lying down or reclining on a chaise longue, sitting on the floor, or sitting askew. High-rises are, furthermore, spaces associated with a woman’s professional success and independence, not with the domestic nurturing and care of the home as an “institution.” Women often conduct business from their apartment. Flowers, vases, and statues can nonetheless be said to mark the space as “feminine.” As such, these modernist spaces are not anti-feminine but rather antithetical to traditional conceptions of feminine domesticity. This clarifies Dreier’s earlier comments regarding the difficulty of applying the modern aesthetic to the home: it isn’t the home itself that is anti-modern, but a certain idea of the home as a traditional, domestic sphere.

Furthermore, these examples show that there was no simple binary opposition between modern and traditional, where “modern equals bad; traditional equals good.” 49 Esperdy is right in pointing out the mutual influence of set design and broader social concerns. Taking gender into account, however, shows the relationship to be far more complex. The modern woman’s environment is a modern, functional one, one that invites free movement and visuality. It is contrasted with the partitioned spaces and ornamentations of Victorian, Old-World tradition.

DEMOCRATIC MOVEMENT IN GRAND HOTEL

The open design of modern architecture reaches its apogee in Edmund Goulding’s 1932 Grand Hotel. Based on Vicki Baum’s 1929 bestselling novel Menschen
im Hotel (“People in a hotel”), the movie takes place almost exclusively inside a luxury Berlin hotel.\textsuperscript{50} Despite its German origin and setting, Grand Hotel remains a thoroughly American film. As with many other films of the era, foreign or exotic locations were created primarily based on verisimilitude—“truthlikeness” rather than truthfulness—to correspond to Americans’ ideas of what such locations should look like. The book’s novelty—so popular as to give birth to a trend of the same name\textsuperscript{51}—resided in creating a setting where various people, unrelated and of different backgrounds, meet and see their lives become intertwined. As the film’s promotional campaign made clear, the sphere of the hotel brought a diverse cross-section of society into contact:

A beautiful ballerina to whom love is no less an art than dancing . . . a lovely and ingenuous peasant girl (with a fixed price on her charms) . . . a respectable business tycoon, caught in the web of an unholy lust . . . a world-weary cynic who lost hope (and half his face) at Flanders . . . a down-trodden clerk with only a few weeks left to in which to grasp life . . . These are some of the men and women of the GRAND HOTEL!\textsuperscript{52}

The allure of the book resides in creating a place where people of various means and social classes are made to socialize even though they have, at first glance, very little in common. Once they interact, such commonalities become apparent: they all share the same hopes, desires, and despairs. Moreover, various strategies are used to create a microcosmic melting pot in which social classes fluctuate and where social mobility is possible.

Cedric Gibbons—an “architect of the Functional persuasion”\textsuperscript{53}—was tasked to create, visually, the ambiance of Grand Hotel. In a distinctive modern style, Gibbons placed the hotel reception on a circular desk in the centre of the lobby, with various shops and restaurants located on the outside edge of the hotel. According to Donald Albrecht, “movie plot and architecture have seldom been so closely harmonized” as in Grand Hotel:

Circles are prominent in every aspect of the Grand Hotel’s design—an appropriate image for the spinning-wheel-of-fortune scenario. The circular motif appears in the hotel’s round, multilevel atrium with open balconies, in the continually revolving doors, and in ornaments on balcony railings. It also appears in the round reception desk, which acts as a pivot for the curving shots that follow the movement of the film’s characters, who travel across the black-and-white floor like pawns in a chess game.\textsuperscript{54}

The 360-degree hotel lobby is thereby transformed into something akin to a boulevard, complete with lounging chairs for people to sit and watch the flow of passers-by (Figures 11 and 12).\textsuperscript{55} The upper floors, where the rooms are located,
are similarly adorned with very large hallways and sitting areas where people congregate to socialize. It is in just such a communal area that the on-call stenographer Flaemmchen (Joan Crawford) is mistaken for a baroness because of her close physical proximity to a baron (John Barrymore), who is in fact also a gambler and a thief, as the film later reveals.

The Grand Hotel may be a space of hyperbolic luxury, the kind associated with the upper class and Old-World elites, but in the American context, hotels were thought of—and they still are today—as Palaces for the Public. Indeed, the luxurious hotel offered the Everyperson a chance to experience modern commodities, and the opulence and grandeur offered only previously to the aristocracy. Moreover, the Grand Hotel is a space that prompts seismic social hierarchy shifts and culminates in the triumphant liberation of the working class as Flaemmchen and a lowly clerk put their tyrannical boss in prison and leave, arm in arm, for France—a space of fantasized escape and freedom for both of them. The conventions of the genre would have dictated a Cinderella-inspired love story blossoming between the baron and Flaemmchen following their magnetic first encounter on the mezzanine. Instead, however, the baron falls madly in love with an even more improbable match: world-renowned—and world-weary—balletina, Madame Grusinskaya (Greta Garbo). Their encounter is exemplary of the type of relationships allowed by the Grand Hotel: close proximity resulting in chance encounters, class intermingling, and temporary class dissolution. Upon their first night together—and having just met as the Baron intruded into Grusinskaya’s room to steal her pearls—the two lie casually on a chaise longue made to look like a bed.

A characteristic trait of Grand Hotel is its indiscriminate treatment of workers and guests. The picture opens with a camera panning over the hotel’s many female telephone operators connecting the hotel guests with the outside world. This first sequence dissolves into a succession of static shots of numerous hotel guests on the phone, in various stages of personal crisis. The to-and-fro of the hotel guests, made possible by the hotel’s design is matched by the “sweeping scope of the camera . . . swaying from room to room and from the lobby to the telephone switchboard,” following the action as it moves indistinguishably from hotel guests to workers. Goulding’s avowed intention was to “use the camera as a ‘walking personality,’ letting it follow the tangled destinies of the central characters . . . as an invisible onlooker.” This moving camera contributes to the democratic character of the picture, capturing the upper and working classes in the same movement. As an apparatus, the camera acts as a medium of democratization. The camera also travels incognito, staying in a single room to show how the same space can be occupied by workers and guests, for instance, or showing the usually unseen, private life of both classes. When it reveals what the guests do behind closed doors, the effect is, once again, class levelling, democratic: Grusinskaya the celebrated ballerina is suicidal, the baron lies on the
floor to talk to his only true companion, a dog (Figure 13), and the porter is a fretful and caring husband about to become a father.

As the camera moves freely around a self-contained environment where people stroll, lounge, and shop, the hotel resembles an ocean liner, a resemblance reinforced in various scenes “on deck” (Figure 14). The hotel, like the ocean liner cruising through the open sea of modernity, offers the security of containment from the outside and a temporary democratic space where conventional social hierarchy is suspended.59

A contained space such as the one found in Grand Hotel is an important element of many modern woman’s films. The various spaces, be they hotels, large office buildings, department stores, or ocean liners, often look very much alike and can hardly be told apart. Structurally, they are large, open spaces facilitating the intermingling of various people belonging to different classes. They are linked in the types of comportment and encounters they facilitate. The office building lobbies in Manhattan Tower (Frank Strayer, 1932) and Skyscraper Souls (Edgar Selwyn, 1932), for instance, create similar chance encounters among various workers. Manhattan Tower’s camera is even more mobile than

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Figure 11: Grand Hotel lobby seen from above. **Source:** Grand Hotel (1932)

Figure 12: Grand Hotel lounge. **Source:** Grand Hotel (1932)

Figure 13: The Baron with dog on floor. **Source:** Grand Hotel (1932)

Figure 14: The Baron and Flaemmchen having a cigarette in the upper-floor lounge. **Source:** Grand Hotel (1932)
Grand Hotel’s. In the opening minutes of the film, the camera ceaselessly moves from window washers working on a suspended platform, to tourists admiring the skyscraper from an open-top car, to secretaries walking along the sidewalk to work, to the masses of workers in the lobby. From the hotel's lobby, special effects are used to create the impression that the camera is descending into the underground, where we meet Jimmy (James Hall) working in the engineering room in overalls. As the clock hits 8:45, Jimmy changes jacket and climbs up to meet his girlfriend Mary in the lobby. As they part, the camera stays with Mary, who takes the elevator to her upper-level office. Movement is emphasized, once more, with the camera seemingly located on top of the elevator and revealing the many floors travelled, thereby creating a stronger sense of the environment as a closed, lived-in unit. A social microcosm, the office building functions thanks to various people doing their respective jobs, from engineers hidden in the basement to top-floor office clerks and managers.

Tellingly, in Skyscraper Souls Anita Page is wearing a very similar dress to Joan Crawford’s signature Grand Hotel outfit (Figure 14). The dress by Adrian—a “masterpiece in design”—had created quite a sensation with its interesting manipulation of various codes: the solid black dress with white collar and cuffs recalls Puritan wear, which its plunging neckline contradicts. The white cuffs evoke clerical workwear, but the asymmetrical cut of the collar indicates greater refinement and add a touch of sass. Finally, the dress is presented as the cleverest outfit for a woman of low means, since it works for both day and night time, which is evidenced in the fact that it is the only gown worn by Flaemmchen throughout the film.

The Grand Hotel constitutes a space of modernity in the sense of our earlier formulation, as a space allowing for the emergence or enactment of modern subjectivity. In its simplest form—and like all hotels—it is a home for the homeless, a home of non-committed, transient, and selective relationships. It suspends to some degree “normal” social hierarchies: everyone who can afford a room can demand and receive equal treatment. In modern hotels, “time and space are available to anyone as long as he or she has the money to buy, that is, rent them, and guests have no anterior or future identity beyond the one as a guest of a certain hotel.” In an early scene, lowly clerk Otto Kringelein (Lionel Barrymore) vigorously protests for his right to pay and receive a room of equal quality as those received by the other guests: “I want a room—a big room—like you would give General Director Preysing—I’m as good as Mr. Preysing—I can pay like Mr. Preysing.” This implacable argument wins him a room next to the other guests.

Although Grand Hotel could count on the heavy draw of not only one, but two Barra’mores, it also starred two “femme favourites”: Joan Crawford and Greta Garbo. Grand Hotel was the first film to be conceived as a multi-star vehicle, a fact that caused some tensions on set on Garbo’s part, as the actress
was not used to such a “democratic” work environment. The unusual coupling of not only one but two female stars caused much enthusiasm. This was to be the first prestige picture for Crawford—the rising modern—as well as the first romantic pairing of Great Garbo—who was at the top of her career—with another screen legend: John Barrymore. Irving Thalberg chose Edmund Goulding to direct the movie for his ability to work with women: “Eddie thinks like a woman. He’ll bring out their femininity. I want them to stand out over the men.” The two women, however, shared no scenes together: Goulding envisioned the film’s narrative structure as two films—each starring a woman in crisis—linked by the baron. John Barrymore’s performance has, in fact, been seen recently as mediating Crawford’s and Garbo’s very different acting styles.

Despite being a multi-protagonist film, it re-centers the novel’s action around its two most interesting characters: the modern stenographer/prostitute Flaemmchen and the famous Grusinskaya. Both are, in a sense, homeless, unattached women who have made hotels their habitual transitory pied-à-terre—Grusinskaya because she has been touring for years, travelling from one city to another, and Flaemmchen because she makes a living from seducing wealthy men in luxury hotels. Both women therefore enter the hotel free of familial authority and constraints. But they are also trapped in social and economic circumstances and both struggle to regain control over their existence, which constitutes the personal crisis structuring the film.

Grusinskaya has become ensnared in a thankless career for which she has lost all passion. She might be a dancer, but ballet offers her very little room for self-expression. She has devoted her life to moulding her body to classical ballet’s tyrannical demands and finds herself alone and empty as she walks through the doors of the Grand Hotel. Flaemmchen is likewise trapped in routine one-night stands while she dreams of a film career and travels. Her career as a stenographer cannot sustain her and she must rely on prostitution for clothes and meals. Both women are threatened by time: Grusinskaya’s aging body endangers her career—a career to which she has devoted her entire life—and Flaemmchen is bound to waste her youth and beauty—the best years of her life—until she eventually loses both. The cruel pressure effectuated by the passage of time and the urgency of living one’s life to the fullest while there is still time are reinforced throughout the film with the other characters being engaged in a race against time: Kringelein has only a few days to live, and has therefore left his boring provincial town to finally enjoy his last pennies, the baron has only hours to find money to settle a gambling debt, and Preysing (Wallace Beery) must conclude a complex business deal or else he will lose the family’s company and fortune.

The speeding up of time has often been seen as one of the defining experiences of modernity, along with the impression of being caught in time’s whirlwind. One of the notable features of Grand Hotel is how it stages the temporal experience of modernity. In this respect, passage through the Grand Hotel
proves cathartic for both Flaemmchen and Grusinskaya; Grusinskaya, by engaging in an erotic adventure with a stranger and overcoming loneliness, and Flaemmchen, by striking a friendship and leaving the hotel to travel Europe as a tourist. Through her friendship with the newly affluent Kringelein, she is able to leave the Grand Hotel—which she has occupied as a commodity—and re-enter any other European hotel as a tourist. The crisis resolved as a result of passage through the Grand Hotel is one concerning the women gaining some control over the passage of time.

SPACES OF APPEARANCE, SPACES OF SURVEILLANCE

Such control over space and over one’s destiny was not only facilitated by modern, exotic locations; in woman’s films it can be found in the most perennial of places: the department store fashion show. Alexander Hall’s 1932 *Sinners in the Sun* provides our last example of modern woman’s relationship with modern set designs. In the film, Doris (Carole Lombard) models expensive gowns at Louis’s, a fashion designer’s lavish store. Extended scenes take place at Louis’s, filmed so as to display its modern interiors to their fullest (*Figure 15*). Models in various stages of undress walk around, which, added to the interior architecture, creates an ongoing visual spectacle. High ceilings, minimal furniture, and an absence of partitions create the sense of openness and freedom mentioned earlier by Albrecht and Cheney. Women move around freely, and their gestures and overall demeanour are easy and relaxed. More importantly, this space—in which wealthy customers and working models circulate together—permits class intermingling and transgressions. In the opening sequence, Doris is mistaken for a customer, a scene we see repeated in other films of the period. In a later sequence, a wealthy customer intuits that Doris is a working model (only because “she wears clothes so beautifully”), yet invites her to sit for a cigarette and a chat. The two converse as equals, sharing their realities with each other and discovering the commonalities in their divergent situations.

*Figure 15: Inside *Sinners in the Sun*’s Louis’s.*
*Source: *Sinners in the Sun* (1932)*

*Figure 16: Doris’s family home.*
*Source: *Sinners in the Sun* (1932)*
The opening sequence at Louis’s is followed immediately by scenes taking place at Doris’s home, where she lives with her parents, grandparents, brother, and sister-in-law. Even though Doris brings in more money than anyone else, all except her mother insist on disparaging her for her job and lifestyle. Mealtimes are particularly painful for Doris, who is constantly persecuted. After meals, everyone—except her mother, who must clean up after the meal—retires into their assigned seat in the living room to read their section of the newspaper while listening to a hysterical program blasting from the radio (Figure 16). Their actions seem well rehearsed; even their banter sounds stale and out-of-date. These are sad scenes: everyone is profoundly unhappy, and they take revenge by making each other’s lives unbearable. Not only are the two spaces—work and home—highly contrasted, but they are shown to affect Doris in significant ways. Once at home, Doris’s comings and goings are closely scrutinized, and she is scolded for the company she (supposedly) keeps, her father eventually kicking her out in the middle of the night. She is constantly denigrated and dehumanized. One gathers from the living-room scene that, were she to remain at home, she would eventually join the routine, be assigned her own section, and take her place among the Sunday paper readers.

With its expensive clothes, inviting and open interior, and sophisticated patrons, Louis’s is a space of appearance in contrast to the home, which is a space of surveillance and control. As Xavier Marquez recently remarked, “both types of spaces”—the first described by Hannah Arendt, the second by Michel Foucault—“represent poles in a spectrum of possibilities for the settings where selves and subjects are partially constituted by the ways in which they become visible.”\(^68\) Although power relations and visibility can become entangled in a multitude of non-exclusive ways, the point Marquez wants to emphasize is that certain spaces can create a relationship among equals, and in turn become settings “where individuality emerges from self-disclosure.”\(^69\) In other words, making oneself visible, revealing or unveiling oneself to others, does not have to be equated, pace Mulvey, with a tipping of the power balance in favour of the bearer of the gaze.\(^70\)

According to Arendt, the public realm, a space of appearance, action, and speech, is crucial for human existence. Appearance constitutes, first and foremost, reality for human subjects. Thoughts, feelings, and emotions remain uncertain unless they enter the public realm and are shared with/by others.\(^71\) For venues to become spaces of freedom and appearance, “artificial equality” must be established. Such equality is artificial, Arendt believes, because it is limited in time and space—it only exists within the limits of a particular space—and it does not completely eliminate differences in wealth or status. Equality is dependent on the space itself, and on the lateral and mutual visibility it allows. In spaces of freedom, social distinctions are temporarily suspended so that individuals of
different backgrounds and social standings can interact on an equal footing, allowing all to express their individuality to others. There is therefore nothing “natural” about a space of appearance: it is artificially created and is dependent on human and environmental conditions. In Sinners in the Sun we witness such a state of artificial equality created by the unique environment that is Louis’s.

A setting such as Louis’s, one that is found in many a woman’s film, no doubt serves as an ideal venue for fashion shows and the general display of beautiful clothes, bodies, and interior designs. For this reason, these settings have often been seen as promoting apolitical consumption. It is important, however, to acknowledge how they also function productively, as spaces permitting the expression of individuality, through visibility and the suspension of conventional rules. A modern aesthetic espousing the ever-new, displayed in both interior design and fashion, contributes, moreover, to this temporary equality and suspension of conventional rules: in the case of interior design, because it does not refer to old social conventions, among other reasons; and in the case of fashion, because it allows all women to dress in the same expensive clothes regardless of social class. In fact, when inequality based on social standing emerges, it is usually mitigated by the models’ ability to wear clothes better than patrons.

Based on such a conception of space, visibility, and power, Arendt associated freedom and expressiveness with the public realm, while the home remained associated with necessity, invisibility, conformity, and hierarchy. Arendt can be seen as translating, in political rather than philosophical terms, Heidegger’s conception of freedom as the disclosure, or the possibility of disclosure, of being. This disclosure is associated, as we have seen, with appearance—since a public is necessary—but also with performance. The public space creates the conditions where individuals can appear in front of their equals and perform their individuality through speech and action. This performance makes the subject a political, public being.

Some would no doubt disagree with a space of consumption being considered “political.” However, Arendt has often been criticized for defending an elitist conception of the political, one that denies, among other things, the possibility of proper political actions to those who cannot appear as equals on the public stage. An obvious consequence of this shortcoming is the increased difficulty of identifying political stages in Western, (post)modern societies, dominated by the private, or social realm. This analysis of fashion in film can be seen as an attempt to widen the realm of the political and show how various stages can conform to at least some of the conditions of public life.

For Arendt, moreover, expressing one’s individuality is only possible outside the realm of necessity—in the political, public realm. This implies that freedom is not possible through activities aimed at sustaining life, and that one may only express one’s individuality when free from want. Originally, “the
privative trait of privacy,” Arendt writes, “meant literally a state of being deprived of something, and even of the highest and most human of man’s capacities. A man who lived only a private life, who like the slave was not permitted to enter the public realm . . . was not fully human.” 77 “The privation of privacy lies,” Arendt adds

in the absence of others; as far as they are concerned, private man does not appear, and therefore it is as though he did not exist. Whatever he does remains without significance and consequence to others, and what matters to him is without interest to other people. 78

Spaces such as Sinners in the Sun’s Louis’s—spaces that allow women to appear and display a uniqueness that is seen and acknowledged by peers, thereby creating equality and permitting freedom—abound in woman’s films of the early 1930s. It would be a mistake, therefore, to look at fashion shows as only revelling in base consumerist, apolitical culture. Fashion, and the fashion-show realm, provided a sphere where women could excel in front of others. Indeed, this artificially created consumer realm generated a space where women could appear. More important, this space established conditions for women to appear as equals by suspending, albeit only temporarily, social status.

In the examples discussed here, I have emphasized how concrete film spaces—such as modern apartments and public and work spaces such as hotels, office buildings, and department stores—function as expressions of the modern woman chronotope in both semiotic—as producers and conveyors of meaning—and phenomenological senses, permitting a certain way of being. Although Europeans architects such as Le Corbusier and Adolf Loos, among others, saw modern architecture as civilized and masculine, and Art Deco as primitive and feminine, these examples from early 1930s woman’s films show that if modern spaces were not conceived in the American context as feminine, then they were at least fully compatible with the emergence of a new, modern woman. In these examples, modern architecture and set design are not restrictive and punitive to female characters, but rather liberating. Modern sets are blank slates for new beginnings, the absence of Art Deco ornamentations signalling a break with the past. As a chronotope, the modern woman is linked with a specific conceptualization of space and time conveyed through architecture and set design. I have further argued that the figure of the modern woman found in early 1930s woman’s film is far from apolitical, as she articulates a hopeful vision of America’s future and progress.
NOTES


2. Fischer is certainly not the first to criticize Busby Berkeley’s treatment of the female form. For instance, Mary Ryan credits Berkeley with enacting "one of the most crass and explicit presentations of women as sexual commodities . . . on the movie screen" (Womanhood in America: From Colonial Times to the Present [New York: New Viewpoints, 1975], 302).


5. Fischer, "City of Women," 124.

6. Fischer, 130.


9. While she uses the word “feminine” to qualify the early incarnations of Art Deco, McClinton does not use the word “masculine” to qualify the modernist approach.


14. Although Albrecht presents great discussions of the modern elements of movie set design, he does not relate it with a film analysis, so that the set designs are not discussed in relation with the film’s narrative or ideological ties. For instance, his lengthy discussion of What a Widow! (Allan Dwan, 1930) never once mentions that, the film being lost, his analysis is based solely on stills and promotional images.


17. Duncan, Art Deco, 7.

23. Duncan, 8.
31. Esperdy, “From Instruction to Consumption.”
35. Boorstin, 345.
41. The Chrysler and the Empire State building were completed in 1930 and 1931, respectively.
42. Esperdy, *Modernizing Main Street*, 55.
49. Esperdy, “From Instruction to Consumption,” 207.
50. Even when the camera moves out of the hotel, it is still filming the hotel.
51. *Shanghai Express* (Josef von Sternberg, 1932) and *Stagecoach* (John Ford, 1939), to name only a few, were both referred to as “Grand Hotel on wheels.” See David Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 94–97.
52. American edition back cover.
55. The original shooting script indicates that the opening scene would have the camera moving around the lobby much more than we see in the film, going into a bar, a florist, and a restaurant’s dining room and kitchen “like a human being, seeing and hearing.”
58. “‘Grand Hotel’ Film,” *New York Times*, 27 March 1932, S.
63. Although William Drake received screen credit as per contractual agreement, Goulding is responsible for writing the screenplay (Kennedy, 113).
65. This is a fact that is asserted bluntly in the novel, but only alluded to in the motion picture.
67. See, for instance, *Bought!* (Archie Mayo, 1931) and *The Reckless Hour* (John Francis Dillon, 1931). *Bad Girl* (Frank Borzage, 1931) and *Double Harness* (John Cromwell, 1933) create a
similar confusion in the viewer. In both films, what the viewer thinks is initially a wedding ceremony turns out to be a fashion show.

70. Although the films I am looking at cannot be said to demonstrate usage of power that is congruent with Arendt’s understanding—concerted action—it should be mentioned that power for Arendt is purely relational and cannot be possessed; Neve Gordon, “On Visibility and Power: An Arendtian Corrective of Foucault,” Human Studies 25.2 (2002): 133.
73. For Arendt, identity is not purely performative and it does not precede appearance; rather, a subject’s identity is created through action. We can therefore see the crucial role played by public spaces for the expression of individuality.
74. Society women are often put down by peers who tell them that the clothes the model is wearing will not fit them as well.
76. Without going into too many details here, it should be mentioned that Arendt sought to bring forward the Ancient Greeks’ understanding of politics as an additional, privileged realm outside of the private realm. This realm of praxis and speech is never simply given—as it exists only through action—nor is it limited to “official” or governmental politics.
77. Arendt, 38.
78. Arendt, 58.

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