Mid-century Style in American Film

See some of the interesting ways films portray “modern” on the silver screen during this three week film series. Ann Hornaday, Washington Post film critic, and Deborah Sorensen, curatorial associate at the National Building Museum, will introduce each film.

THURSDAYS, 6:30–8:30 PM

**Playboy Chic: Designing the Mid-Century Bachelor Pad**

**FEBRUARY 6**

“The Moon is Blue”

Directed by Otto Preminger (1953, NR, 99 min.)

This urbane comedy defied Hollywood’s Production Code (all the way to the Supreme Court) and set a new bar for frank discussions of adult sexuality.

Starring William Holden, David Niven, and Maggie McNamara

This film will be shown in VHS format

**Office Politics: The Lipstick Jungle of 1950s Manhattan**

**FEBRUARY 13**

“The Best of Everything”

Directed by Jean Negulesco (1959, NR, 121 min.)

Joan Crawford tears up the secretary pool in this melodrama about working girls in the big city. Set in the newly completed Seagram Building (Mies van der Rohe, 1954–58).

Starring Joan Crawford, Hope Lange, Suzy Parker, and Robert Evans

This film will be shown in DVD format

**From Modern to Mod: The Spy Styling of Derek Flint**

**FEBRUARY 20**

“In Like Flint”

Directed by Gordon Douglas (1967, NR, 114 min.)

Ultimate spy spoof fantasies, the Flint films are extravaganzas of over-the-top Sixties style.

Starring James Coburn and Lee J. Cobb

This film will be shown in DVD format

$5 Members | $5 Students | $10 Public

Special Rate for NBM Members: $10 for all 3 films! Prepaid registration required.

Walk-in registration based on availability.
Bachelors, Secretaries, and Spies: Mid-century Style in American Film
February 2008
National Building Museum

The National Building Museum’s film series, Bachelors, Secretaries & Spies: Mid-Century Style in American Film, was inspired by the exhibitions Marcel Breuer: Design and Architecture and Eero Saarinen: Shaping the Future. Given that film can offer unique insights into design history and trends in popular taste, how do American movies of the 1950s and ’60s reflect or diverge from developments in mid-century modern architecture and design?

During this period in film history, bachelors, working women, and spies or super-villains exist on screen as independent figures, detached from—if not in direct opposition to—safe havens of community and family. In contrast to these metropolitan singles, families are shown to live in homes that are traditional in style (Colonial or Victorian), suggesting security and comfort. At the same time, domestic trappings of middle class success are often undermined by themes of anxiety, instability, and financial burden, and frequently fuel characters' desire for a bachelor existence free of responsibility. The great irony of the mid-century bachelor film is that practically all of the free agents featured find themselves well on their way to marriage and family by the end of the picture. This would seem to indicate that the public found great pleasure in seeing independent men and women pulled back into “normal” society.

See some of the interesting ways in which the desires and fears of mid-century modern life were reflected on screen during this films three week film series. Ann Hornaday, Washington Post film critic, and Deborah Sorensen, curatorial associate, will introduce each film.

- The Moon is Blue (Otto Preminger, 1953, 99 min.)
- The Best of Everything (Jean Negulesco, 1959, 121 min.)
- In Like Flint (Gordon Douglas, 1967, 114 min.)

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“Bachelor Modern: Mid-Century Style in American Film”

NBM CALENDAR INTERVIEW
Curatorial Associate Deborah Sorensen interviews Washington Post film critic Ann Hornaday.

DS: Although designs for “modern living” were promoted by museums and advertised in magazines, mid-century modern design is largely absent from films of the 1950s. When it appears, modern style is often associated with characters who challenge accepted behavior or stories that reflect anxiety over social change. What kind of reality were films of the 1950’s trying to depict?

AH: In some ways, [they] were projecting the kind of bland, homogenized consensus that the era would come to be known for (and in some circles, nostalgically pined for). But looked at more closely, it's apparent that they were also forums for working through a lot of the anxieties of postwar America, from fear of Communism to ambivalence about women's changing roles. In engaging contentious issues, whether explicitly or symbolically, these films actively forged the consensus the Fifties would come to be known for, as much as they reflected it.

DS: Are the films chosen for this series 'typical' in their representation of 1950s America?

AH: “The Moon is Blue” was in many ways a typical sex comedy of the 1950s in terms of structure and the ideas it communicated. But it was also an example of a burgeoning independent film movement of the era, which acted outside the studio system. Thus it contains such words as “virgin” and “mistress,” which a studio would have cut and which brought the movie within the sights of local and state censor boards.

Similarly, "The Best of Everything" is certainly typical, being both a wide-screen extravaganza (wide-screen technology being one way Hollywood was trying to compete with television) and the kind of soap opera for which the Fifties is famous (think "Peyton Place" and the melodramas of Douglas Sirk).