Fotocinema, Special Issue no. 35/2027: Architects on the Silver Screen

Deadline: Mar 20, 2027

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The Journal Fotocinema is calling for scholarly papers for its Special Issue, “Architects on the Silver Screen: Genders, Representations, Identities.”

Adrien Brody’s portrayal of architect Laszlo Toth in Brady Corbet’s 2024 The Brutalist, together with Adam Driver’s Cesar Catilina in Francis Ford Coppola’s Megalopolis, earlier that year, added two of new entries in a lineage of filmic representations of the architect built in the shadow of King Vidor’s The Fountainhead (1949). Vidor’s translation of Ayn Rand’s Howard Roark, a character heavily-modelled on Frank Lloyd Wright, played with hyperbolic, and more than a little toxic masculinity by Gary Cooper, belonged in the tradition of the architect as a lone, heroic genius-creator.

While not the first, Cooper’s Roark rapidly permeated the collective imagination, becoming the ultimate representation of the architect, filmic or otherwise. A white, heterosexual male, an obsessive visionary of almost mythical stature, Roark mirrored the self-image of architects as constructed by architectural media and historiography alike, being immediately embraced by the profession, and becoming an enduring –if questionable– source of inspiration for both students and practicing architects. Cinema has helped perpetuate this stereotypical vision, contributing many variations on it, be it William Holden’s McDonald Walling in Executive Suite (Robert Wise, 1954), Kirk Douglas’s Larry Coe in Strangers when we meet (Richard Quine, 1960), Richard Gere’s Vincent Eastman in Intersection (Mark Rydell, 1994), or James Frame’s Miles Moss in The Architect (Jonathan Parker, 2016).

However, the prevalence of this portrayal has obscured many other filmic depictions of architects that diverged from the dominant one. By the time Roark hit the screens, American cinema had already produced at least 175 films with architects in them, with numbers climbing over 250 when adding non-American films. All white, heterosexual men, many of them fitted the Roark template, depicted as creative, dynamic and successful individualistic geniuses. However, films also presented architects who worked in the entrepreneurial side of things, were employees at corporate offices, or were simply not that interested in architecture, adding to those who were architects in name only, appearing in films where their profession played a small role or no role at all. Amongst those deviations from the norm, perhaps the most remarkable was that of women, who, surprisingly, given their invisibility in the official historiography of architecture, appeared on screen as architecture professionals very early on in the history of the medium: three decades before The Fountainhead, it was also King Vidor who gave American cinema –and most possibly cinema at large– its first woman architect, Dorothy Perkins, played by his then-wife, Florence, in the film Poor Rela-

tions (1919).

Hollywood kept adding a few other fictional women in the next decades, soon joined by Germany, the UK, and, in the 1950s, Austria, Italy, East Germany, and the Soviet Union. As women architects disappeared from the US screens, the 1960s witnessed an increase in the representation of the struggle of women practicing architecture in Italian, Polish, Cuban, and Greek cinema.

The 1970s and 1980s featured a remarkable increase in female representation that pushed the numbers of 'woman architect films' to almost 130 by the end of the century, and about 250 by 2020. The late 1990s also widened the representational window, which extended to sapphic architects (Andrea und Marie, 1998) —transgender professionals are still awaiting to be included.

The portrayal of women architects displays its own set of recurring features: the tone of these films ranges from subtly vindictive to patronizing, from condescendingly comedic to dishearteningly cruel, either denouncing or falling into many clichés and stereotypes, as do the depictions of their men counterparts. All of them are, however, a source of invaluable information on the real status and on the way society has perceived the architect (of any gender identity) and the profession as a whole throughout the last century. Thus, this issue looks for papers that analyse the representation of architects in films from a variety of perspectives, and in different historical periods, geographical and socio-political contexts. Possible topics may include, but are not limited to:

· Wide historical analyses of the depiction of architects in filmographies from different countries and in certain periods, or comparative analyses of specific case studies. Of special interest are those texts that examine peripheries in an ample sense: sociopolitical, cultural and geographical contexts outside the Western sphere, countries under state socialism, etc.

· Studies on the evolution, persistence and/or disappearance of certain stereotypical traits attached to the figure of the architect throughout the history of cinema, and in different cultural and geographical contexts.

· Portrayals of architects that practice in areas of the profession other than the traditional designer-builder. In this sense, texts dealing with modes of practice that challenge the hegemonic 'lone genius-creator' are especially welcome, those that examine films dealing with architects working in a collective practice, for instance.

· Examinations of films depicting women architects, be they the protagonists or supporting characters, independent professionals or working for hire, working alone or in a team. The films can be examined in isolation, or comparing them with contemporary portrayals of their men-normative counterparts.

· Analyses of the portrayal both of women and/or social minorities in the field of architecture in relation to other professions, or to studies of their representation in commercial cinema at large. The goal is to reflect on the way the architectural profession shapes the represented identities of the characters, investigating representations of architects with non-normative identities from an intersectional perspective in terms of race, sexuality, social class, and other axes of difference. These analyses should offer critical reflections on gender norms and stereotypes situated within the social norms of a specific geography, culture and historical context.

As a whole, the issue intends to offer a comprehensive and varied picture of the many faces of the architectural profession and of the architect (of any gender identity) as a professional that cinema has provided. Its aim is to both discuss the depiction of professional identities and recover the many lesser-known, diverging portrayals scattered throughout its histories, in order to challenge the hegemonic vision that still dominates the profession's self-image.

This call for papers is framed within project "WAR/F: Women Architects in Film 1945-2000," (PID2022-136975OB-I00), a research Project funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation's National Research Agency, and coordinated at the University of Zaragoza by professors Luis Miguel Lus Arana and Lucía C. Pérez-Moreno (https://warf.unizar.es).

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Guest editors of the issue are: Koldo Lus Arana (University of Zaragoza, Spain), Salome Tsopurashvili (Ilia State University, Georgia).

Articles must be submitted between March 1 and 20, 2027. Publication date: July 2027.

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