

## Emptying the Glass House

Essay for the catalogue "Karina Nimmerfall: The Glass House", Künstlerhaus Schloß Balmoral, Bad Ems 2011

By Doris Berger

Modern architecture is not just décor; it also influences the narrative orientation of a film. "Architecture plays," as was already apparent to architect Robert Mallet-Stevens in 1925 when he wrote about the reciprocal influence of architecture and film: "Modern architecture does not only serve the cinematographic set (*décor*), but imprints its stamp on the staging (*mise-en-scène*), it breaks out of its frame; architecture 'plays.'"<sup>1</sup> Architecture plays an active role and participates in the emotional impact of a film. It is precisely this fundamental assumption that has provided source material for Karina Nimmerfall's multipart project *The Glass House*.

The title itself already draws various lines of reference: glass houses constructed of steel and glass are considered to reflect the basic vocabulary of modern building practice. Aside from botanical greenhouses, other glass-and-steel constructions of the nineteenth-century included train stations, department stores, and world exposition halls, embodying the industrial age through mobility and consumption in a modern and ostentatious way. In fact, the first film studios were glass houses (Georges Méliès' film studio, 1897) which became the dominant production site for films prior to the First World War. And finally, Philip Johnson's *Glass House* (1949) begs mentioning among the abundance of glass-house residential architectures of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with its title, for one, serving this project in a referential capacity.

Now Karina Nimmerfall's paragons are not actually constructed architectures, but rather those that have been integrated into motion pictures. Her source material is architecture which has experienced a medial filter—second-degree architecture, so to speak.<sup>2</sup> The fragments that have been appropriated and intertwined in her sculptural architectural model *The Glass House (Modern)* represent a "Who's Who" of cinematic and architectural history. Thus, recognizable in the model are, for instance, not only excerpts from Richard Neutra's Lovell House of 1927–29 (*L.A. Confidential*), John Lautner's Jacobsen House of 1947 (*Twilight*), and the Elrod Residence of 1968 (*Diamonds Are Forever*), but also the famous Van Damm House from *North by Northwest*, which was conceptualized by set designers R. Boyle, N. Horning, M. Pye, H. Grace, and F. M. Kelvey (and inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright). Modern structures may serve as shooting locations or even be specially designed for films. Karina Nimmerfall avails herself of particular camera views of architectural structures which she then assembles to create an architectural model. As such, she processes not only form but also content.

Modern architecture and Hollywood enjoy an ambivalent mutual relationship. Frequently dwelling within modern residences in particular are "evil" characters, or else the residences themselves become protagonists of "evil." This interpretation has nothing in common with the mindset of the architects or residents; on the contrary, it relates to an aversion on the part of Hollywood toward modernist architecture. On this Joseph Rosa has commented: "In recent Hollywood movies, modern domestic architecture has become identified almost exclusively with characters who are evil, unstable, selfish, obsessive, and driven by pleasures of the flesh. ... [F]ilmmakers of late have chosen modernist works as the sites for murder, gangsterism, adultery, and a catalog of other illicit and otherwise unsavory behaviors. Bad guys may no longer wear black, but they do live in white-walled modern homes."<sup>3</sup>

According to Rosa, the mainstream taste of Americans does not accept modern architecture when applied to private living space. He considers this to mirror an angst that modern living concepts could negatively effect middle-class family structures. And precisely these misgivings have been fueled by the pejorative positioning of modern living architecture in films since the 1930s.<sup>4</sup>

Modern and postmodern architecture associated with negatively connoted protagonists or narrative threads can be found in feature films of various genres. A well-known example are James Bond films, where it is always the villain who lives in impressive modern or futuristic buildings that Bond ultimately ends up destroying. Bond-film characters embody the mindset of the creator, Ian Fleming, who was known for his disinclination toward modern architecture.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, he relied upon it for his storylines and for the lifestyle quality of his films, and the spectacular buildings and designs (by Ken Adam) have long become an integral component of the success formula for Bond films. Especially popular as an agent for evil and abomination are structures by Frank Lloyd Wright and his student John Lautner. Take, for example, Lautner's Sheats/Goldstein House (1962–63/1989) located in the heights of Beverly Hills, which has featured in a divergent range of films, including *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle* (2003), *Bandits* (2001), *The Big Le-*

bowski (1998), *Playing God* (1997) and the porn video *Unleashed* (1996). Lautner's "signature California baroque aesthetic," with its "soaring interior spaces, curving forms, dramatic vistas,"<sup>6</sup> is apparently particularly well suited for a dramatization of characters. In 2004, visual artist Dorit Margreiter created a work inspired by this house. Her film installation is both a documentary and an interpretation, making experienceable the sociocultural and medial inscriptions of this house. And Matthias Michalka notes that she shows "how—through the societal regime of the image and the gaze, which is essentially defined by the mass media of film and television—the view and treatment of this architecture is determinate."<sup>7</sup>

Karina Nimmerfall takes the medial inscriptions of the Sheats/Goldstein House, and also Lautner's influence upon contemporary, freely designed (formally speaking) architecture, as a point of origin so as to combine it with fragments of architecture and form originating from more recent structures: to be found in her second architectural model *The Glass House (Modern Contemporary)* are, among others, sections of the Mataja Residence (1999) by the architects Belzberg and Wittman from the thriller *The Glass House* as well as form fragments from Zaha Hadid's Phaeno (2005) from the film *The International* and Auer-Weber's ESO Hotel (2002) from the most recent James Bond film *Quantum of Solace*.

The formal vocabulary of both architectural models has been influenced by the filmic images. The digitally processed film stills, which have been transferred onto transparent film, provide fictitious glimpses, views, and perspectives. The images have been captured from the outside and show some of the furnishings, architectural fragments, as well as perspectives to the outside in a bright-dark atmosphere rich in color. Both *The Glass House (Modern)* and *The Glass House (Modern Contemporary)*—referencing, through the entirety of their composition, both so-called establishing shots and special-effects models—have been each fitted with a special projection screen. Projected upon the screen by means of rear-projection technology is a large-format vista with an animated motif, causing for instance water in a pool to ripple or a sandstorm to blow up in the desert. The minimal amount of animation breathes life into the model without telling a story. Moreover, the placid animation enhances the medial presence of the work. Both architectural models are composed of film fragments taken from modern (*The Glass House [Modern]*) and contemporary (*The Glass House [Modern Contemporary]*) structures that thematize the architecture of a glass house in its ratio of interior and exterior space, of transparency and opacity.

The poster, which is part of the multimedia work, states: "They had designed a location for living and working: a laboratory of sorts. In the end it made for a well-balanced home. However, its reputation would never recover from the experiment." It informs about the experimental character of modernist architecture, but also about the estimation thereof, which is influenced by mass-media circulation in films. The title "The Glass House" appears in a modernist font designed by Josef Albers that has an allure of transparency, just like glass as a material. The picture in the background shows fragmented views through glass out onto vegetation of southern California along with a blue sky, and also a mirrored architectural section and a spotlight. The image fails to capture an unambiguous perspective. Here the topic of transparency becomes a *mise en abyme*. One gazes through and through and through. These elements equally relate to the aforementioned medially charged architectural models and to the walk-in video-spatial-installation *The Glass House (Representational)*.

The spatial installation is comprised of two video projections as part of an implied architecture. A "concrete wall" reaching straight across the room, a wooden ceiling, and "steel constructions" with many sharp angles intimate the form and materiality of the house while concurrently referencing the model character of the installation.<sup>8</sup> The intertwining walls, the connoted mix of materials, and the many inclines reference the deconstructivist forms so frequently used in film sets (for gangsters and crooks), without however rendering a concrete architecture. Here, too, the spatial construction of the installation is made up of set pieces from medially imparted architectures, as are the virtually constructed spatial models in the videos. Yet in contrast to the architecture models *The Glass House (Modern)* and *The Glass House (Modern Contemporary)*, the images are not digitally processed film stills but rather projected impressions in a synthetically compiled virtual space, the source material of which are the medial images. Here, the furnishing details embedded in the computer-generated model are assigned a special function: repeatedly appearing film props—such as an orchid jutting into the image detail, George Nelson's "cigar lamp," or the famous living room furniture in the Sheats/Goldstein House, often used in film sets—become generally recognizable symbols of the uncanny and "localize" the architecture in its medial context. As in both sculptural architectural models, *The Glass House (Representational)* likewise exhibits an animation intervention which allows the lights of the city of Los Angeles to shine with a clichéd twinkle. In this work, the viewers can directly enter the structure, for spatial and bodily experience play a greater role than in the models.

The components of *The Glass House*—posters, architectural models, and a spatial installation—are visual montages that draw on the collective-consciousness inventory of Hollywood’s image machinery. In image/text, model/image, installation/projection the artist realizes her theme in different media-related explorative forms. The montage effect once recognized by Sergei Eisenstein in the successive shots of a film is here transferred from cinema into artistic space. Yet it does not manifest in the same way as in the film’s time-space continuum. Instead, it shares a space continuum with the architectural model and a time continuum with the physical experience of the spatial installation. Karina Nimmerfall divests modern architectures from their ideological ballast. Instead of telling a story, she constructs a new realm of experience which is assembled, and can be newly interpreted, from an amalgam of medial memory and personal spatial experience. It is a medial construction that is oriented to the image. Karina Nimmerfall is the architect who builds her houses out of medial representations.

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<sup>1</sup> Mallet-Stevens quoted in: Anthony Vidler, “The Explosion of Space: Architecture and the Filmic Imaginary,” in *Film Architecture: From Metropolis to Blade Runner*, ed. Dietrich Neumann (Munich and New York, 1996), p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> In this respect, the artist primarily references (in the source citations to her architectural-image-model) those films from which they originate.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Rosa, “Tearing Down the House: Modern Homes in the Movies,” in *Architecture and Film*, ed. Mark Lamster (New York, 2000), p. 159.

<sup>4</sup> See Rosa, pp. 160–61.

<sup>5</sup> See Steve Rose, “James Bond: the enemy of architecture,” *The Guardian*, November 4, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> See Rosa, p. 164.

<sup>7</sup> Matthias Michalka, “10104 Angelo View Drive,” in *Dorit Margreiter: 10104 Angelo View Drive*, exh. cat. MUMOK Vienna (Cologne, 2005), p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> The materials of concrete and steel are not in fact being used here but are rather designed of wood or painted aluminium, similar to film sets.