

Part Five: History, Conservation, and Revitalization

Chapter 20

From *Poirot* to *Bioshock*: Art Deco in the age of mediatization

Bridget Elliott

I discovered that London Weekend Television, who financed that first series [of *Poirot*] for Brian Eastman, spent almost £5 million on the filming of those first ten stories, an average of half a million pounds per episode, a fortune in 1988. [...] The spectacular sets, clothes, props and locations underlined the authenticity that everyone wanted to bring to every frame. The audience truly felt they were being transported to 1935, 1936 or 1937. – David Suchet

For a young artist to fully understand not just the basics of an artistic period, but to apply it holistically to a frigging video game really blows my mind. Everything this guy touched turned to Deco gold. – Ken Levine¹

As actor David Suchet and game designer Ken Levine attest, art deco retains a visible presence in twenty-first-century media, thus continuing its long association with popular art forms and consumer culture. Many essays in this collection explore the symbiotic relationship between various strands of *art moderne* (subsequently identified as art deco) and early twentieth-century mass media, showing how the style was widely photographed and discussed in the popular press,

where it was frequently cast as a visual correlative to jazz, and became a key component both of radio design and programming and early Hollywood entertainment.² This essay focuses on more recent media incarnations of art deco which have further extended the style's social reach and layers of meaning. In particular, it compares the retro-deco of the television series *Poirot* (1989-2013) with the retro-futurist deco of the original version of the video game *BioShock* (2007) and examines some of the key stakes in such instances of mediatization.

From Mediated to Mediatized

The term mediatization, imported from communication studies, draws attention to some important shifts in the relationship between art deco and the mass media over the course of the twentieth century as social and cultural life gradually became unimaginable without those media that progressively infiltrated the most intimate aspects of human existence (Hepp 2012, ch. 4). According to media studies professor Stig Hjarvard, the concept of mediatization helps explain “how the media spread to, became intertwined with, and influenced other fields or social institutions” in the later phases of high modernity (Hjarvard 2013, 1). Elaborating further, he notes that such omnipresent media derive a significant proportion of their influence from a “double-sided development in which they have become an *integral part* of other institutions’ operations, while also achieving a degree of *self-determination and authority* that forces other institutions, to greater or lesser degrees, to submit to their logic” (Hjarvard 2013, 3). This has important implications for the evolution of art deco. Initially, during the twenties, thirties and forties, the style was formulated by artists, architects and designers for various material artifacts that were first physically experienced directly and then disseminated through various forms of

media representation such as print, radio or film. Such a paradigm is predicated on the notion of mediation, which Hjarvard defines simply as “the use of media for the communication of meaning” (Hjarvard 2013, 2). In other words, the deco idiom was formulated by those working within the relatively autonomous spheres of art and design before being circulated to wider sectors of the general public through various media vehicles. However, this relationship would change over the course of the twentieth century as art deco lost its currency for contemporary artists and designers, becoming yet another historical style such as gothic revival or art nouveau.

The ever expanding reach of mass media in the late twentieth century, followed by the rise of social media and interactive gaming in the twenty-first, inevitably shifted design priorities, with the result that any subsequent revivals of the art deco style (as well as restorations of earlier deco artifacts) operate under a rather different rubric of mediatization; art deco is now resuscitated and repurposed by those working in media that emerged long after the style’s ascendancy in the twenties, thirties and forties. Indeed, these more recent media have become the main vehicles not only for framing and disseminating the style but also for commissioning new incarnations of it. In other words, more people are now exposed to art deco through television, the internet and gaming than through original deco artifacts seen in situ or in museum collections, or even through representations of such works in archival media. Inevitably, such cultural layering affects the way the style is used and understood in increasingly self-conscious ways. Frederic Jameson argued more than twenty years ago that the traditional fine arts were acquiring a new “consciousness of themselves as various media within a mediatic system in which their own internal production also constitutes a symbolic message and the taking of a position on the status of the medium in question” (Jameson 1991, 162). Although art deco is a style rather than an

artistic medium per se, and in fact the deco idiom spans many different media, a closer look at our case studies will reveal a similarly self-conscious position-taking in the way the style is redeployed in recent media.

But before turning to a more detailed analysis of our case studies, it is important to understand the rationale for selecting them. As media that evolved after the heyday of art deco, television and video gaming are ideal vehicles for focusing on the question of stylistic revival.³ It is also important that *Poirot* and *Bioshock* rely on art deco (and closely related forms of streamline moderne) for developing not only plotting and characterization, but also the kind of consistent signature look that makes a visually compelling brand of entertainment. Furthermore, their market performance indicates a massive popular following. *Poirot* ran to seventy episodes over thirteen seasons between 1989 and 2013, not including spin-off films, while the original version of *Bioshock* won numerous awards as one of the most critically acclaimed video games of all time, selling over four million units between its release in August of 2007 and March of 2010.⁴ In the analysis that follows, I argue that the highly visible deco elements in each are intrinsic to their success. Focusing on a few of the most conspicuous uses of deco from both the designers' point of view and that of viewers and gamers, I suggest several reasons for the longevity of this popular early twentieth-century style.

Poirot

The categorization of period architecture generally remains firmly in the realm of the professional or amateur enthusiast [...] Oddly, however, most people *are* able to name a few of the main features of Art Deco architecture fairly easily - the

curved corners, stylised forms, the use of bakelite and chrome, the transport motifs. [...] It's possible of course that Art Deco is just more omnipresent because of its universal appeal, or its uniqueness, but I think that most of the credit should go to Monsieur Hercule Poirot. – Charlotte Neilson

In an article for ArchDaily that describes itself as “the world’s most visited architectural website”, Charlotte Neilson attributes a large part of the extraordinary popularity of art deco to Agatha Christie’s large corpus of crime fiction devoted to the investigations of Hercule Poirot (33 novels and 54 short stories),⁵ all which have been adapted for television over the past three decades by LWT (London Weekend Television) and ITV (Independent Television) in collaboration with ACL (Agatha Christie Limited). By most accounts, Christie is the world’s all-time, best-selling, fictional author, whose novels and short stories have sold over two billion copies and been translated into more than one hundred languages.⁶

There can be little doubt that the glamorous depiction of the interwar years – conspicuously evident in the fashions of the main characters and the buildings and interiors they inhabit – was and still is an integral component of Christie’s success. If people enjoy reading [??1] about the visual details of everyday life during the interwar period ~~in~~ Christie’s stories, they seem even more passionate about looking at them on ~~on~~ television. The shift to television adds a further mediatized layer to Christie’s already textually mediated objects from the thirties. ~~There~~ ~~the~~ Television’s capacity to ~~-meticulously restored~~ and ~~recreated~~ the built environment and period clothing have brought art deco to life for millions of viewers, who give voice to their enthusiasm in blogs and websites tracing the intricate details of what is seen in each program. Typical

examples include the discussion of the homes used in various episodes on ChimniWiki, a site devoted to making architectural history accessible to homeowners, and the numerous fashion pins (or posts) related to both Agatha Christie and Hercule Poirot on Pinterest, the social network for sharing visual material.⁷ But by far the most detailed sources for *Poirot* fans are two sites run by the blogger Eirik Dragsund: *The Chronology of Agatha Christie's Poirot* -and *Investigating Agatha Christie's Poirot*. The former goes to great lengths to establish a timeline for the different television episodes (most falling between 1928 and 1938) by using internal clues such as dates that appear in letters, cheques, and invitations or references to historical events such as the maiden voyage of the Queen Mary, while the latter considers how the series was produced, by looking at script writing, direction, characterization, set locations, and design.

The immaculately dressed David Suchet, who plays the Belgian detective throughout the series, is the personification of art deco, an idea that is foregrounded from the outset in the program's title sequence designed by Pat Gavin in 1988 (Perkins 2013). **[INSERT FIGURE 20.1 HERE]** As the opening credits roll, Poirot's profile and face emerge from the stylized pages of a book, while a plumb-bob on the book's cover turns into his (impeccably deco) moustache. Key aspects of Poirot's signature look – the waxed moustache, bow tie and winged collar – are clearly evident despite the fact that his bust is rendered in the kind of multiple perspectives favored by painters such as Juan Gris. (Gavin has pointed out that this multifaceted cubist style, which to him suggested a puzzle, seemed especially appropriate in the case of a detective deciphering clues [Perkins 2013].) As the fractured blue planes morph into steam, the settings of Christie's stories are brought to life by a stream of images including a smoking factory, a sleek locomotive resembling the Orient Express, and a biplane. Poirot's name is spelled out along the tracks in a

bold, round, sans serif typeface that owes much to the graphic design of Cassandre.⁸ Our next sighting of the detective is onboard the speeding train. While Poirot stares out of its window, the symbols of his profession – a magnifying glass and revolver – float by outside. The conspicuous shift from color to black and white in the train segment creates a noirish sense of mystery by evoking the flickering frames of celluloid films from the 1930s and 1940s, and is a perfect segue to the finale with the opening credits. The backdrop for the credits is a virtually empty film set, whose sole props are two large stage flats representing larger-than-life versions of the same book cover we saw at the beginning, indicating that we have come full circle. Suchet crosses the empty set using Poirot's mincing walk and enters a dazzling pool of limelight, multiply recessed like a triangulated art deco gemstone. There he turns and raises his hat to the viewer before disappearing into darkness. These long shots of Poirot give viewers a final opportunity to savor the sartorial splendor of this deco dandy replete with Homburg hat, flower lapel pin, three-piece wool lounge suit, white gloves, swan-headed walking stick, spats and patent leather boots (Schneider 2011).

As the program unfolds, the elegance of Poirot's attire is complemented by his equally meticulous, ultramoderne flat. The task of finding and furnishing it fell to Brian Eastman, the first producer of the series, along with his production crew. As a freelance detective working from home, Poirot is frequently seen entering and leaving an apartment in the fictional Whitehaven Mansions, or, in real life, the U-shaped, ten-story apartment block originally known simply by its address, 6-9 Charterhouse Square, designed by Guy de Morgan & Partners and built by J Gerrard and Sons Ltd. between 1935 and ~~1935~~1937. Features such as its steel frame, pale yellow and brown brick cladding, wide, curving, metal window bands and recessed entrance

suggest the kind of streamlined efficiency that de Morgan believed would appeal to the businessmen occupants he envisioned in its small pied-à-terre flats. Like many of the art deco locations used in this television series, 6-9 Charterhouse Square was in excellent condition, having been recently restored to the tune of £2 million. After the architectural firm Hildebrand & Glicker had completed the upgrades in 1988, the owners, Regalian Properties, renamed the building Florin Court (Temple 2008). **[INSERT FIGURE 20.2 HERE.]** As it turned out, the timing was perfect for Brian Eastman, who had decided to “make modern-Thirties architecture a feature of the stories” and was in the midst of establishing a list of such buildings in striking distance of central London to use as filming locations (Haining 1995, 42, cited in Dragsund July 7, 2013). The developers agreed to let Eastman’s crew film the location from every conceivable angle over the course of a single weekend before any of the apartments were occupied. The objective was to build up a library of footage for weaving into any number of stories. As Eastman recalls, “We shot continuously for a 72-hour period – all through one day, then through the night and all the next day. We knew it was important to do this because we would never be able to come back and find everything the same. [...] So we filmed Florin Court from every angle and in every kind of light and darkness” (Haining 1995, 43 cited in Dragsund July 7, 2013).

The interior of Poirot’s flat reveals the close attention to detail that one would expect from a detective specializing in “murders of quiet domestic interest”.⁹ As fans of the television series know, the detective had two different apartments in Whitehaven Mansions: the first being a small, relatively stark set of predominantly white rooms, while the second was larger, more opulently furnished, and richly colored. The creation of a more luxurious flat in 2005 was part of

the transition to Granada Television (part of ITV), which took over producing the series from LWT in 2002, increasing its funding and replacing Brian Eastman with their own executive producers, Michele Buck and Damien Timmer, who had a different approach. According to David Suchet, “They did not want the almost ‘family’ feel of the original one-hour versions, with Hastings and Miss Lemon fussing over Poirot at Whitehaven Mansions” (Suchet 2013, 242). Instead they sought a greater fidelity to Christie’s later novels by making each one into a stand-alone drama or special event with its own, newly designed title sequence. Of course, this meant abandoning Pat Gavin’s earlier opening credits (described above) that had initially given the series its signature look. *Five Little Pigs*, the first of Granada’s new Poirot “films” marked the turning point. As Suchet stresses, the “new film had a distinctly feature-film feel to it, and that was clear from the moment that we started shooting. Now there were far more shots using hand-held cameras, more elaborate exteriors, even grander props; we were certainly in the world of cinema now – even if the film was being made for television” (Suchet 2013, 244).

The décor of the first apartment (56B Whitehaven Mansions), designed under the direction of Rob Harris, echoes the elegance of many Hollywood black and white film sets of the late 1920s and early 1930s, recalling the period when Cedric Gibbons was the art director of Metro Goldwyn Meyer (MGM). **[INSERT FIGURE 20.3 HERE]** The paleness of the apartment’s off-white walls, light parquet floors, and glass bookshelves is emphasized by a pair of contrasting dark French doors. Bauhaus tubular steel chairs and other pieces of highly polished, wooden veneer furniture, including a pylon desk, fluted console and coffee tables, as well as a sleek, dark-wood, low-backed living-room suite upholstered in a pale grey and white print, reinforce the period feel. Although details were deco, Brian Eastman had insisted that the general feel of

the set embody a rather more restrained thirties moderne “because Agatha Christie had explained in a profile of Poirot that Art Deco was too flamboyant for him” (Eastman 2013). The finishing touches included a folding screen, and small collection of lamps, vases, clocks and figurines, many of which were recycled in the second apartment (203 Whitehaven Mansions) after the set for the first one was dismantled during the transition to Granada-ITV.¹⁰

Although the first few films under the new regime saw the detective working away from home, David Suchet, who became more involved in production decisions after being appointed an associate producer by Granada, requested that a new apartment be built to address his concern that Poirot was increasingly adrift (Suchet 2013, 272). **[INSERT FIGURE 20.4 HERE]** Jeff Tessler, the new designer of the series, explains the rationale behind the detective’s new home: “Eight years ago we moved him upstairs. I built a bigger apartment for him. I made it more continental. Partly because he is Belgian, we wanted a warm look – a lot more French and Belgian Art Deco, richer and more striking” (Rohrer 2013). Poirot’s relocation from number 56B on the first floor to number 203 on the second provided an additional bedroom to accommodate his new live-in valet, George, who replaced Miss Lemon. (As Poirot’s secretary in earlier programs, Miss Lemon had always gone home at night.) Number 203 is supposed to be one of the more exclusive, luxurious and spacious two-bedroom flats in the original thirties building, which had only one such unit on each floor (Temple 2016). As Eirik Dragsund observes, the layout of the living-room in the later flat resembles that of the earlier one in many respects, including the location of the dining-room and a seating area in front of the fireplace, as well as a set of double French doors, all of which suggests that the two flats belong to the same building. Also furthering the illusion of continuity are the similar types of art deco objects used to furnish

both flats, including white ceramic figurines, bronzes, elongated vases and a folding screen (Dragsund, May 18, 2012). Nevertheless, the furniture in the second flat is much bolder, as the orange upholstery and tigerwood veneer of the new living-room suite demonstrate. We also see more striking geometric patterns in the fabric of the curtains and a living-room armchair.

The set for Poirot's larger flat inevitably required more furniture, even though it still needed to be dismantled and stored after each film was shot. It contains both original art deco artifacts and cleverly contrived imitations, as Jeff Tessler explains: "Some of the pieces we hired, some we sourced from Art Deco dealers and a few things were bought in TK Maxx then sprayed up. But most of the big items – the suite, the dining table and desk – were made by our workshop at Pinewood Studios. They look absolutely authentic in their walnut and dark-wood veneers – you can't tell what's real from what's fake" (Tessler cited in Day 2013). All of the props are carefully catalogued so they can be reused in different contexts, according to props master Jim Grindley, who is responsible for every object on the set, including Poirot's silver egg cup, cigarette case and writing pad. However, people tend not to notice such recycling because the interior styling is so clever. In Grindley's words, "It's all about illusion creating the right effect" (Grindley cited in Day 2013). Seeing the set of the new apartment for the first time, David Suchet was almost moved to tears:

It was so perfect for Poirot. Every single tiny detail was right, from the bonsai tree that he trims, to the clock on the mantelpiece; from the square furniture in orange upholstery, in true Art Deco style, to the chrome side tables. It had the precision and symmetry that he would have wanted. It meant that Poirot had his home again. It even had one of my own clocks in it. I am a great lover and collector of clocks and not long after the change in

production team I spotted, in one of my favourite clock shops, a magnificent Art Deco clock, with a marble base and two columns standing beside a diamond-shaped face, and with a chrome dog standing on top of it. I knew that Poirot describes an almost exactly similar clock, though with a fox on top of it, which he would stroke and then polish away his fingerprints with his handkerchief. I bought the clock at once and donated it to the production, and it sat on the mantelpiece of his new flat (Suchet 2013, 272-3).

Poirot's picture perfect apartment functions on at least two levels. Within the parameters of the storyline, it reveals certain attributes of the detective's character such as his modern taste in art and furnishing, his love of domestic comfort, and his meticulous attention to detail. Outside the fictional world, it is part and parcel of the movement to preserve and restore modern British architecture, actively fostered by such groups as The Thirties Society, which was formed in 1979 to protect especially vulnerable art deco buildings and provide public education about their history and merits (Craggs, Goeghagen and Neate 2013, 885).¹¹ As we have seen in the case of Florin Court, filming in prominent art deco locations played a vital role in forging the signature look of the series. Numerous other deco locations followed, only a few of which can be mentioned here, including a number of iconic *moderne* homes such as "High and Over" in *The King of Clubs*, "Joldwynds" in *Theft of the Royal Ruby* and *The Disappearance of Mr. Davenheim*, and "Kit's Close" in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, and other well-known streamlined structures such as the De La Warr Pavillion in *The ABC Murders* (2), the Midland Hotel in *Double Sin* and the Hoover Building in *The King of Clubs* and *The Dream* (TV Locations U.K. and ChimniWiki). While some of these locations were well preserved or newly

restored, others were in various states of disrepair, which meant the production crew had to render them camera-ready prior to filming.

A case in point is the Midland Hotel in Morecambe, the victim of various failed restoration schemes, which left it sadly derelict when *Double Sin* was filmed there in 1989 for the second series (Guise 2014). Part of the production crew's cosmetic surgery included fabricating a bold new streamlined statue of a white "aviator" mermaid with outstretched arms and tail for the carpark in front of the main entrance (Ludlow 2016).¹² **[INSERT FIGURE 20.5 HERE]** A dramatically foreshortened view of her frames our first glimpse of the Midland Hotel as Poirot and Hastings drive up to the building in a smart, royal blue taxicab. As they disembark, the camera focuses on the taxi's silver hood ornament, which consists of another flying figure with arched wings. This rapid succession of modern transportation imagery, so characteristic of art deco, intensifies a thirties sensibility and sets the stage for appreciating the hotel itself, whose facade was frequently likened to "a great white ship rising out of the sea" (Clonmore 1933, 94; see also Doremus-Cook 2014). Perhaps even more ambitious was the complete recreation of Eric Ravilious's murals of seaside subjects seen by day and night in the Rotunda Café in the north end of the building, where much of the story's action takes place. Because the original murals were hastily painted in 1933 on plaster that was too fresh and damp, they quickly disintegrated beyond repair and had to be completely painted over in 1935. By 1989, black and white photographs constituted the only remaining visual evidence of them, leaving Brian Eastman and his crew to determine their own color scheme for the reproduction, which resulted in buildings rather more pink and beige than the steely white described by Ravilious's wife, Tirzah Garwood, who had done much of the original painting. Color aside, the television crew's painstaking

duplication of the 1933 seaside imagery apparently convinced many visiting the hotel after 1989 that the originals has simply been restored (Doremus-Cook 2014). There can be little doubt that the glamorous mediatized incarnation of the Midland Hotel, seen by millions of *Poirot* viewers on television (not to mention DVD and YouTube) helped generate sufficient interest in the building to fuel two restoration proposals: one that never got off the ground by Kalber Leisure, who purchased the hotel in 2001, followed by another, more successful bid by Urban Splash, a Manchester property regeneration company. Taking over the hotel in 2003 and securing 7.2 million pounds in grants from the Northwest Regional Development Agency and English Heritage enabled Urban Splash to complete three years of extensive restoration from 2005 to 2008 (Guise 2014 and Friends of the Midland Hotel, “Restoration”). Returning to the beginning, one of last features to be completed in 2013 was yet another version of Ravilious’s mural. ~~In order to~~ To accommodate some of the changes made when Urban Splash transformed the Rotunda from tea-room to bar, including the insertion of a circular counter in the middle of the room and two new side doors, the spatial disposition of the mural had to be modified by painters Jonquil Cook and Isa Clee Cadmum. ~~In order to~~ Trying to reproduce all other aspects of the 1933 mural as faithfully as possible in the new space, they discussed the color scheme with Ravilious experts Alan Powers and James Russell and, like Eastman’s production crew, based their design on the old black and white photographs as well as Ravilious’s own sketches for the project (Doremus-Cook 2014^[??3]). In this case, the cultural layering involves some curious twists as a television production of Christie’s fiction takes considerable liberty resusitating a lost art deco mural. Decades later when this mediatized replica (widely mistaken for the original) must be removed during renovation, its popularity leads to the commissioning of another more historically accurate recreation.

Although spatial constraints preclude examining further examples of art deco in *Poirot*, the few already discussed help us understand why the style attracted the program's producers and how they intended it to function. As we have seen, their passion for recreating everyday life during the thirties – from its fashions and social mores to its buildings and new technologies – sent members of the production crew scurrying to source original artifacts and plausible replicas. What they couldn't find they had to research, before producing the necessary artifacts in-house or ordering them from specialty suppliers. Every last-tiny detail had to be right so viewers could fully immerse themselves in Poirot's world. In Gemma Day's words, "It's this kind of expertise that creates the Poirot effect – the illusion that we're basking in the luxury of a bygone age, and that also no expense has been spared in conveying us there" (Day 2013). Day's emphasis on the luxury that characterizes this particular instance of what Raphael Samuel called "retrochic" reminds us that *Poirot* was conceived and launched in 1988-9 during the so-called Lawson Boom, a period of British economic prosperity at least partially engineered by the policies of Margaret Thatcher's chancellor, Nigel Lawson (Samuel 1994, 83-118). Fueled by revenues from North Sea Oil, rising property prices, the deregulation of the London stock exchange, income tax cuts, and the suppression of trade unionism, a rapidly expanding (some would say overheating) British economy generated new jobs and unleashed a frenzy of consumer spending (Pettinger 2016; Rogers 2013).

As the enormous popularity of *Poirot* indicates, one of the many things avidly consumed during this period was Britain's past. Raphael Samuel traces this development in a fascinating account of retrochic, which he characterizes as powerful form of popular memory or unofficial (as

opposed to professional or academic) history. According to Samuel, unlike more serious historical revivals, retrochic has few qualms about authenticity, being integrally linked to new technologies that falsely “distress” or otherwise counterfeit original artifacts for ever-expanding markets that enjoy playing with the idea of a period look (Samuel 1994, 83-85). By the late eighties the British appetite for retro goods and experiences was virtually insatiable, as the success of Covent Garden Market and Neal’s Yard and shops like *Past Times* attest (Samuel 1994, 86, 88). These success stories owed much to earlier manifestations of twentieth-century retrochic, such as the work of real estate agents like Roy Brookes, who Samuels describes as “pioneering a new market in run-down period properties” whose gentrification paved the way for later projects on a much larger scale, such as Florin Court and the Midland Hotel (Samuel 1994, 92). Samuel also cites art deco as one of the most enduring popular styles for clothing, furnishing and bric-a-brac at London’s open-air markets in Portobello Road and at Camden Lock from the sixties onward (Samuel 1994, 96, 103). In part, this was because so many mass-produced artifacts from the twenties and thirties had survived, but also because the simple, geometric forms of art deco were readily recognized and easily imitated. From its inception, art deco design had been inextricably bound up with commerce and used extensively for stores, hotels, film sets, advertising, new technologies and domestic products in an era of relative interwar affluence, before the rise of fascism and the horrors of World War II, not to mention the pressures of postcolonial immigration, multiculturalism, globalization and the complicated politics of navigating the European Union. In short, by the 1980s, the style was familiar and oddly comforting. Watching *Poirot*, viewers were transported back to a thirties that never was – gloriously modern in its Euro-American styling but with a reassuringly English sense of order and social hierarchy – where there were very few outsiders apart from a Belgian detective who

knows his place. As Finlo Roher observes, such “nostalgic opulence [is] perfect for escapist Sunday night telly” (Roher 2013).

Bioshock

I finished playing *BioShock* this year (years after it was released) and I immediately became a fan. I’m only halfway into the game and I’m already in love with the art deco theme of Rapture and especially its story. It’s one of those games that [so] fully immerses you into the world that you start to think about the what ifs and implications of a world like that. – James Bernabe

James Bernabe’s passion for the art deco design of Rapture has been widely echoed in online blogs and forums for fanart and fanfiction as well as in numerous academic articles that have appeared since the original version of *Bioshock* was released in 2007.¹³ According to Craig Nye, a senior staff writer for the videogames website *Thunderbolt*, the immersive environment of Rapture is one of the seven wonders of the videogame world (Nye 2008). Indeed, the extraordinarily rich and complex urban exteriors and interiors of this “first-person shooter survival-horror game” have generated much discussion (Tavinor 2009, 91). Unlike the decision to use the thirties costumes, props and locations for *Poirot*, which seemed self-evident from the outset because that was the period of Christie’s stories, the designers of *Bioshock* experimented with various locations and styles before settling upon an underwater, art deco city.

It is worth stressing that the location of the game was decided before its Ayn Rand storyline (Kim 2016). According to Ken Levine, the game's creative director, the setting and storyline of *Bioshock* were driven by its hybrid genre as a first-person shooter (FPS) including many elements of role-playing games (RPG) and the particular issues it tackled such as simulated worlds, genetic engineering and artificial intelligence (AI). To generate a convincing, coherent, and fully immersive gaming experience, Levine explains that the design team needed a location that would be self-contained and relatively isolated, engulfing the gamer in its scary physical space and world view (Gillan 2007). Early scenarios were set in imaginary presents and futures, including "an abandoned space station overrun with alien eels", an underwater colony of religious fanatics who invented horrific biological creatures (Parkin 2016), and even a city run by savants, whose physical manifestation took the form of a brain in a jar (*Making of Bioshock*, 2014). None of these, however, provided sufficient opportunities for exciting gameplay. Eventually all were jettisoned in favor of a historical perspective that shifted from an abandoned World War II Nazi lab to an underwater city (Park 2007). Determining the location of the gameplay was crucial as Levine explains, "I don't start with Story, because games are *not* story. Games are gameplay. Games are interactive" (Levine cited in Gillen 2007). The decision to stage the game in an underwater city led Levine to speculate on its origins:

So I came up with this notion of this Utopia they didn't want anyone to find. From that, I wondered what sort of Utopia it would be, and came up with the character of Andrew Ryan and his sort of philosophical background: pseudo-objectivism and extremely capitalistic view on the world. He'd be terrified the New Dealers in the US and the Stalinists in Russia would find his city, so – as he said – it wasn't impossible to build a

city at the bottom of the sea – it was impossible to build it anywhere else (Levine cited in Gillen 2007).

This train of thought eventually gave rise to the dystopian, retrofuturist city of Rapture, located underwater off the coast of Iceland.

Although the gamer discovers Rapture in 1960 after the plane of his avatar, Jack, crashes into the ocean, it was built during the 1940s.¹⁴ After swimming through plane wreckage towards the beckoning lights of the shore, Jack descends the staircase of a magnificent art deco lighthouse and enters a bathysphere. During his descent to the city, Jack gets his first glimpse of its urban skyline through the bathysphere windows. Resembling 1940s Manhattan with neon-lit structures that look vaguely like the Chrysler Building and Radio City Music Hall, Rapture also conjures up the urban visions found in Dada montages and futuristic films, such as *Metropolis* and *Blade Runner*. [INSERT FIGURE 20.6 HERE] The presence of marine life (fish, octopi and whales) and bubbles of air, along with the eerie green glow of the water, let the gamer know he has reached the ocean floor. As the bathysphere docks, Jack overhears the menacing voices of two female splicers who foreshadow the other dangerous characters he will encounter in the city's decrepit alleyways and buildings. Upon leaving the relative safety of the bathysphere, Jack is urged to pick up the handset of a shortwave radio. As the friendly voice of Atlas offers to direct him to the safety of higher ground, he seems to be thrown a lifeline. And so the game begins, as Jack, following the advice of Atlas, physically progresses through the different areas of the city (or levels of the game) by arming himself with weapons and gathering special life-enhancing potions and plasmids and killing the many enemies (splicers, big daddies and other evil characters) who block his path. At first, Jack's goal is to rescue Atlas's family but everything

changes when he discovers that Atlas is really Jack Fontaine, Andrew Ryan's arch enemy, and that Andrew Ryan, whom Jack has killed on Ryan's instructions, was his biological father.

Deeply traumatized by these revelations, Jack's new objective is to destroy Fontaine and find a way to escape to the surface. At every turn, Jack is presented with the moral dilemma of whether to rescue the innocent-looking "little sisters" who accompany the evil "big daddies" who menace him, or to kill them so he can harvest the Adam (a miraculously rejuvenating substance) that they carry. The choices gamers make in their role as Jack determine which of the game's two outcomes they will experience.

The art deco style of Rapture started to take shape after Levine visited the Rockefeller Center (1930-39) in New York. As he explains,

my wife and I went around with little tourist cameras taking photos of doorknobs and lighting, and so on. You have to understand what made the movement what it is. How do you represent that in a game? If you fall into the tiny details the gamer won't see it, and you have to distinguish what is essential to the real structure from what is essential to the player's understanding of it in this macro-space. Obsessing over tiny screws that might be fundamental to a real space won't work. [...] You end up trying to capture the essence or the spirit of something, rather than literally recreating it" (Rossignol 2013).

Levine also photographed some of his other favorite art deco icons from the 1930s and 1940s, including the Empire State and Chrysler buildings (Perry 2007). Both his own forays into deco and those of other members of the design team, such as art director Scott Sinclair who confesses to sleeping through art history classes, are more or less apparent in different aspects of *Bioshock's* design (*Making of Bioshock*, 2014). Most obvious perhaps is the game's citation of

canonical works of art and architecture. For instance, the colossal statue of Atlas outside the Kashmir Restaurant is based on Lee Lawrie's famous bronze figure in front of the Rockefeller Center (1937) (Worth 2013) **[INSERT FIGURE 20.7 HERE]** and the brass medallions on the walls of the stairwell descending from the lighthouse to the bathysphere celebrating the values of Rapture (e.g. science, industry, art) echo those commemorating various building trades (e.g. electricity, machines, masonry) in the lobby of the Empire State Building (Gaudiosi 2007-9). Certain iconic art deco skyscrapers are recycled wholesale, such as Rapp and Rapp's Paramount Building (1927) which appears in one of the promotional images for the game ("Rapture" *Bioshock Wiki*). Elsewhere, we glimpse parts of well-known deco structures. For instance, Rapture's lighthouse reprises various elements from the Rockefeller Center, and the urban skyline seen from the windows of the Bathysphere and the skylights of the city's underwater corridors includes a shadowy silhouette resembling William Van Alen's Chrysler Building (1930) ("Rapture Tower" *2K Forums* 2008).

Nevertheless, direct quotations of historical art deco artifacts are relatively rare in *Bioshock*, because, as Levine reminds us, game designers focus on capturing the essence of a style rather than its minute details. As we have already seen, such mediatized reproductions of historical styles tend to be simplified and exaggerated, as in the case of the "aviator" mermaid sculpture fabricated for the Poirot episode at Morecambe. An art deco shorthand of this type has several advantages. First, it is more readily legible and intensely experienced, especially in the case of those gamers less familiar with the art and culture of the period portrayed. In response to Dan Amrich's question about how modern audiences would react to a fantasy world from over sixty years ago, Les Levine explains, "We're not trying to make a 15 million dollar architecture

appreciation class. The audience wants something that looks cool, unique and feels believable. They don't care if it's art deco or fart gecko” (Levine cited in Amrich 2006). In other words, because most gamers aren't burdened by notions of art historical authenticity, all sorts of creative liberties are possible, which has the further advantage of speeding up the design process and reducing its costs. As Shawn Robertson, the lead animator of *Bioshock*, observes, art deco was an excellent choice because “it's automatically low-poly and fits into a game budget perfectly because of its large simple shapes” (Worth 2013). In this case, members of the design team readily picked up an art deco shorthand, whose key features included streamlining and the use of stock industrial decorative motifs, which could be applied to everything from weapons and vending machines to advertising and furniture. According to art director Scott Sinclair and technical artist Nate Wells, once they learned to distinguish art deco from art nouveau, the designers took a free and easy approach to the style, selecting what they wanted from a wide array of existing objects that were then blown out of proportion or molded into different things. (*Making of Bioshock* 2014) The resulting stylistic consistency of Rapture makes its alternative history as a failed utopian underwater city particularly compelling, at least in part because it echoes early twentieth-century attempts to envision cities of the future. In this respect, Rapture's futurist look is surprisingly familiar, much of it inspired by sources such as *The Metropolis of Tomorrow* (1929), a collection of deco drawings by the well-known architectural delineator, Hugh Ferriss, who wanted to show how recently introduced zoning bylaws requiring setbacks for downtown skyscrapers might influence the future design of New York City. In *Bioshock*, the shadowy simple geometric forms of Ferriss's dramatically spotlighted monumental buildings are transposed to a new underwater location, prompting one critic to remark that “Rapture was designed to look like Hugh Ferriss's literal wet dream.” (Kim 2016)

The retrofuturist layering that we see in *Bioshock's* game space is replicated in its story world.

As Jack advances through the game's levels, he delves deeper into the city's past, gathering clues from his own encounters with different characters and overhearing conversations on the street, while looking at lots of advertising and segments of film as well as hearing radio and musical selections from the twenties and thirties, all of which fosters the illusion of a coherent deco world. Gradually he pieces together the grim backstory of Rapture and its inhabitants. Initially built in the 1940s as the utopian [Ayn Randian](#) experiment of Andrew Ryan, an American entrepreneur whose Randian distrust of religious and secular authority led him to recruit like-minded, highly ambitious, individuals, Rapture soon degenerated into warring factions.¹⁵ One of the most horrifying aspects of Rapture's unbridled capitalism was its citizens' relentless quest for physical perfection. Experimenting with highly dubious forms of DNA hacking and [splicing](#)^[??4], many of them eventually degenerate into the mutants and zombies that Jack encounters in 1960.¹⁶ It is this dystopian narrative with its temporal disjuncture that frames the way gamers perceive the art deco elements of the cityscape. Numerous well-preserved details, such as the neon advertising, lighting and signage, streamlined vending machines, geometrically patterned elevator and security doors, and [air-little sister](#) vents in the shape of stylized bronze sunflowers, make the old, leaky buildings seem even more decrepit. The [air-little sister](#) vents have grown barnacles and various [Securis](#) bulkhead doors buckle and leak as the sea takes back the city.

[INSERT FIGURES 20.8 and 20.9] Such contrasts underscore how a once bright vision of the future has gone sadly awry.

A good example of this dystopian framing appears early in the game as Jack enters the Kashmir Restaurant through boldly patterned art deco doors. The once elegant dining room of Rapture's elite is in disarray, debris from a 1959 New Year's Eve ball strewn everywhere, the washroom fixtures broken and bloodstained, and water flooding the lower level dance floor. **[INSERT FIGURE 20.10 HERE]** Jack experiences the juxtaposition of past pleasure and present terror at every turn as he encounters the splicers, ghosts, little sisters and big daddies who haunt this magnificent deco relic. The effect of what he sees is intensified by what he hears. Stumbling across the audio diary of Diane McClintock, Andrew Ryan's mistress, Jack discovers she was stood up by Ryan on the night of the masquerade ball and badly injured when supporters of his arch enemy Atlas bombed the restaurant and attacked its guests, an event which marked the beginning of a bloody civil war. Ambient music also conditions Jack's response to the space. At first, "If I Didn't Care," by the Ink Spots is playing softly in the background. An optimistic ballad about love recorded in 1939, the song became one of the group's biggest hits. However, the mood changes when Jack witnesses a citizen of Rapture brutally murdered by a big daddy for trying to steal some Adam from a little sister. As he watches, he listens to Noel Coward's "The Party's Over Now" from 1931, although the version played in *Bioshock* is a later recording from 1955. The words of the song allude both to Rapture's descent into chaos and his own increasingly perilous entrapment in this underwater city (Gibbons 2011).

Pasts, Presents and Futures

The grim, dystopian and retrofuturist art deco in *Bioshock* presents a stark contrast to its elegiac and nostalgic presentation in *Poirot*. At first blush, one might be tempted to suggest that in the

new millennium, an art deco of ruin and decay has cast its shadow over the pristine integrity of late twentieth-century reincarnations of the style. As previously discussed, the prosperity of western economies in the 1980s fueled a resurgence of art deco that made programs like *Poirot* so popular, just as the increasing erosion of global stability across the political, financial and environmental sectors during the early 2000s, made the failed utopian experiment of Rapture so compelling. But such a tidy juxtaposition risks obscuring as much as it illuminates, since these contrasting versions of art deco are, at least in part, also explained by the different demographics and expectations of those playing first-person shooters and those watching Sunday night television. While the former routinely do battle with hostile forces in dangerous places, most of the latter seek refuge in the kinder and gentler worlds of an imaginary past.

To further complicate matters, we should remember that dystopian images of art deco have as long a history as that of the style itself, playing a key role in films such as *Metropolis*, directed by Fritz Lang in 1927, and both versions of *Blade Runner*, the first directed by Ridley Scott in 1982 and its sequel, *Blade Runner 2049*, directed by Denis Villeneuve in 2017.¹⁷ Similarly, in the American art world of the 1960s Robert Smithson photographed numerous examples of decaying New York buildings from the 1930s that he called ultramoderne rather than art deco. Attracted to the Janus-like qualities of these thirties buildings that referenced both the distant past by using names and stylistic flourishes from ancient cultures (e.g. MesoAmerican and Egyptian) and the future with their modernist streamlined forms, Smithson claimed they embodied an ultramoderne (or crystalline) sensibility where time repeatedly looped back on itself offering different glimpses of the future from a present that was constantly changing (Smithson 1967 and Lee 2001). Although in the twentieth century such disturbing and explicitly

retrofuturist manifestations of the style were a minor undercurrent in the stream of more popular, retro-deco restorations and recreations, their increasing presence in the new millennium points to the need to reconceptualize art deco as a field or spectrum that encompasses different nuances and competing positions.¹⁸ In other words, it is important to differentiate between a holistically conceived retro-deco of nostalgic escape that engulfs us in an interwar past that never was and a fragmented and decaying retrofuturist deco that focuses on past projections of the future to pose disturbing questions about our own present and the futures we imagine.

But what should we make of these differences that are foregrounded in the comparison of *Poirot* and *Bioshock* as two mediatized instances of art deco? Returning to our earlier discussion of Jameson's observation that the traditional fine arts have become increasingly self-conscious of themselves as media within a mediatic system, we can better appreciate how their art deco signature look provides a compelling visual metaphor for the kind of convergence culture each example embodies (Jenkins 2006). In the case of *Poirot*, we have an homage to the older medium of the book as the original vehicle of Christie's stories, which are reanimated on screen for older generations of readers as well as for younger generations who may spend much less time reading and may well be encountering the mysteries for the first time. The perfectly intact art deco of *Poirot* enables viewers to readily immerse themselves in its 1930s setting when crimes were (supposedly) easily solved, signs of modernity appeared glamorous, media distractions were few, and life could be lived slowly with books to be savored.

In contrast, *Bioshock* presents a bleaker view of Rapture's art deco as entrapped gamers try to escape from this ruined, neoliberal, Ayn Randian utopia, whose dismal history is recorded in bits

and pieces of older media that they encounter on their journey, including snippets of radio programs and old films as well as faded, peeling posters. Just as art deco subsumed a wide variety of styles from different eras and cultures, reducing all of them to a new streamlined simplicity, the older media in *Bioshock* are rendered in only one dimension for the screen. Even though the ultra-capitalist, high-tech experiment of Rapture has clearly failed – its deco infrastructure falling into disrepair and its citizenry degenerating into factions of warring mutants – one should not conclude that the experience of playing it necessarily fosters a critique of neoliberal status quo. While some academic writers, such as Sian Watts, have argued that the destruction of physical structures can be read as symbolizing the destruction of social structures, leading to the association of ruin with the freedom to reinvent social and gender relations, others, such as Thijs van den Berg, have suggested *Bioshock*'s spectacle of destruction only offers gamers temporary cathartic relief from their pervasive sense of dissatisfaction and powerlessness as consumers in contemporary culture because its gameplay is predicated on a logic of capitalist accumulation and speculation and its most desirable outcome (if one spares the little sisters) is the prospect of escaping from Rapture to start their own bourgeois families (Watts 2011, 247; van den Berg 2012). Furthermore, as Jessica Aldred and Brian Greenspan have stressed, *Bioshock* is “both a storyworld and cultural/technological property embedded in the very real, material conditions of media conglomeration and convergence that both allegorizes and operationalizes the ‘control’ logic of convergence” (Aldred and Greenspan 2011, 481). In short, while its dystopian framework seems to question technological progress and unfettered capitalism, *Bioshock* offers no alternatives apart from nuclear annihilation (which is how the game ends if one has killed the little sisters) and must be played according to procedural rules and on equipment that is tightly controlled by three main producers (Aldred and Greenspan

2011, 493). Unlike *Poirot*, the ruined art deco world of *Bioshock*, albeit even more seductively immersive, seems to put an end to imagining a future that is anywhere but here.

Notes

¹ The opening epigraphs are taken from David Suchet and David Wansell, *Poirot and Me* (London: Headline Publishing, 2013), 62, 64-5 and Ken Levine, ed., *Breaking the Mold: The Art of Bioshock* (Boston: Take-Two Interactive Software, 2002-2007), “Foreward,” <https://www.2kgames.com/cultofrapture/downloads-bioshock>.

² After editing the collection, direct the reader to several of the most conspicuous examples. Page numbers will be added at the proof stage.

³ For excellent discussions of earlier art deco revivals, see Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory* (London: Verso, 1994), “Retrochic,” 83-118 and Elizabeth Guffey, *Retro: The Culture of Revival* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), ch. 2, 67-97.

⁴ Wikipedia provides a handy list of episodes for all 13 series, see

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Agatha_Christie%27s_Poirot_episodes

It provides sales information for the original version *Bioshock*

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BioShock#cite_note-138. Sales figures are provided from 2007-

2010 before *Bioshock 2* was released on February 9, 2010, followed by *Bioshock 3 (Infinite)* on

March 2012. Copies of the first *Bioshock* are still sold on their own and as part of the remastered

Bioshock Collection released on September 13, 2016.

⁵ The statistics for the number of Poirot novels and short stories are taken from Agatha Christie Limited (ACL), the company that Christie set up in 1955 to manage the rights to her work, <http://www.agathachristie.com/characters/hercule-poirot#about> . ACL also provides a carefully ordered reading list of the Poirot stories, <http://s3.amazonaws.com/agatha-christie-cms-production/Poirot-Reading-List.pdf> .

⁶ For instance, Wikipedia lists both Agatha Christie and William Shakespeare tied in first place as best-selling fiction authors, estimating their sales as between two and four billion books, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_best-selling_fiction_authors .

⁷ See for example a search run with the terms Hercule Poirot, fashion and Agatha Christie <https://www.pinterest.com/search/pins/?q=hercule%20poirot%20fashion%20agatha%20christie> . The ChimniWiki article is http://www.chimni.com/wiki/Homes_Used_In_Poirot_Episodes .

⁸ The outlined text with its shadows and highlight resembles the Acier Noir font that Cassandre invented in 1936, although the shape of the letters (particularly the P and R) is closer to the typeface he used in earlier posters such as *Grand Sports* (1925) and the combination of capital letters with a small “i” echoed the text of his *Pi Volo* (1924). Gavin’s locomotive of course echoes the posters Cassandre did for *Etoile de Nord* and *Nord Express* in 1927, see <http://retrographik.com/a-m-cassandre-art-deco-poster-artist/>.

⁹ In a 1956 interview with Nigel Dennis, Agatha Christie used these words to describe the subject matter of her stories. Cited in Russel H. Fitzgibbon, *The Agatha Christie Companion* (Madison: University of ~~Wisconsin~~~~Wisconsin~~ Press, 1980), 26.

¹⁰ Floor plans and pictures of both flats are reproduced in Eirik Dragsund, “The Apartment on Screen: 1989-2001 v. 2005-present,” *Investigating Agatha Christie’s Poirot* (May 18, 2012), <http://investigatingpoirot.blogspot.ca/2012/05/apartment-on-screen-1989-2001-v-2005.html>.

¹¹ In 1992 the society changed its name to The Twentieth Century Society to reflect its expanded mandate to embrace all modern architecture since 1914 (<http://www.c20society.org.uk>).

¹² A photograph of the mermaid sculpture from the Lancashire Evening Post is reproduced on J Anna Ludlow’s site, http://www.jannaludlow.co.uk/Midland_Hotel/Film_and_Television.html. Her outstretched arms and tail belong to a well-established genre of aviator sculptures extending from art deco bronzes to more recent examples such as Anthony Gormley’s *Angel of the North* (1998).

¹³ James Bernabe, “Welcome to Rapture,” *Behance* (November 26, 2015), <https://www.behance.net/gallery/31573627/BioShock-Rapture> . Bernabe also sells some of his fanart based on *Bioshock* at <https://www.redbubble.com/people/jamesbernabe/works/17872304-bioshock-rapture>. Other prominent forums for fans are “The Cult of Rapture,” <http://www.2kgames.com/cultofrapture/home.php>, and “*Bioshock* Wiki” <http://bioshock.wikia.com/wiki/Rapture>. Further examples of fan art include, Paul, “*Bioshock*

Fan Art That's as Good as the Game Itself," *Unreality Magazine*, <http://unrealitymag.com/video-games/bioshock-fan-art-thats-as-good-as-the-game-itself/> samples of fan fiction can be found at <https://www.fanfiction.net/game/BioShock/>. On the extensive body of academic writing on the game that has contributed to its canonization, see Felan Parker, "Canonizing *Bioshock*: Cultural Value and the Prestige Game," *Games and Culture* (August 30, 2015): 1-25. Downloaded from gac.sagepub.com at University of Western Ontario July 29, 2016.

¹⁴ The only identity on offer is that of Jack which is why I refer to the player as he rather than she in discussions of the game's procedural logic.

¹⁵ Levine's decision to show the failure of Rapture's unbridled, Ayn Randian, capitalism at a time when many leading members of the Republican far right were extolling her virtues is an interesting one, even if he avoids explicitly commenting on its political significance. Rand's currency in tea-party, libertarian, and other far right circles has been widely discussed. See for example Burns, *Goddess of the Marketplace: Ayn Rand and the American Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) and Jane Mayer, *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right* (New York Anchor Books, 2016).

¹⁶ On the quest for physical perfection in design during the interwar years, see Christine Cogdell, *Eugenic Design: Streamlining America in the 1930s* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

¹⁷ As one recent commentator notes *Blade Runner* 2019 extends the art deco neo-noir look of the first film: "If Scott's original was set in a golden age of affluent positive-dreariness, fused with

the oriental fashion clothing apparel of 1920-1930's decadence, then 2049 is the dying embers of that age, more grim, colder, utilitarian – the hangover of the last epoch.” (weusedtobedroids.com 2017)

¹⁸ In addition to *Poirot*, we could cite other examples of retro-deco in this collection, such as Anne Massey's discussion of the 2007-2012 restoration of Oliver Percy Bernard's bar and eating areas in the former basement of the Regent Palace Hotel (see ch.5) [Add other examples from our collection here?] In contrast, dystopian, ruined and retrofuturist versions of art deco have increased in number in the new millennium as part of a larger wave of what Thijs van den Berg calls “disaster porn”, including films such as *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), *War of the Worlds* (2005), *2012* (2009), *The Book of Eli* (2010), and computer games such as *Half-Life 2* (2004) and of course *BioShock* (2007). (van den Berg, 2012: 2)