

## Set Design: A Window into the American Subconscious Value of the PC

Very few pieces of technology have shifted the nature of human affairs to their core. The Personal Computer (PC) has been doing so since the beginning of its adoption into mainstream culture. Such an enormous impact on society lends itself to curiosity. It is uniquely human to study self-behavior, to learn, or even just to understand. Knowledge in explorations of mass social character is a tricky pursuit. One has to glean the necessary information to make or identify some type of legitimate determination. However, when dealing with questions that relate to mass personal experience, the tendency for bias to enter into the observable field is a serious concern. In order to circumvent this issue a method of viewing truth must be implemented, yet it must be one that does not filter away data so as to mar the results. Studying the set design of popular American films in the early 1990s, corresponding to the beginning of widespread PC adoption, is just such a method. Observing the set design of popular films within the horror-suspense genre from that era, whose subjects do not specifically utilize the PC in plot, enables accurate observations of cultural attitudes toward it in that specific slice of time. In these films, set design exists to promote suspension of disbelief by supporting the authenticity of character roles. Using this method it is possible to view the unadulterated subconscious reflection of society's placement of the PC in everyday life, and how that definition rapidly changed in a period of only a few years.

To establish validity in this realm it is important to begin where the absence of the PC within the set design of popular horror-suspense films is the standard. In the popular film *Misery* (1990), starring Kathy Bates and James Caan, a PC does not appear throughout. This absence proves to be an interesting fact when applied to roles of characters one might typically identify as requiring an interaction with a PC. The most obvious of these cases within the film deals with James Caan. Today, the role of a writer is defined in part by the cliché of a person huddled over a laptop in a coffee shop.

Certainly, a writer today is inseparable from the device. Another instance of this in the film occurs when Macia Sindell, played by Lauren Bacall, calls the Silver Creek Sheriff's Office, also devoid of a PC, to report Paul Sheldon (Caan) missing. Her character is a literary agent in New York City, though her desk does not contain a PC. (See Attached Screenshot 1). The set design of that scene in particular helps an observer draw the conclusion that as of 1990, the PC had not yet entered the American subconscious as a necessary tool for professional endeavors.

Moving along to the year 1991, two very popular horror-suspense films emit rather important evidence regarding the transformation of the PC within the American psyche. The first of these films is *Cape Fear*, starring Robert DeNiro and Nick Nolte. In the film a scene takes place where Nolte, who plays a prosecuting attorney is voicing concern about some troubles he's having to the District Attorney, played by Fred Thompson. The shot of interest here shows Thompson's character at his desk. There is not a PC in his primary workspace, but rather directly behind him. The PC sits on a table behind his chair. It is turned off, and the keyboard sits in such a way that suggests use does not occur very often. Curiously, also on the table are a water pitcher, and a few legal books, both of which are used only occasionally in the case of need. (See Attached Screenshot 2). This film portrays the PC as perhaps necessary equipment, though not directly. It remains in the technological closet.

The second of these films from 1991 is *Silence of the Lambs*, starring Anthony Hopkins and Jodie Foster. In the very beginning of the film, Clarice Starling, played by Foster, is called into her supervisor's office to be assigned to the infamous Hannibal Lector, played by Hopkins. The supervisor is made known to the audience as the Deputy Director of Behavioral Sciences for the FBI. When she enters his office, the audience gets a view of the entire room. The primary workspace is absent of a PC. However, a PC is placed in the rear of the office, on a separate table. The table is set apart as an independent workspace. The computer in this film is also turned off, and gives the impression it is used very little. (See attached screenshot 3). Later on in the film's progression another official is portrayed

sitting at his desk taking a phone call. In this shot, his desk appears to be a sort of L shape. The PC in this shot sits on the furthest end of the desk. It is turned off, and the keyboard is put away in a compartment under the desk. (See attached screenshot 4). It is more than coincidental these two films exhibit the same type of set design when used to characterize the professional atmospheres of several presumably important public servants. On separate occasions, two independent set designs were constructed for these films in a consistent manner. From this fact it is clear the placement of the PC in the previously described shots is truthfully reminiscent of the American perspective on the place of the computer in larger society within the time period.

The final set design in question comes from the film *Basic Instinct*, starring Michael Douglas and Sharon Stone. The film made its debut in 1992. However, within this film is the portrayal of the PC as a more widely used tool in accomplishing professional tasks. In the film Michael Douglas plays a detective on the trail of a suspected killer, played by Stone. The film sets itself apart from those previously mentioned in that there are several shots of key characters using computers. In the beginning scenes of the film, Michael Douglas' partner is shown doing work with the computer as a necessary agent of interaction. (See attached screenshot 5). Later on in the film, Michael Douglas uses the computer to perform an important search regarding some of the details of his case. (See attached screenshot 6). There are even shots that are framed with the entirety of the computer monitor as it presents information. This scene is indicative of the very beginning of the societal perception of the PC as a cooperative source of information. In this scene Douglas is dependent on what information the computer provides, which in this case is information leading to a break in the case. The sharp contrast when compared with the other films suggests the rapid nature with which the PC transformed life in American society.

It can be difficult to ascertain objective truth regarding technological trends of the past. As the life of specific technologies come and go, or undergo dramatic change, memory of their real impact

becomes less reliable. Consider asking a young professional today the importance of a typewriter, and also considering what the answer would be when compared with the same question asked of a young professional 30 or 40 years ago. The answers of course would be much different. And further, the memory of a person who was witness to the past height of a specific technology, when also considering they have lived to witness the transformation, cannot be entirely counted upon for accuracy. This is the case because when any such technological memory is recalled, it could be that the future experienced beyond the perception of the initial memory could influence the true details of the recollection. Thus, students of history with a focus on the patterns of technological emersion and adaptation into mainstream culture must view facts from the vantage point of untarnished perspective. As a matter of great fortune, the wide and varied selection of films available from different time periods can serve as trusted sources of information for gathering insight into a specific cultural change. In this way, the idea of set design as an unbiased glimpse into the American cultural mindset surrounding the PC becomes a very important tool. It speaks to the truth of the most radical innovation since the Gutenberg press of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. It tells of the ways in which culture can ubiquitously absorb the technology it creates, and also conveys the curious nature by which humanity comes to be defined by those creations.

Works Cited

*Misery*. Dir. Rob Reiner.

Perf. James Caan, Kathy Bates, and Richard Farnsworth.

Columbia Pictures, 1990. Film.

*Cape Fear*. Dir. Martin Scorsese.

Perf. Robert DeNiro, Nick Nolte, and Jessica Lange.

Universal Picture, 1991. Film.

*Silence of the Lambs*. Dir. Jonathan Demme,

Perf. Jodie Foster, Anthony Hopkins,

Scott Glenn, and Ted Levine.

Orion Pictures, 1991. Film.

*Basic Instinct*. Dir. Paul Verhoeven.

Perf. Michael Douglas, Jeane Tripplehorn,

George Dzundza, and Sharon Stone.

Tristar Pictures, 1992. Film.

Screenshots

\*All screenshots were taken by myself, though the material framed in the photographs belongs to the above citations.

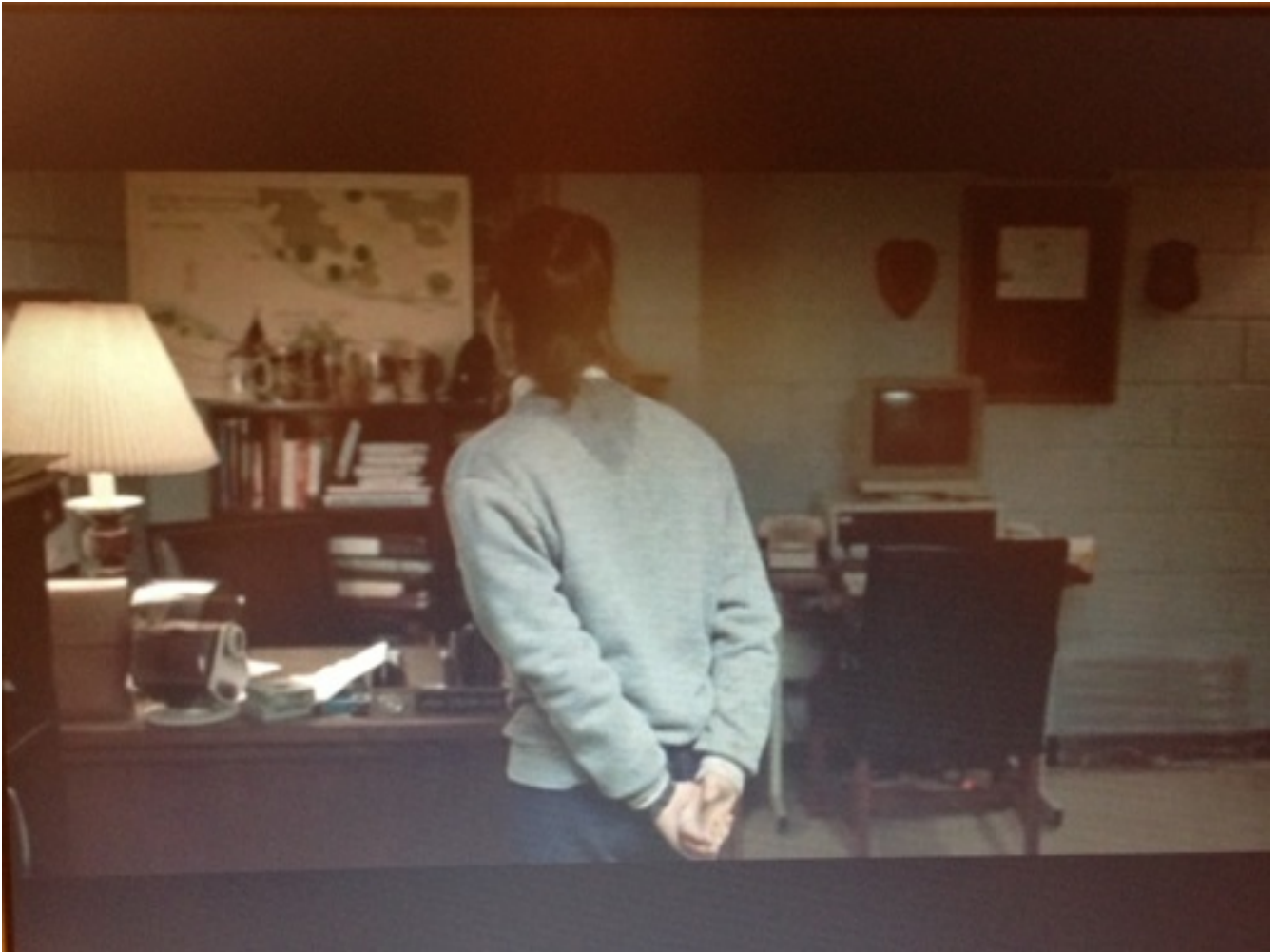
Misery-



Cape Fear –



Silence of the Lambs –





Silence of the Lambs (2)



Basic Instinct



Basic Instinct (2)

