

Here, the Past Lives On And the Future Takes Shape

By EDWARD BALL

THE FIRST THING THAT catches the eye at Modern Props, a prop rental company serving Hollywood films and television, is neither its giant inventory of high-tech equipment nor its *moderne* décor, impressive though they may be. It's not its machine shop, where engineers construct make-believe gizmos that beep and whir for the camera in science-fiction and action pictures. The first thing that catches the eye is an almost unmythical cleanliness.

Modern Props, one of hundreds of such companies in Los Angeles, gives the impression of a dismantled particle accelerator lab. In addition to refitting furniture, the company is known as the place to go when a script calls for a briefcase-sized satellite uplink or a make-believe laser cannon. Within white-walled warehouses, radar screens languish near Orwellian control room sets. Computers and transmitters by the dozen line up in precise order on steel racks. Digital displays pop up everywhere. A life-size mock-up of a space shuttle capsule sits ready for camera.

Outfitted in spotless white jumpsuits, with the company logo on the breast and the United States flag on the shoulder, Modern Props' 30 or so employees look as though they have just arrived from the tarmac at Cape Canaveral.

At the company's main warehouse, squeaky-clean workers swab the floors, paint touch-up on nicked surfaces and polish the brushed-aluminum fronts of consoles reminiscent of James Bond sets. The workers' unrelenting hygiene seems cartoon-like, perfect for an industry that embraces appearance.

"We have five guys who do nothing but clean," says the company president, John Zabrukky, who founded

Modern Props provides everything from furniture to A-bombs.

Modern Props in 1978. "I think we are more like a Japanese company than an American one. We try to isolate ourselves from malaise."

The fastidiousness ultimately finds its way to the big screen. For "The Rocketeer," the action-fantasy released last summer by the Walt Disney Company, Linda DeScenna, the set decorator, wanted a room full of sleek furniture to fill the offices of the character Howard Hughes in a scene in the 1930's. "Modern Props got the perfect Le Corbusier chairs and clean Deco appointments," says Ms. DeScenna, who has used Modern Props to decorate many films.

Mr. Zabrukky, who designs many of the fantastic machines he rents to big-budget productions, says: "In the 1970s, prop shops were making horrible things that looked like cardboard machines with blinking lights and loud mechanical switches. We build and rent a lot of robotics and articulated props, using materials like titanium and brushed aluminum. We're like a big art studio, constantly experimenting. Sometimes we build things for ourselves and just hope people come in to rent them."

Mr. Zabrukky leads the way to a cabinet where he keeps some of his favorite creations — hand props, so-called because they look great in close-up. Many of the silver or black gadgets are exquisitely fabricated, with moving parts. He pulls out a hand-sized black device and presses a button on it; a pair of mechanical wings sprout from the sides, and on them, rows of tiny lights begin to flicker. "This is the 'psychokinetic energizer' from 'Ghostbusters.'"

Putting psychokinesis aside, Mr. Zabrukky grasps a briefcase that looks as if it has done service in a cold war spy film. A miniature satellite dish rises from the middle of the case and begins to rotate slowly. "Some of these units took two months to engineer," he says.

Feature films make up only a part of Modern Props' business, the balance being filled by television ads and fashion shoots. But the company's Hollywood work is the most visible. An early Modern Props design deal was for "Airplane II: The Sequel" (1982), a comedy about pilots and a space shuttle. Bob Gould was the set decorator.

"They built a mission-control room for the film that had all sorts of LED readouts and neat equipment," says Mr. Gould, who has used the prop house to dress the sets of about 10 features. "Back then, their stuff seemed very advanced; but now it's become quite normal."

Modern Props' next important assignment came with "Blade Run-

ner" (1982), widely considered a milestone in set design. Until the late 1970's, Hollywood film makers largely imagined the future to be an efficient, spotless place where citizens could probably eat off the floor. But "Blade Runner," directed by Ridley Scott and set in Los Angeles in 2019, depicted an overpopulated, dysfunctional megalopolis, full of elaborate and menacing machines, some of them — with names like "the eyeball examination unit" — devised by Modern Props.

Over the years, the company's storerooms have become a virtual graveyard of high-tech film relics. Here lies a computerized tennis racquet that appeared in "Total Recall" (1990); over there, a big mechanical chair from "Robocop" (1987). Standing alone is a boxer's punching machine that the actor Dolph Lundgren pummeled in "Rocky IV" (1985), while training to fight his nemesis, Sylvester Stallone. Other bits and pieces prod screen memories from

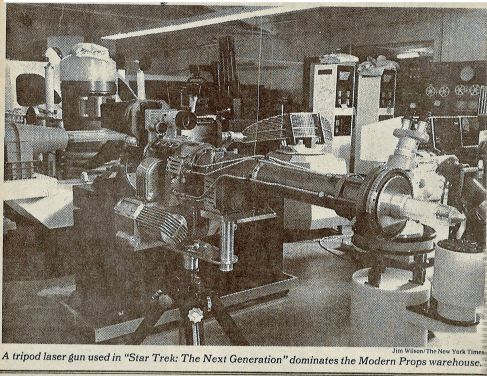
"Back to the Future" (1985) to the "Star Trek" series to cop thrillers.

The world of props would seem to have changed radically since the Hollywood of the 1930's, 40's and 50's. In those days, audiences went to the movies in part to get an eyeful of lavish décor and wardrobe. ("Prop" is short for "property.") Today, films feature fewer velvet sofas and more shootouts.

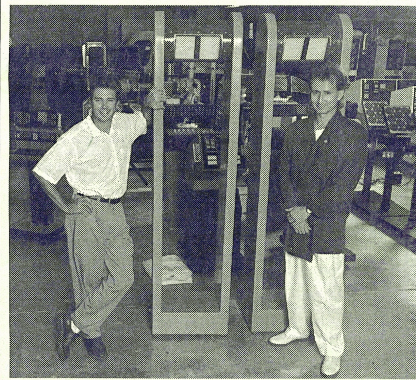
But consider the action film, with costly special effects and guns that look like radiology equipment. Its extravagance holds an appeal similar to the toniness of old Hollywood's historical extravaganzas.

"Props are a kind of visual shorthand used to establish the mood of a film," says Donald Albrecht, curator of production design/exhibitions at the American Museum of the Moving Image in New York and the author of "Designing Dreams," a book about film sets. "Production design and

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A tripod laser gun used in "Star Trek: The Next Generation" dominates the Modern Props warehouse.



Michael Ladish and John Zabrukky with some of their props

Prop Makers

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props tend to be overlooked, because the narrative is of primary importance," he says. "But there are still films which people go to see mainly for their design, like 'Blade Runner' or 'Terminator 2,' which have an unusual view of the future."

The big film studios once had clearly defined prop identities. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer films always looked the grandest, while RKO Pictures, which used smaller budgets, relied more on modest backdrops and décor. Every studio had a large prop warehouse, but in the early 1960's, most of these collections were sold off, and numerous independent prop houses appeared to take their place.

At Modern Props, some of the most interesting inventory is actually recycled military gear. "We buy machines from the Pentagon at auction, such as electron microscopes and old laboratory equipment," says Mr. Zabrukky. "They destroy things with a sledgehammer before they sell them, and it's terrible, because this stuff costs taxpayers so much money." The storeroom at Modern Props is full of such battered and unidentifiable metal. The company refurbishes the military equipment in its machine

shop, adds polished surfaces and blinking lights and rents out the result as a kind of second-generation science fantasy.

"To make the communicators that were used in 'Star Trek III,' we found real walkie-talkies from the Vietnam era," remembers Michael Ladish, the company's business manager. "We stripped and sanded them, thinned them down, fixed them up. They're what Captain Kirk used to talk to the Starship Enterprise."

The 1980's saw a boom in science-fiction and action films, which tend to thrive in a climate of patriotism. But now Hollywood is going in a different direction," says the set decorator Bob Gould. "You have films like Kevin Costner's 'Dances With Wolves.' There are a lot of period films, and two movies about Columbus in production."

A few items at Modern Props may signal the change. They are the fake portable atom bombs, four silver-and-black devices resembling a toaster-sized nuclear reactors. Each sports a metal globe about nine inches in diameter, plus various forbidding wires and switches. "I was curious what a terrorist's atom bomb would look like, so I came up with these portable A-bomb units," says Mr. Zabrukky. "They haven't rented yet." □

Edward Ball writes about film for The Village Voice and Premiere.