Research article

Through the window: Reflections of Calvinist ethics Amsterdam's architecture on cinema

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Abstract
This study explores how Calvinist Protestant ethics and cultural history have shaped Amsterdam's architectural character, using cinema as a critical lens. The city's seventeenth-century canal houses, with their large, often uncurtained windows, are approached as everyday spaces where moral ideals become visible. Rather than treating this architectural feature as a stylistic choice, the article draws on Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* to interpret transparency as a sign of discipline, self control and social accountability. Through close readings of films such as Paul Verhoeven's *Business is Business* and *Turkish Delight*, Dick Maas' *Amsterdamned*, Joram Lürsen's *Public Works*, and Robert Jan Westdijk's *Little Sister*, the study examines how windows, façades, and interiors function as metaphors of visibility and concealment. These films reveal Amsterdam as a city suspended between virtue and excess, surveillance and intimacy. Combining architectural history, cultural analysis, and film studies, the article highlights the moral and visual tensions embedded in Amsterdam's urban imagination.

Keywords
cinema, amsterdam, architecture, windows, calvinist ethos

Highlights

- Calvinist-Protestant ethics encompass a wide range of Amsterdam's identity, extending from its architecture and daily life to its cinema.
- Architectural elements are not only structural forms of the city but also carriers of culture that influence many aspects from cinema to art and shape daily life. In this sense, Amsterdam's windows are a defining figure of the city.
- Trapped between the city of sin and the city of virtue, Amsterdam shows a similar pattern in its cinematic representations. This entrapment repeats itself in some way in every area.

Araştırma makalesi

Pencereden bakmak: Amsterdam mimarisinde Kalvinist ahlakın sinemadaki yansımaları

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Öz
Bu çalışma, Kalvinist Protestan etik anlayışı ile kültürel tarihin Amsterdam'ın mimari karakterini nasıl şekillendirdiğini, sinemayı eleştirel bir mercek olarak kullanarak incelemektedir. On yedinci yüzyıla tarihlenen, büyük ve çoğu zaman perdesiz pencereleriyle dikkat çeken kanal evleri, ahlaki ideallerin gündelik mekânlarda görünür hâle geldiği alanlar olarak ele alınmaktadır. Bu mimari özellik, yalnızca estetik bir tercih değildir. Weber'in *Protestan Ahlakı ve Kapitalizmin Ruhu* çalışmasından hareketle, disiplin, özdenetim ve toplumsal sorumlulukla ilişkili bir pratik olarak yorumlanmaktadır. Çalışma, Paul Verhoeven'ın *Business is Business* ve *Turkish Delight*, Dick Maas'ın *Amsterdamned*, Joram Lürsen'in *Public Works* ve Robert Jan Westdijk'in *Little Sister* filmleri üzerinden, pencere, cephe ve iç mekânların görünürlük ile gizlenme arasındaki gerilimi nasıl temsil ettiğini analiz etmektedir. Bu filmler, Amsterdam'ı erdem ile aşırılık, gözetim ile mahremiyet arasında salınan bir kent olarak resmeder. Mimarlık tarihi, kültürel analiz ve film çalışmalarını bir araya getiren bu çalışma, kentin imgelemine yerleşmiş ahlaki ve görsel çelişkileri görünür kılmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler
sinema, amsterdam, mimari, pencereler, kalvinist ahlak

Öne çıkanlar

- Kalvinst-Protestan ahlak Amsterdam'ın mimarisinden, gündelik yaşam kültürüne oradan da sinemasına kadar uzanan bir alanı kapsamaktadır.
- Mimari öğeler sadece kentin yapısal formları değil sinemadan sanata birçok unsuru etkileyen ve gündelik yaşamı şekillendiren bir kültür taşıyıcıdır. Bu anlamda Amsterdam pencereleri kenti tanımlayan bir figürdür.
- Günah şehri ve erdemler kenti arasına sıkışmış Amsterdam, sinemadaki temsillerinde de benzer bir örüntü gösterir. Bu sıkışmışlık her alanda bir şekilde kendini tekrar eder.

Introduction

Amsterdam stands out not only as a commercial and political power centre of early modern Europe, but also as a city shaped by its own unique cultural and architectural codes. The ring of canals, constructed in the seventeenth century, goes beyond forming the physical framework of the city; it is also an expression of a deeply ingrained moral and social order. At the heart of this architectural order lie visibility, transparency, self-discipline and rationality, which can be described as the cornerstones of Calvinist Protestant ethics. As Max Weber (1904-1905/2002) established in his work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, this ethic has profoundly shaped not only economic activities but also the aesthetic and spatial organisation of everyday life. Amsterdam's canal houses, with their narrow facades, tall stories, and often uncurtained wide windows, seem to embody the individual's accountability to both God and society, as well as the obligation to live honestly, carved into the architecture itself.

However, Amsterdam's identity harbours a historical contradiction with this ideal of moral transparency. On the one hand, this architectural order can be read as a showcase of virtue and morality; on the other, it is the stage for the immense wealth acquired through colonialism, commercial excess, and sin industries (such as brothels) institutionalised within a policy of tolerance. It's this duality that has also made the city synonymous with the image of a sinful city. Thus, Amsterdam is a space where Calvinist order meets pragmatic tolerance, simple architecture meets social abundance, and private meets public life in a complex manner.

This cultural and moral tension also features in artistic representations of the city. Seventeenth-century painters such as Johannes Vermeer and Pieter de Hooch depict domestic scenes, using metaphors of light and windows to show the boundaries between privacy and social surveillance. Three centuries later, similarly, 20th century contemporary cinema removed Amsterdam from being merely a backdrop and transformed it into an active actor that shaped the moral conflicts of narratives and characters.

The central hypothesis of this study is that Calvinist morality, which is particularly evident in Amsterdam's architectural fabric, especially in its canal houses and windows, plays a central role in the city's cinematic representations and is reproduced in modern and postmodern forms through these representations. Grounded in the assumption that architecture is not merely decoration but a cultural text and moral element, this study explores cinema's approach to these architectural facts and features.

This article examines how Calvinist Protestant ethics, embedded in Amsterdam's architectural fabric -particularly its windows and domestic spatial organization- shape and structure cinematic representations of the city. How are architectural elements such as windows, façades, and interiors used in selected Dutch films to construct themes of visibility, surveillance, privacy, and moral discipline? In what ways do these films reproduce, critique, or subvert the Calvinist moral codes associated with transparency, virtue, and social control in different historical periods?

This research seeks to approach Amsterdam not merely as a physical space, but as a visual and spatial text, where a series of moral and cultural values intersect, that is constantly being rewritten. Cinema occupies the position of the most dynamic interpreter of this text, and this study aims to reveal how cinema renders visible the dialogue between the city's Calvinist past and its multi-layered present. In doing so, the study does not merely apply Weberian sociology to cinema; it also goes beyond the Foucauldian origins of surveillance studies, to question through cinema, how architecture functions as a regime of effects and how it shapes the emotional geographies of urban spaces.

Methodology

This research seeks to examine, from an interdisciplinary perspective, the images of Calvinist Protestant ethics present in Amsterdam's architectural fabric and their representations in the city's cinematic narratives. The complex nature of the research, particularly its positioning at the intersection of space, culture, and visual meaning, necessitates a qualitative research design and a multi-layered methodological framework. This framework aims to describe architectural forms and cinematic works without abstracting them from their historical and social context, integrating methods from cultural studies, architectural history and film analysis. To increase analytical transparency, each coding category was applied based on explicit decision rules and supported by concrete scene examples. For instance, scenes were coded under "Visibility and Surveillance" when windows or architectural openings visually exposed private interiors to public gaze, such as the canal-house sex-work scenes in *Business is Business* (1971) or the handheld camera intrusions in *Little Sister* (1995). A scene was coded as "Moral Discipline" when architectural order (cleanliness, symmetry, openness) was narratively associated with social control or psychological pressure, as seen in the bourgeois interiors of *Turkish Delight* (1973).

Research philosophy and design

The study is built upon an interpretive research philosophy. This philosophy is based on the assumption that social reality is shaped by the meanings people attribute to it. Proceeding from the premise that Amsterdam's architecture and its representations in cinema are profound carriers of cultural meaning, the aim is not to make quantitative generalisations but to present an in-depth and contextual analysis of these meanings.

Data collection and analysis methods

The research process entailed two complementary stages: building the theoretical framework and analysing the primary data, in this case, the films.

a) Thematic literature Review: Constructing the theoretical framework

In the first stage, a systematic literature review was conducted to establish the theoretical basis of the study. The review was structured around three main axes. The first axis examined the works of historians such as Simon Schama, Johan Huizinga, Jonathan I. Israel, and Herman Pleij on Dutch cultural history and mentality, based on Max Weber's thesis on the Protestant Ethic. Secondly, Michel Foucault's concept of the panopticon, Richard Sennett's analyses of the public man and transparency, and Irene Cieraad and Susan Buck-Morss's theories on space and visuality were instrumentalised to understand how Amsterdam architecture functioned as a mechanism of surveillance and discipline. Finally, primary and secondary sources on Amsterdam's 17th century urban expansion and architectural evolution have formed the basis for understanding the practical and symbolic dimensions of architecture.

b) Analysis of primary data (films): Qualitative content and semiotic analysis

In the second stage, five films were selected using purposive sampling to answer the research questions. The sampling strategy was based on the principle of maximum diversity, ensuring the selection of films representing different historical periods (from the 1970s to the 2010s) and different thematic relationships with Calvinist ethics (economy, violence, privacy, historical origins).

The following criteria have been established for film selection:

1. *Narrative and Visual Integration Criterion*: The film must transform Amsterdam's architectural elements (windows, facades, canals) from passive décor into an active component of the plot, character development, or thematic depth.

2. *Thematic Focus Criterion:* The film must centre on themes directly connected to the Calvinist ethos, such as visibility, surveillance, privacy, moral hypocrisy, and the tension between worldly asceticism and social excess, or develop an inquiry into these themes.

The films selected according to these criteria are as follows:

- Paul Verhoeven, *Wat zien ik (Business is Business, 1971)*
- Paul Verhoeven, *Turks Fruit (1973)*
- Dick Maas, *Amsterdamned (1988)*
- Robert Jan Westdijk, *Zusje (Little Sister, 1995)*
- Joram Lürsen, *Publieke Werken (Public Works, 2015)*

A multi-stage qualitative content analysis was applied in the analysis of the films. This process involved the systematic coding of data, the identification of themes, and their interpretation. The analysis stages were carried out as follows:

Analytical Category	Subcategories	Objective
1. Visual Composition	Framing, Camera Angles, Use of Light and Shadow, Colour Palette	To understand how architectural elements (windows, facades) are transformed into carriers of meaning and how character psychology/social pressure is visualised.
2. Narrative Function	Character Motivation, Dramatic Conflict, Thematic Message	Identifying the concrete role of architecture in advancing the plot, shaping character development, and conveying the film's thematic message.
3. Cultural and Moral Codes	Visibility, Surveillance, Simplicity, Hypocrisy, Worldly Asceticism	To evaluate how cinematic representations engage in dialogue, critique, or reproduction with Calvinist principles as defined within the theoretical framework.

Tablo 1 Analytical Coding Scheme for Film Analysis

This coding scheme provided a structural framework for the analysis and enabled the findings to be organised systematically. After the analyses were conducted separately for each film, they were synthesised comparatively to reveal the historical evolution of the Calvinist heritage in cinema.

The coding process, shaped by culture and context, is not inherent to the text. We developed codes through repeated readings of the movies, informed by discussions on architecture, morality, and visual culture. We conducted two rounds of coding. In the first round, we identified recurring meaning clusters related to windows, interiors, and ways of looking. In the second round, we reorganized these clusters into broader cultural themes such as visibility, privacy, surveillance, and moral discipline. This approach views the cinematic text as a space for cultural negotiation.

Calvinist ethics, the Weberian framework, and the rise of Amsterdam

Amsterdam's economic and urban rise in the 17th century was not merely a story of commercial success, but also, as Max Weber (1904-1905/2002) pointed out in his work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, a spatial reflection of a profound cultural and religious transformation. Based on Weber's thesis, it is an indisputable fact that Calvinist Protestant ethics permeated Amsterdam's architectural fabric, particularly its canal houses and window culture. How physical forms were transformed into instruments of moral and social order has been a frequently debated topic ever since.

Amsterdam's planned urban expansion and architecture appear in many studies as a concrete example of worldly asceticism and rationalisation in the Weberian sense.

Weber (1904-1905/2002) argues that the spirit of modern capitalism stems from the ethical codes created by Protestant denominations, particularly Calvinism. According to him, the Calvinist concept of predestination encouraged individuals to view worldly success as a sign of divine favour and thus to lead a systematic, rational, and work-oriented life (pp. 98-112). This worldly asceticism rejected luxury consumption while sanctifying the pursuit of profit as a vocation.

Amsterdam's rise in the 17th century serves as historical evidence for this Weberian framework. While the city became one of the centres of global trade, increasing economic prosperity led to an architectural style that was functional and simple, devoid of ostentation. Richard Sennett (2000) addresses this situation in the context of the distinction between public and private space. He draws attention to the tendency of Protestant cultures to make the private sphere transparent and subject it to public moral control (p. 214). In Amsterdam, this tendency is reflected in the physical design of houses. Large, curtainless windows and simple building facades have become an architectural guarantee of the individual's honesty and accountability both before God and before their neighbours.

Simon Schama (1987), in his work *The Embarrassment of Riches*, which recounts the Dutch Golden Age, reveals the profound moral dilemma faced by the Dutch bourgeoisie. According to Schama, while worldly success was accepted as God's blessing due to Calvinist beliefs, there was also deep concern about the arrogance and moral decline that this wealth could lead to (p. 315). This embarrassment of riches required wealth to be camouflaged in an unostentatious manner and simplicity in everyday life. Architecture has been the most prominent reflection of this moral tension. Narrow-fronted, steep and unadorned canal houses, while complying with practical tax laws (de Jongh, 1990, p. 197), also prevent the ostentatious display of social status. Johan Huizinga (1941) also supports this view, emphasising that Dutch civilisation built its identity on Calvinist virtues such as cleanliness, order and simplicity (p. 27). The interiors of homes are not exempt from this new moral climate. The concept of *huiselijkheid (domestic civility)* transforms private life into a sphere of moral discipline by prioritising cleanliness, order and functionality.

The canal belt expansion undertaken by Amsterdam in the early 17th century, which is included in the UNESCO World Heritage List, is not only an engineering feat but also a manifesto of rational and ethical urban design (UNESCO, 2010; Abrahamse, 2010). This planned development, centred around the Herengracht, Keizersgracht and Prinsengracht canals, combines commercial logistics, water management and healthy living conditions around the axes of functionality and public benefit. This plan is the urban-scale counterpart to Weber's emphasis on rationality and order. The measured ornamentation on the canal facades establishes the structural order that enables the coexistence of workplace and home. Keeping the plots narrow created an architectural language that reconciled capitalist production relations with Protestant minimalism (de Jongh, 1990, pp. 197-204).

Amsterdam's rise and architectural formation in the 17th century bears parallels with Weber's thesis. The city's physical fabric was shaped by the fundamental principles of Calvinist morality: visibility, self-discipline, rationality and worldly asceticism. Canal houses and windows are not merely structures that meet the need for shelter, but also spatial tools that invite the individual to constant moral performance and legitimise social control (Spohnholz & Prak, 2006). This architectural order has made Amsterdam not only a commercial metropolis, but also a powerful cultural narrative in which Protestant morality is carved into stone and glass.

Architectural layout, canal houses and the social function of windows

Amsterdam's characteristic open windows and the aesthetic of the fine lace draped over them are not merely a matter of aesthetic preference, but rather the architectural manifestation of a deeply ingrained moral and social order. The large windows of Amsterdam houses facing the street, mostly without curtains or with fine lace, have historically served two fundamental functions. These are physical illumination and social visibility. According to Frijhoff and Spies (2004), curtainless windows are a way of declaring to neighbours and society that the life inside is honest and clean (p. 198). This practice establishes a direct link between moral transparency and physical transparency. Irene Cieraad's (1999/2006) study, *Dutch Windows: Female Virtue and Female Vice*, states that these windows transform the interior space into a semi-public area. According to her, windows create an area of civility and surveillance where virtues such as cleanliness, order and moderation are made visible without being displayed (pp. 31-52).

Unlike the Catholic tradition, which emphasises the confession of sin through a priest as an intermediary figure, the Calvinist tradition views the individual as constantly under God's watchful eye. As Sloterdijk (2005) notes, this understanding of divine surveillance has been reflected in the social sphere, fostering a culture in which individuals monitor and control one another (p. 89). The windows in Amsterdam have institutionalised this relationship of mutual surveillance spatially.

Foucault's (1977) interpretation of the panopticon concept provides an important framework for understanding this architectural arrangement. The panopticon is a spatial model in which individuals, arranged around a central surveillance tower and constantly observable, gradually internalise this surveillance and begin to practise self-discipline. Amsterdam's windows embody precisely this mechanism on a horizontal plane. The window facilitates both the individual's sense of being under constant control and the society's mutual surveillance (Foucault, 1977, p. 201). What is striking here is that this practice is both a voluntary and compulsory moral display. The individual gains the trust of society through their transparent window.

This architectural and moral order also manifested itself in early modern Dutch visual culture. In 17th century Dutch painting, particularly in Vermeer and Pieter de Hooch's domestic scenes, light streaming through windows is the primary element emphasising the moral and physical cleanliness of the space. In paintings such as *The Milkmaid* or

Woman Holding a Balance, the interplay of light and curtains emphasises that the interior of the home is a space that can be seen and controlled, both privately and morally. These paintings reinforce the idea that the interior of the home must be visible and orderly, both literally and symbolically. Similar themes are present in Dutch literature. In Louis Couperus's novels, the order, cleanliness, and transparency of bourgeois home life are often addressed alongside a critique of the Calvinist-based lifestyle (Couperus, 1992, p. 77).

Reading Amsterdam architecture in this way inevitably raises counterarguments that these forms are merely the product of practical, economic, or technical necessities. Indeed, it could be argued that narrow facades can be explained by land taxes, wide windows by the need to illuminate interior spaces and advances in glass technology, and brick facades by fire resistance and the availability of local materials (de Jongh, 1990; Abrahamse, 2019). The existence of these factors cannot be denied, and they have undoubtedly played a role in the emergence of architectural form. However, the focus of our study is not so much on the question of how, but rather on the question of why. Why did a particular society choose these forms from a range of technically possible forms and establish them as a cultural norm over centuries? The answer lies in the fact that practical solutions can only find their place within a broader cultural ethic that legitimises, sustains, and gives them meaning. Large windows can illuminate the interior space, but when they also transform it into an area of surveillance and moral display, they fit perfectly within the existing Calvinist value system.

Sin city or showcase of virtue?

Amsterdam's urban identity harbours a distinct tension between the architectural manifestations of Calvinist morality and the city's historical reality. Seventeenth-century Amsterdam became a magnet for religious refugees (Sephardic Jews, French Huguenots), which increased the city's commercial dynamism while institutionalising religious pluralism (Israel, 1995, pp. 310-315). This pluralistic structure evolved into a social organisation known as 'verzuiling (pillarisation)' in the 19th and 20th centuries, allowing Protestant, Catholic, socialist and liberal communities to coexist within their own institutional networks (Lijphart, 2022). This new way of life also brought changes to Amsterdam's daily life. These changes, felt in the city's life, also played a role in shaping the city's political and economic identity.

Amsterdam's tolerance policy in the late 20th century adopted a regulatory approach in areas such as sex work and soft drugs. This pragmatic approach focused on minimising public disorder and hidden harm rather than strict Calvinist prohibition. As a result, the city has been branded as Europe's city of sin, while still upholding the disciplinary norms of Protestant morality (Israel, 1995, p. 312). Houses with large windows, symbolising moral transparency, also serve as masks that conceal the city's dark economic and social realities. Herman Pleij (2001) draws attention to this contradiction, emphasising that

while the Dutch display virtue in their domestic order, they lead a social life steeped in sin and excess in the public sphere (p. 62).

Susan Buck-Morss (1989) criticises Schama's concept of the shame of wealth, arguing that Dutch prosperity cannot be separated from the context of colonialism and the slave trade (p. 212). Jonathan Israel (1995) also notes that the prosperity of the Golden Age was based on the colonial empire in the Caribbean and Asia (p. 315). Amsterdam's architecture and urban policies reflect a continuing search for balance between moral idealism and pragmatic governance. While the city maintained the spatial representation of Calvinist discipline, it was also forced to manage the contradictions inherent in being a global trading centre. This complex identity transformed the city into not only a physical but also a moral laboratory, providing fertile ground for cinematic representations.

Representations of Amsterdam in cinema

The relationship established by Amsterdam cinema with the Calvinist morality embedded in the city's architectural heritage is less a simple reflection than a dialectical inquiry that has evolved. This section traces the historical transformation of this cinematic dialogue through four key elements. The analysis begins with Paul Verhoeven's provocative transformation of the Calvinist virtue showcase into a desire showcase in the 1970s. Subsequently, it examines Dick Maas's exposure in the 1980s of the chaos and repressed violence hidden beneath this orderly surface, in the dark waters of the canals. By the 1990s, it addresses how the theme of social surveillance in Robert Jan Westdijk's cinema evolved into a more psychological and voyeuristic violation of privacy. Finally, Joram Lürsen's historical drama delves into the origins of these tensions, revealing how the founding conflict between Calvinist morality and modern capitalism has been woven into the city's codes. This chronological analysis demonstrates that Amsterdam cinema is not merely a passive recorder of the city's moral codes, but a dynamic cultural actor that actively rewrites, negotiates, and critiques these codes.

Paul Verhoeven's first feature film, *Wat zien ik* [Business is Business] (1971), marks the symbolic starting point of an iconoclastic challenge to the social taboos of 1970s Dutch cinema. The film's spatial choice -the daily life of two sex workers living in a canal house on Prinsengracht- is more than just an aesthetic backdrop; it is a conscious critical intervention in the architectural codes of Calvinist morality. In Verhoeven's cinematography, the windowless windows, interpreted by Simon Schama as a symbol of transparency before God and neighbour, are abstracted from their moral function (1988, p. 412). The film ironically recodes this architectural element, transforming it from a space where privacy is exposed into a commercial showcase where desire is displayed and economic exchange takes place. Thus, the windows function as a visual metaphor that deliberately violates the boundaries between public and private space and questions the hypocrisy of social morality.

Verhoeven explores the urban fabric of the film through ordinary details such as narrow staircases and small kitchens, revealing the material reality of everyday life behind

Amsterdam's tourist image. This cinematographic approach aims to expose the contradictory relationship between morality, economic practice and everyday life, going beyond merely depicting sex work. The film translates David Garland's (1990) thesis on how moral rules in modern societies operate through the regulation of visibility into a visual argument. The comings and goings of clients, especially under the gaze of neighbours, become an ironic part of this regulation.

This critical framework offers a subversive reinterpretation of the Calvinist work ethic as defined by Weber (2002). Verhoeven's characters subvert this ethic, which views work as a sign of God's election (p. 117). Sex work is merely a rational occupation for them. The film's international distribution title, *Business is Business*, carries a sharp irony in this context, secularising the labour sanctified by Calvinist ethics and exposing the moral hypocrisy of Dutch society. Indeed, Peter Cowie describes the film as a work that reveals the tension between visibility and repression in Dutch society through comedy (1990, p. 212). The vertical architecture of the canal houses visually reinforces the characters' cramped lives, while their presentation as economic actors reposition sex work not as a moral aberration but as an invisible yet functioning part of the urban economy.

Ultimately, *Business is Business* transforms Amsterdam's urban space into a Calvinist ironic parody, using it as a fundamental tool for social criticism. Verhoeven's cinematic vision reconfigures architecture as a moral laboratory and positions the film as a foundational text for understanding the city's spatial fabric. However, Verhoeven's critique is limited to exposing the city's moral hypocrisy on the surface, that is, in the visible realm represented by windows and facades. The next cinematic step, delving beneath this surface into the city's dark depths and exploring repressed violence, would be taken by Dick Maas. Verhoeven's critical interrogation of the architectural surface undergoes a radical shift in the 1980s with Dick Maas. Maas shifts his cinematic investigation from the city's facades and windows to the uncanny depths of the canals, symbols of repressed violence and chaos that threaten the order on the surface. Thus, there is a clear break from Verhoeven's cinematography, which constructs the city as a moral performance space, to Maas's approach, which exposes the chaotic and violent infrastructure underlying this performance.

Amsterdamned (1988) may appear on the surface to be a typical thriller and crime narrative, but it actually cinematographically reconstructs the city's spatial, cultural, and moral fabric. From the opening sequence onwards, the viewer encounters the city's symbolic elements. In the darkness of night, canals, narrow streets, bridges and canal houses leaning against the shore adorn the background throughout the film. These locations are not merely decorative backdrops, but also become dramatic elements that drive the narrative forward. The canals, in particular, not only evoke a romantic image of Amsterdam but also function as carriers of violence, mystery, and unseen darkness. Maas combines the invisible threat beneath the water (the killer diver) with the picturesque surface of the city, exploring the theme of visibility and invisibility embedded in Amsterdam's daily life. Amsterdam's architectural structure, with its large windows opening the interior of the home to the public space, displays a concrete form of this

cultural morality. *Amsterdamned*, however, dramatises the contradiction between the city's ideal of transparency and the darkness beneath the water. The city may appear to be a safe place with its orderly daily life, but it actually harbours suppressed violence, crime and moral dilemmas beneath its surface. Therefore, the film can be read as a text that exposes the invisible chaos behind the visible order. However, Maas's canals are not merely a place of chaos. They are also an uncanny space where what Kristeva and Lechte (1982) define as the abject -that is, the primal violence that the city's rational order has cast out, repressed, and refuses to see- returns. The dark waters of the canals represent the urban unconscious that has been pushed beneath Amsterdam's clean and bright facades.

The moments when the killer emerges from the water and disrupts the surface order mark the return of the repressed. In this context, the film can be read not only as a thriller narrative but also as an allegory of modern urban life's bright surface, its relentless effort to conceal its own abject -its own expelled violence- at any cost. Maas's camera reveals the dual nature of the urban space by showing both cyclists riding along the canal banks and the killer moving stealthily under the bridges. Thus, a contrast is established between the light reflected from the peaceful windows of the canal houses and the dark surface of the water. As Marijke de Valck points out, it is significant that representations of the city in Dutch cinema are mostly based on the permeability between home and outside (2006, p. 112). *Amsterdamned* continues this tradition by juxtaposing the safe interior of the home with the dangerous exterior of the water. In this context, the film depicts Amsterdam's moral and social tensions through a murder story. The fact that the majority of the victims are women is particularly relevant to the city's gendered perception of space. Although Amsterdam is known internationally as a liberal and tolerant city, the film reveals the fragility beneath this image. The scenes around the Red-Light District show that sexual freedom is also intertwined with violence.

Joram Lürsen's film *Publieke Werken* [Public Works] (2015) stands out as another example. The film is a historical drama that examines Amsterdam's spatial transformation in the late 19th century through the lens of the city's cultural fabric and architecture. Adapted from Thomas Rosenboom's novel, the film centres on the moral dilemma faced by a pharmacist and a violin maker when asked to sell their properties for a hotel construction. One of the film's most striking visual dimensions, illustrating the impact of Amsterdam's urban modernisation process on individuals, is its portrayal of the city's socio-cultural transformation through windows and facades. Amsterdam's narrow canal houses, tall windows, and facade layout are not merely an aesthetic backdrop but also a reflection of Calvinist culture's ideals of transparency and order. The film's opening sequences offer the viewer a panoramic view of 19th century Amsterdam, presenting a cityscape on the brink of modernisation. The canal-side houses, narrow streets, and the city's unfinished structures simultaneously convey two distinct faces of the city. These aspects point to the deep-rooted values of traditional life and the new urban order rapidly shaped by capitalist ventures. *Public Works* visually reproduces this cultural code. High windows are used not only to illuminate the interior but also to ensure the social visibility of individuals. In the film's scenes, windows serve as a metaphor for both the opening of

personal life to the outside and the visibility of economic pressures. In particular, the home of violin maker Walter Vedder comes to the fore as a space representing Amsterdam's architectural identity. The windows of his house carry the sounds of music, part of the city's cultural life, to the outside, while also becoming a symbolic target of capital and modernisation pressures. The dilemmas Vedder experiences while looking out of the windows reveal how individual freedom and moral responsibility clash with the urban space. At this point, the film emphasises that Amsterdam, with its seemingly transparent facades, actually has a structure that conceals social inequalities. As Mak point out, Dutch urban architecture has used transparency as part of social control (Mak, 2018, p. 44). In Lürsen's film, this space of surveillance is transported into a dramatic context where capitalist enterprises corner individuals.

While Westdijk demonstrates the destructive effects of the Calvinist legacy of surveillance on the modern individual's psychology, Joram Lürsen's film *Public Works* takes the camera from the present day and turns it to the moment when all these tensions originated: the late 19th century. In a sense, the film offers an origin story for all the modern conflicts examined in this study. It is a cinematic record of that first, foundational struggle between traditional Calvinist morality and the rise of modernisation and ruthless capitalism. The transparency of the windows creates a context in which individuals' moral responsibilities are constantly visible to society. This embodies the point at which Weber defined the tension between capitalist modernisation and the worldly asceticism required by Protestant ethics. In fact, the hotel construction is both a promise of progress and a threat of moral decline. Lürsen's camera frequently shows cityscapes in long shots. In these scenes, the windows of canal houses not only delineate the boundaries of a space but also function as visual surfaces on which the moral dilemma Schama describes as the shame of wealth is displayed. In the film, the process of purchasing houses for hotel construction threatens not only individuals' living spaces but also Amsterdam's historical memory. For Vedder and other characters, windows and facades are not merely architectural elements of a house but also indicators of their identity and social position. The transparency of windows creates a context in which individuals' moral responsibilities are constantly visible to society. This concretises Weber's point about the tension between capitalist modernisation and moral responsibility (2002, p. 91).

The critical inquiry initiated by Paul Verhoeven in his film *Business is Business* is taken to a deeper and more personal dimension two years later in the director's film *Turks Fruit* [Turkish Delight] (1973). While 'Dutch Harvest' exposes the socio-economic hypocrisy of Calvinist morality in the public sphere, *Turkish Delight* shifts this critique to the boundaries of the private sphere and the body, namely the psycho-sexual realm. Centring on the passionate and destructive love between the sculptor Eric, and Olga, the daughter of a bourgeois family, the film examines the relentless conflict between the values that form the basis of Calvinist morality -order, cleanliness, and self-control- and artistic chaos, bodily desire, and emotional excess. In Calvinist culture, the design paradigm possesses democratic, rational, and ascetic characteristics. In this form, function and simplicity are paramount (Weber, 2002, p. 3). *Turkish Delight* presents a dramatic conflict

between this rational order and individual desires, contrasting the traditional aesthetic with a popular, erotically charged lifestyle. The distinguished examples of 18th-19th century Amsterdam architecture and Michel de Klerk's analysis of social housing projects define an area in the urban architecture of this film where simplicity and functionality meet aesthetics (Tatlı, 2024, p. 11). In *Turkish Delight*, such aesthetic codes are not a display of superiority in the workshop, interior spaces, and window compositions. Eric's bohemian and cluttered studio is a space of rebellion against the Calvinist ideal of domestic order, where bodily fluids, rotting food, and artistic creation intertwine. This space does not merely present visual chaos; Verhoeven uses haptic cinematography to draw the viewer into this tactile excess and make them feel the bodily and instinctual aspects suppressed by order (Lee, 2010, pp. 13-22). In contrast, Olga's family home is a bourgeois fortress, orderly, sterile, and ruled by suppressed emotions. This space is an example of the uncanny house archetype frequently explored in modern cinema. Despite its apparent safety, it transforms into a space of psychological violence that erodes individual autonomy (Burke, 2015).

The transparency and principle of social surveillance engraved into architecture by Calvinist culture take on a pathological form in the film *Turkish Delight*. The windows in Olga's family home are no longer a symbol of social integrity, but rather the merciless eye of bourgeois morality that controls and judge's individual desire. Eric's exclusion from these windows, or Olga's gradual fading behind them, demonstrates how architectural transparency can become a psychological prison. Contemporary cinema and urban studies argue that the ideal of transparency in modern architecture brings with it its own shadow, namely a surveillance paranoia (Chlup, 2023).

Verhoeven, presenting this intuitive critique in the 1970s, reveals how the Calvinist perspective transformed into a source of modern anxiety. As Judith Pollmann (2009) notes, religious tolerance in the Dutch Golden Age was based on a controlled structure that allowed different groups to exist within their own private spheres (pp. 12–24). Verhoeven takes this historical code and reverses it in a modern context. The film's ostensibly liberal atmosphere conceals a deeper, invisible moral pressure that gradually erodes Olga's physical and mental autonomy. This situation also aligns with the 1970s Dutch counterculture's general critique of the repressive mechanisms behind bourgeois modernity's seemingly progressive façade. At the end of the film, the decay of the body through Olga's illness is not only a tragic fate but also an allegory of the Calvinist order's ultimate and destructive victory over the individual body. Thus, *Turkish Delight* deepens Verhoeven's reckoning with Amsterdam's architectural and moral codes, moving from an ironic critique of the public sphere to a tragic and bodily analysis of the private sphere.

The final film I will discuss is the 1995 Dutch film *Zusje* [Little Sister]. The film is a low-budget drama directed by Robert Jan Westdijk. Following Dick Maas's exposure of the physical threat lurking beneath the city's orderly surface, 1990s cinema internalises this threat even further. In the film, the anonymous danger coming from the canals is replaced by a psychological violation that infiltrates the family's most intimate space. In this film, the historical Calvinist culture of surveillance, no longer a social norm, is

transformed into a voyeuristic and sinister invasion of privacy, personalised by new technology such as the handheld camera. Martijn's camera goes beyond the one-way surveillance of the panopticon. It also becomes an act of sousveillance (surveillance from below). It is a non-hierarchical form of surveillance that infiltrates intimacy and constantly violates the boundaries of consent. Years before the rise of social media, the film anticipates the phenomenon of individuals transforming themselves into data subjects by constantly recording their own lives and the lives of others. Martijn's documentary project transforms love and affection into a data collection project. Daantje's most intimate moments become an archive to be viewed, edited, and interpreted later. This offers an unsettling foreshadowing of how Calvinist transparency ethics could evolve into the neoliberal era's culture of self-disclosure and personal branding. The film's narrative is built around Martijn recording his sister Daantje's life under the pretext of a documentary.

When evaluated through Amsterdam's urban culture, the symbolic role of windows, and Calvinist cultural influences, the story reflects the city's cosmopolitan yet intimate life, the voyeuristic effects of architectural transparency, and the ongoing tensions of Calvinist morality within family dynamics (Peker, 2023). Using a subjective handheld camera perspective, the director blends voyeurism with psychological drama, delving deeply into themes of surveillance, privacy, and moral restraint while capturing Amsterdam's vibrant urban culture. Amsterdam in the 1990s is often characterised by youthful bohemianism, multiculturalism and post-industrial vibrancy, and *Little Sister* vividly depicts these traits. The film portrays Daantje's life in a shared flat, set against the backdrop of the city's bustling streets, cafés and nightlife, reflecting Amsterdam's reputation as a centre of freedom and diversity. Martijn's intrusive shots, capturing spontaneous moments in public spaces, emphasise the city's dense, interactive environment where personal boundaries blur with social life (Shorto, 2013, p. 47). This is also consistent with Amsterdam's historical role of tolerance, influenced by its Golden Age trading heritage and modern waves of immigration. Denis Condon argues that cinema generally reflects social changes towards urbanisation and secularisation. He notes that in Sister, Westdijk depicts Amsterdam's urban landscape through Daantje's party-filled, relationship-filled, and independence-filled youth culture, while in Martijn, he uses it to explore intergenerational conflicts symbolising unresolved family ties (Condon, 2013, p. 12). The city's canals and narrow streets often become a metaphor for the characters navigating emotional labyrinths.

Özgen examines how Dutch audio-visual heritage represents immigrant communities in urban environments and notes that *Little Sister* reflects narratives of multicultural neighbourhoods, integration, and cultural hybridity. According to him, Dutch films portray Amsterdam as both a place of opportunity and alienation. *Little Sister* is a good example of representing these spaces (Özgen 2024, p. 15). Özcan Akyol, in discussions of urban inequality in Dutch literature and cinema, emphasises that Amsterdam's gentrified neighbourhoods conceal underlying social tensions and states that this situation parallels the family secrets in the film (Akyol, 2020, p. 89).

Frijhoff, analyses the influence of Calvinism on Dutch visual culture and argues that Protestant iconoclasm and the emphasis on moral transparency influenced architectural designs that discouraged hidden sins (2004, p. 253). In the film, we see this reflected in Martijn's obsessive documentation. The line between love and transgression becomes blurred throughout these documentations. The film's found footage style creates an experience similar to that of passers-by looking in on Amsterdam's illuminated houses at night, making the audience complicit in voyeurism. Yıldırım argues that Dutch films use urban windows to symbolise identity crises and that this theme parallels the experiences of immigrants who feel exposed in their host societies (2012, p. 112). A similar situation is seen in Lale Gül (2021). According to Gül, personal lives in Dutch society are emasculated under the guise of liberalism (p. 134). This situation parallels the intrusive sibling dynamic in the film. This perspective links Amsterdam's windows to broader discourses on privacy in multicultural urban spaces.

In the story, Martijn's obsession with Daantje reveals repressed desires that evoke Calvinist concepts such as original sin and the struggle against temptation (Dietz, 2011, p. 12). Yet Amsterdam's secular city life clashes with established moral constraints. Judith Thissen notes that post-war Dutch films grapple with Calvinist legacies where entertainment and fear are intertwined in Orthodox Protestant circles (2019, p. 510). Thissen skilfully weaves Amsterdam's urban culture, window symbolism, and Calvinist undertones into a narrative of privacy and intrusion.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates how Amsterdam's buildings, which were designed back in the 1600s based on Calvinist ideas, are more than just buildings. They function as a set of rules that affect how people see the city, how they live in it, and even how Amsterdam is represented in movies. The narrow buildings, large windows, and tidy rooms show off Calvinist values of being open, controlled, and responsible while also turning everyday places into spots where people are always being watched, in a moral sense.

The movies examined in this research prove that these building ideas aren't stuck in time. Dutch movies treat them as if they have been passed down. Sometimes, films copy these ideas. Other times, they point out problems or push them to the extreme. Windows and rooms are not just pretty to look at; they are used to tell stories about the push-and-pull between being out in the open and keeping secrets, being good and breaking the rules. From Verhoeven's early films, which make fun of being morally transparent, to the repressed violence in Westdijk's take on how people deal with being watched, to Lürsen's look back at where these problems started, movies show how Calvinist ideas are still around today in weird ways in the city. From this perspective, we see that movies play a part in a conversation about culture.

Cinema puts pressure on the contrast between Amsterdam's two sides as a good city and a city of excess by putting buildings right in the middle of moral and emotional fights. By doing this, movies show the weak balance between order and wanting things, being

controlled and being free, which has long been how people think about the city. By seeing buildings as cultural text and movies as a way of understanding them, this research adds to the discussion in film and city studies about how space, morals, and what we see are related.

The ideas used around windows offer a way to study other cities where old moral rules still affect how things look today. In the end, the light coming through Amsterdam's windows shines on the fight between a society and the moral rules it has built into its buildings.

As a result, this article has shown that Amsterdam's dual identity is more of a static contradiction than a productive tension area that nurtures the city's cultural dynamism. The light flowing through Amsterdam's windows does not only illuminate physical spaces, it also contains the metaphor of an ongoing, visual and spatial reckoning of a society with its own moral codes. Cinema is the scene where this showcases the sharpest, most creative and most enduring expression.

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