



Utopia and dystopia: fantastic and virtual cities



As we move farther and farther into the future, the probability is that the construction of new buildings will diminish, except in certain areas of the city, and the constant repairing, shoring up, and modernization of older architecture will begin to take on a rather retrofitted look.

Ridley Scott



Learning objectives



- To be able to analyze the modernist vision of design and urban planning in early science fiction
- To account for the shifts of the portrait of the city in films that imagine the future throughout the twentieth century



- To be able to discuss the condition of postmodernity in relation to the postmodern city in contemporary science fiction
- To relate the changes of narratives in science fiction to the development of media technologies



Introduction



This lesson traces utopian and dystopian visions of urbanism in the cinematic constructions of fantastic and virtual cities, with an emphasis on the changing function of the city and futurity in science fiction, the genre that most directly addresses visions of the future.



At the inception of the science fiction film, as for example in Fritz Lang's modernist Metropolis (1927), the city represented the future and was thus a prime site for the negotiation of utopian and dystopian visions. However, the late twentieth century saw two important shifts that changed this function of the city for the negotiation of utopia and dystopia.



The city as a site of invention and innovation had defined labor as modern and industrialized in a capitalist system in contrast to rural, traditional, and premodern subsistence labor. In the late twentieth century, through the increase of computer technology, labor became independent of and detached from the city and turned into an invisible, deterritorialized, and solitary activity, while the medium of film began to incorporate advanced computer technology with computer-generated animation and computer game technology.



These recent developments in cinema – from analog to digital, from movie-going to home video, from film consumption to computer games, from celluloid to DVD – in conjunction with the changes in the nature of labor, have resulted in a detachment of the notions of progress and futuricity, whether utopian or dystopian, from the city.



Now, even when their setting is urban, utopian and dystopian films focus on the conflict between human subjectivity and virtual reality. The city itself does not signify the future any more because futurity cannot be located in material technological development or in the built environment. Instead these contemporary, postmodern, science fictions narrate the difficulty of distinguishing reality and representation from one another.



To put it simply: the more we move into the future, the more these films show cities of the past or in decay. The chapter offers a historical outline, beginning with films from the 1920s that create modernist, futurist visions of the city and moving on to contemporary films that show decaying or outdated cities in the future that are often virtual: first, as the setting of the film that we are watching, but, second, within the narrative in the experience of the characters.



This historical outline implies a moment in which films about the future show cities of the present, which I locate in the late 1960s to 1970s with the disillusionment of modernity, particularly for urban architecture, planning, and design, and with the onset of computer technology. This chapter emphasizes the analysis of films that represent turning points in this development from modern to postmodern cinematic depictions of the city.



Futuristic cities: Metropolis and Things to Come



Fritz Lang's modernist film *Metropolis* shows us a future in which utopian and dystopian possibilities are negotiated via the city. This Ur-text of the sciencefiction genre was recycled with a Giorgio Moroder soundtrack (1984) and cited in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) and Tim Burton's *Batman* series (1989, 1992). Shot throughout 1926, costing about 4.2 million Reichsmark and with over 35,000 extras, the film's narrative is set in the year 2000.



The metropolis that gives the film its title is organized vertically: above the ground is the Garden of Eden for the sons and daughters of the owner of Metropolis, Frederson, and below the ground are the machines at which the workers toil, the workers' living quarters, and the catacombs where the disenfranchised meet. A few sites are not mapped on this vertical hierarchy: the house of Rotwang, the mad scientist, the cathedral, and the bar Yoshiwara.



In the fantastic and futuristic city of Metropolis, the workers toil below the ground without seeing the sun. Freder, the son of the master, Frederson, meets Maria who takes care of the workers' children, is enchanted by her, and follows her, first to a factory workplace where he switches places with one of the workers, and then into the catacombs where he hears Maria pray to the masses of workers about a peaceful revolution.

Maria is trapped by Rotwang, the mad scientist, who creates a robot in her likeness. Frederson wants a robot to substitute for human laborers, but Rotwang intends the robot to incite a violent revolution and destroy Metropolis. The robot Maria is introduced to Metropolis in a seductive dance at Yoshiwara and then creates chaos among the workers, who begin to destroy the machines and leave their children behind in danger of being flooded. Maria and Freder rescue the children.





The foreman recognizes the false Maria and the workers burn the robot at the stake. Freder fights with Rotwang on the top of the cathedral and Rotwang falls to his death. In the film's final scene Maria enables Freder to hold hands with his father, who symbolizes the head, and the foreman, who symbolizes the hand, thereby symbolizing the heart that connects the two.



The film integrates the discourse of religion, represented by the triangle of the three men in front of the cathedral, and of labor and revolution. Metropolis fetishizes the city and technology in a cinematic spectacle, emphasized in the opening shot of working industrial machines in abstract close-up shots. Shots of the city of Metropolis show a futuristic vision without humans but with airplanes and cars.



The Bauhaus architecture at the time expressed modernity through practicality and rationality of design, but this utopian vision of progress is revealed in the narrative as a dystopia of panoptical control, disenfranchised and infantile workers, cruel exploitation, technological innovation gone mad, and self-inflicted destruction.

William Cameron Menzies's *Things to Come* (1936) similarly relies on set designs that create a modernist city which, according to Janet Staiger, is influenced by modernist architect and urban planner Le Corbusier's concept of the "Contemporary City." She describes the *Things to Come*'s "Everytown" of 2036 as "multi-storey buildings, moving sidewalks, and a domed glass shell protecting the climate, marking off city from exterior countryside and diffusing light to an even glow"





She suggests that Metropolis and Things to Come offer utopian visions that are “bright, optimistic views of possibilities for tomorrow”. Donald Albrecht describes how the city design of Things to Come was also intended to contrast with Metropolis’s urban future vision. Set designer Vincent Korda (brother of Alexander Korda, producer of The Third Man) remarked: “Things, structures in general will be great, yes, but they will not be monstrous”.



Albrecht describes the futuristic city: “Korda’s town center is beneath the ground and, with its smooth, plain contours, executed completely in white, is a conscious rejection of the frenetic pace associated with the Futurist-inspired cities of earlier films like *Metropolis* and *Just Imagine*”. Thus, *Things to Come* not only changes the set but also questions the implied hierarchy of the vertical organization in *Metropolis*.



While the models of the two cities differ, both are situated in a “dialectical understanding of the relationship between the temporal and spatial dimensions of narrative utopia, a dialectic, that is at the heart of the experience of modernity as well”. Because *Metropolis* and *Things to Come* project modernity on to the futuristic city, they also emphasize its material destruction. In *Metropolis*, the sequence in which the city itself is in danger of being destroyed is part of the spectacle of the film.



Similarly, in *Things to Come* much of the narrative concerns war and its destruction of the city rather than the futuristic and utopian urban environment, which is quickly revealed as a dictatorship that leads to rebellion. Made in 1936, *Things to Come* is framed by its anticipation of war, beginning with discussions under the Christmas tree in 1940 about the relationship between war and progress in a city called “Everytown.”



The depiction of the war reflects the understanding of war in Britain at the time as a war without declaration. We see the shadows of soldiers marching across the screen, a city occupied by police and the military, trucks full of people wearing gas-masks driving around, and seemingly random explosions. The depiction very much reflects the anxiety about a war in England, particularly as it pertained to London.



The city is, however, not London but one that looks like London. The extended scenes show total war in montages of explosions, airplanes, people running in panic, and close-ups of the faces of a dead child in the tradition of the anti-war film.



The totalitarian computer



With the advancement of computer technology the importance of the cityscape in science fiction decreased because visions of the future became associated more with the invisible aspects of the technology and less with visible design and urban structures. In Jean-Luc Godard's *Alphaville* (1965) the computer controls the city of that name.

Alphaville is a transitional film that represents a shift towards virtual reality, while it is beholden to a realist representation of the city. Therefore, for example, the computer takes up enormous space in the heart of the city. Alphaville signals another transition related to the paradoxical development of the postmodern city becoming a city of the past, namely the genre mixing of an ostensibly science-fiction film shot in a noir style with a main character, a “private-eye” taken from American pulp fiction of the 1930s and 1940s.



The film mixes science fiction and film noir conventions to criticize urbanization as inhuman. Much of the main character Lemmy Caution's time in Alphaville is spent in a hotel room, a transitional space typical of film noir. Kaja Silverman, in dialogue with Harun Farocki, describes the dystopian element of Alphaville as a "technocratic vision", but the setting of the room and the "Red Star Hotel," according to Silverman, "is a throwback to a detective novel from the 1930s, or a B-picture from the 1940s".





Alphaville is not another planet; according to Silverman it is “a state of mind, a ‘place’ where people find themselves when reason has succeeded in driving out affect”. While she is correct in her assessment that Alphaville represents a state of consciousness in which rationality has conquered emotion, it is important to note that this state of consciousness is still represented by a city, and a well-known and recognizable city, for that matter, Paris.



The film gives the city of Paris, which we see and know and is inscribed by the French NewWave as authentic, the name of Alphaville, the first city. Thus, the film does not offer us an abstract meditation on temporality and consciousness, but instead anchors these two issues in a recognizable cityscape. This move continues the tradition of the science-fiction genre that situates the conflict between the poles of extreme rationality and spiritual emotionality in an urban environment.



The films discussed in this chapter do not simply suggest cities as sites for this conflict but instead propose cities both as origins of the conflict and as necessary sites for negotiating the contradictions and tensions that emerge from the conflict. Curiously, despite Godard's avantgarde status, the ending follows conventional narrative structure, discussed by Silverman who concludes about the space of the city circumscribed by the film *Alphaville*:



At the end of Alphaville, Lemmy and Natasha travel through the night in the Ford Galaxy. Significantly, they never reach the geographical border where Alphaville ends, and our world begins. That is because the border is psychic rather than terrestrial – because the earth is a state of mind, rather than a place.



The superhero in an outdated city



Richard Donner's *Superman* (1978) connects futuristic aspects of science fiction with the setting of an outdated city and begins the paradoxical portrayal of cities in futuristic narratives in which they appear to belong to a contemporary or earlier time period. In this film, the city becomes the dystopian reflection of anxieties about urban development at the time.



The futuristic and fantastic utopian aspects associated with science fiction are embodied by a superhuman individual who is, not coincidentally, male and whose masculine prowess is put to the service of the nation to which the city is subordinated.



In early science fiction, such as *Metropolis* and *Things to Come*, the design of the mise-en-scène of the city represents the future where utopian and dystopian visions of the social world are negotiated. *Metropolis* and *Things to Come* articulate a political dystopia to critique certain aspects of modernity and they celebrate modernism's utopian, technological spectacle in the design of the imaginary city.



In Superman the city itself is not part of the futuristic setting; instead the character is endowed with superhuman strength to enable utopian moments that are integrated into an overtly nationalist discourse. The city is situated in the present in a historical moment when the actual cityscape lost its importance for science fiction because the built environment became less associated with modernist, utopian (and thus also dystopian) visions of urbanism and instead became the object of technological surveillance.



Superman ideologically supports surveillance in the figure of the all-knowing, all-seeing character who works for the good of the nation.

Superman integrates the binaries that surround the context of the city: the urban–rural split and the future–present binary, both dialectically embodied in the dual nature of the nerd–superhuman.

Superman, which takes place primarily in New York City, begins with Superman's biographical pre-history, the background that explains Superman's superhuman strength, situated in a different universe, on the planet Krypton. Here we find a futuristic, technological society with utopian elements, such as strength, knowledge, technological, and architectural advancement in the representation of the city and dystopian elements, since the politics of the society are cruel and lead to its destruction.





Despite the film's opening's announcement about the depression in Metropolis, the city in Superman is contemporaneous with the time the film was made, and signifies decay and criminality, in short, the failure of modernity. In 1972, the urban housing project called Pruitt-Igoe had been blown up in St. Louis, Missouri, which postmodern architect Charles Jencks saw as the symbol of the end of modernism.



Pruitt-Igoe was a modernist complex that included over 2,000 public housing units that had been built in 1951 by architect Minoru Yamasaki. By the late 1960s–early 1970s, it was clear that these urban projects of modernist visions had failed and the only response the city found was total destruction.



Positioned after what was perceived as the failure of modernist architecture and urban planning to embody a utopian vision of the future, Superman espouses conservative values by subordinating the city to the nation, portraying the battle between good and evil, and portraying an asexual masculinity that romances and seduces the urban feminist.



The virtual city of the past



Whereas the early films of modernist science fiction portrayed dystopian and utopian visions in futuristic city settings, and films from the 1960s and 1970s show contemporary cities marked by dystopian narratives, the late 1990s saw a group of films that showed cities of the future – either real or simulated – that were either decaying or belonged to the past.



I read these films and their cities as marking the passing of the promise of modernism and diagnosing the condition of postmodernity. Joshua Clover identifies the collapse of virtual and past cities in what he labels “edge of the construct films”: films in which “the hero sees the simulation as nothing more (and nothing less) than what it is, recognizes the limited apparatus of what he once thought was infinite reality”.



He describes the cities in three films from the late 1990s as “constructs in the past” even though they are virtual cities: Truman’s town in *The Truman Show* (1998), which is set in the 1950s, the “pointedly motley but largely 40s noir metropolis” of *Dark City* (1998), and the “1937 Los Angeles” recreated by programmers in Josef Rusnak’s *The Thirteenth Floor* (1999).



While the city was central to the invention of the science-fiction genre and to the negotiation of utopian and dystopian visions of the future in Lang's *Metropolis*, the significance of the city as a recognizable, even if fantastic, localized, built environment to the negotiation of utopia and dystopia diminishes with the advancement of technology. Instead, recent films are set in urban environments that are decaying or are from a by-gone era.



The contemporary dystopian vision concerns the problems of reality, virtuality, memory, and subjectivity. Paradoxically, while cinematic representation is enabled by the technology, it is technology itself that becomes the problem in negotiating questions of utopian and dystopian visions of the future.

Andy and Larry Wachowski's *The Matrix* (1999) shows that the science-fiction genre has undergone significant changes as technology has developed, allowing other genres to employ similar technologies so that genre boundaries have become less distinct. Of course, science fiction has never been absolutely pure; a film like *Metropolis* is also a love story and a melodrama with religious overtones that addresses, through a futuristic narrative, the conflict between labor and those who own the means of production.





The Matrix, in turn, integrates Hong Kong action films, a genre to which the physical body is integral, with technology associated with video games. The oppressive quality of technology, which threatens to empty humankind of its humanity and is represented by robots, replicants, and automatons, then resurfaces later not only in *The Matrix*, but also, for example, in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), and in Alexis Proyas's *Dark City* (1998).

Paradoxically, these films fetishize, celebrate, and rely on their own technological advances in camera and animation technology and in special effects. In these later films, however, the built environment of the city is no longer the site of modernity and technological innovation, but a grimy place of the present and the past that has more in common with the city of film noir, and therefore sometimes called “future noir”, the city in ruins, or the rundown urban ghettos and barrios.





Portraying an outdated or dilapidated city is part of the general dystopian vision of technology. As technology advances in society, we increasingly find artificial humans, cities, and spaces in the urban science fiction. Science-fiction film is caught in a curious paradox: the more the advancement of technology lends itself to narratives fed by anti-technological anxiety and conspiracy, the more the representational strategy can rely on technological development.



The cities in *Dark City*, *The Matrix*, and *Blade Runner* are dystopian sites of decay based on seeing technological advancement not as utopian fantasy but as extreme dystopian fantasy.

Dark City includes explicit references to the history of modernity. It references modernity in the design and architecture of the cityscape, but also in the interior design and clothing, and via one of the main character's names: Dr. Daniel Paul Schreber.



Daniel Paul Schreber was Freud's patient in his famous case about paranoia, about which Schreber himself wrote a book (on the Schreber case and modernity, see Santner). The reference to turn-of-the-century Vienna and the beginning of theories on paranoia is ironic because the film itself offers a paranoid fantasy. Like so many of science-fiction films, *Dark City* begins with a pre-history of a different civilization. The voice-over informs us: first there was darkness, then cubing. Their civilization was in decline.



The city of Dark City is futuristic, like Metropolis, with artificial skyscrapers, but it is also outdated in terms of architecture and decorative style, which are reminiscent of the 1940s and 1950s. Except for Dr Schreber everything stops at midnight, referencing older narrative structures, particularly turn-of-the-century fiction and fairy tales.



Caught in the matrix



By the time of *The Matrix*, the built environment of the city is the location for neither utopian nor dystopian visions. The film's urban scenes are shot in Sydney, a neutral city in the global imagination, since it carries no connotation of utopian urban development or urban blight. With the advancements in digital media, hyper-environment, and virtual reality, the city is no longer the embodiment of futurism.



Joshua Clover convincingly argues that the reorganization of labor in the late 1990s, particularly in the US, found expression in the paranoid logic of *The Matrix*. Importantly, labor has become detached from locations and can take place anywhere, thus not necessarily in the city.

The city we encounter at the opening of *The Matrix* shows dilapidated blight marked as the present.



The apartment of the main character, Neo, is dingy and could be in a tenement house in New York City. Similarly, the spaceship Nebuchadnezzar is outdated, in curious juxtaposition to a narrative about a computer that has total control. When Morpheus explains the matrix to Neo, they are meeting in a grimy, old apartment, with Morpheus sitting in a dilapidated chair. Morpheus's explanation of the matrix encapsulates the dystopian vision of technology:



The matrix is everywhere . . . it is all around us . . . you can feel it . . . when you go to work . . . when you go to church . . . it is the wool that is pulled over your eyes . . . you were a slave . . . born into a prison that you cannot smell or touch . . . a prison for your mind . . . unfortunately no one can be told what the matrix is . . . you have to see it for yourself. . . .



The condition of slavery has changed from that of the workers underground in the city in Metropolis to that of people who are in a virtual prison of their own minds.



Almost saved by the mall: dystopian horror in suburbia



Not belonging to the genre of the science fiction but rather to the horror genre, George A. Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1979), remade in 2004 by Jack Snyder, creates a fantastic dystopian vision of the new American urban development, suburbia. Zombies invade suburbia and force the film's main characters to find refuge in a shopping mall.

Here the most normal space of consumption, intended to calm and seduce citizens into consumerism, becomes the alienated site of horror, where the main characters are threatened by cannibalistic death. All those mall characteristics, such as elevator music and artificial fountains, are estranged by the horror effect. The characters begin to live artificial lives in coffee shops, furniture and electricity stores watching television, imitating the lives of consumption in the 1970s.





Dawn of the Dead turns the shopping mall – the promise of a safe and clean haven of consumerism – into the horrific site of cannibalism. The zombies are the suburbanites gone bad, reverting to the base instinct of killing through biting. The subversive impetus of the dystopia lies in its reference to the everyday of modern consumer society, in contrast to The Matrix that ties its narrative to religion, in a way similar to Metropolis, which promises redemption.



Postmodern cities in science fiction are in the process of becoming outdated, while the contemporary urban development of malls is subversively portrayed with ironic horror as a site of danger, a counterpoint to the *Superman* national ideology of the late 1970s, and the endorsement of virtual reality in the late 1990s.