

“It Was the City Killed the Beast:” Nature, Technophobia, and the Cinema of the Urban Future

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You have nowhere to go.

The last line spoken in George Lucas’s *THX 1138*

IN the 1951 movie *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, a single alien visitor and his powerful robot land their saucer-shaped spaceship in a park in Washington, D.C. To demonstrate technological superiority, they turn off all electrical and mechanical power on Earth, illustrated in a montage of cities brought to a halt by stalled modes of communications and transportation. The message of the film is that unless humans find a way to live peacefully with one another—the film was made during the days of the Cold War when atomic weapons proliferated in the United States and the USSR—even more technologically advanced aliens might have to step in like parents among squabbling children and slap some sense into them.

Klaatu, the alien, played by Michael Rennie in an aluminum foil suit, is a rather messianic figure backed up by an eight-foot Cyclopean robot that can incinerate anything with its ray-gun eye. He has been sent by a federation of Earth’s galactic neighbors to tell us to get our act together and to show us what might happen if we do not. Although Klaatu is on a peace mission, he does not hesitate to have his robot, Gort, take out a few tanks and soldiers when they get too militaristic and wound Klaatu. He also exhibits some very human tendencies by getting close to an interplanetary love affair with Patricia Neal.



The film was timely, well-acted, and, given the rising “Roswellian”^{*} atmosphere and the beginning of UFO sightings as a cottage industry, it was kept from getting out of hand by director Robert Wise. It also achieved cult status, especially in the phrase “Klaatu barada nikto,” a message from Klaatu to robot Gort not to use his powers to level the planet when Klaatu was briefly incarcerated by his hosts. Gort instead uses his powers to rescue Klaatu. After an admonitory speech by Klaatu in the concluding scene, he and his robot fly off in their spaceship leaving no more than a patch of scorched grass behind.

The message of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* is a forewarning that has been sounded by cool heads and Jeremiahs in cinemas, books, political podia, and pulpits since the first technology expanded humans’ control over nature and over themselves: beware what you make; it might re-make you.

When humans began to construct permanent settlements some 12,000 years ago, they began to exercise dominion over their environments. By engaging in agriculture and animal husbandry, damming rivers and clearing forests, and creating technologies that made their lives more secure and efficient, they became “man the engineer,” altering their environment as much as they could to meet their goals and desires. In the process, they broke not only with their hunting and gathering nomadic past, but also with their traditional social forms and even their ancient deities.

Formerly metaphysically atavistic and pantheistic, humans eventually created anthropomorphic gods who would place them at the center of creation and bestow upon them permission to “multiply and subdue the earth.” Now nearly gods themselves, humans would seem to have found their place, with the permission to use their intelligence to make a world to their liking. All things seemed possible and life seemed more secure, and perhaps one day in the far off techno-urban future, even eternal. Earth, air, fire, and water were no longer simply elements, but through technology, they were now factors of production. Mankind could consider the prospect of utopia itself. At the center of this utopia was the city.

Yet this very capability to control, it seems, carried with it elements of fear, anxiety, guilt, and in the minds of some, blasphemy. Most futuristic novels and films appear to focus more on the “dystopic” expectations of future worlds rather than on utopian notions. In part, it may be that novels or films that portray ideal and idyllic future cities offer less dramatic prospects and are less interesting than places beset by human failings.^{**} Nevertheless, such dystopic visions must have their roots in imaginings that preceded their artistic expression.

Winner

**From the time Orson Wells’ famous War of the Worlds radio drama on October 30, 1938 caused many people to run screaming in terror from their homes at the “arrival” of vicious Martian invaders, a “little green men” genre of film and pulp literature has continued to grow almost exponentially. With the so-called Roswell incident in 1948 and the subsequent NASA programs, interest in exobiology (extraterrestrial creatures), in fact and fiction continued the exponential growth in stories about these outsiders with alien invaders ranging from marauding space aliens in Signs to benign ETs. Most recently, U.S. television has successfully employed the genre in the series Roswell, and the mini-series Taken. “Documentary” programs on UFOs, crop circles, and accounts of “alien abductions” follow predictably in the wake of curiosity and credulity.*

***It is nearly impossible to find a film that is fully utopian in subject and plot. Even Lost Horizon, the low-tech utopia of peace, abundance, and longevity in the Himalayas, had to have a “cost” (rapid aging) for those who chose to emigrate, and, presumably, to keep audiences from succumbing to eventual boredom.*

Mumford 1966
 Mumford 1969
 Marcuse
 Kenniston
 Arendt
 Ellul
 Mesthene

But beyond this difference lies the hypothesis that the control and sophisticated technology of modern urbanized humankind may not be without some residue of guilt and anxiety. The theme that humans have overreached their mortal prerogatives and tried to become godlike appears in nearly every age and society. The biblical account of the Tower of Babel warns against the arrogance of humans believing they can reach heaven by means of technological prowess. The Greek story of Icarus flying too close to the sun illustrates the fault of overreaching. These concerns continue to resonate in both the actual and virtual worlds, as technology plays a more prominent role in human affairs.

Nature’s Vengeance

Perhaps the precursor to many more contemporary expressions of this notion is Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*, which questions the concept that it might be possible for man to conduct the most godlike of all wonders: the creation of life itself. Following in its wake have been hundreds of novels and films exploring the folly of such hubris. Time after time, science and technology, their blessings notwithstanding, are misused or put to work for evil intentions. Godzilla monsters rise from the sea to crush arrogant cities; insects, transmogrified into marauding giants by radiation, attack their human creators only to have to be subdued or eradicated by some even more fearful technology. Nature, raped and outraged, takes its revenge through outraged leviathans from Moby Dick to giant sharks that attack holiday beaches. Snakes, crocodiles, apes, wolves, virtually every known species, including of course, humans, have been employed in novels and films to avenge the injuries and insults received by nature. Indeed, one of the most financially successful science fiction films of all time, *Jurassic Park*, fits squarely within this time-honored genre. The most common scenario of this genre finds technology in the hands of mad scientists, power hungry politicians, or greedy showmen, among others.

In plot renderings of these dystopic fantasies of the future, the city is often reduced to some awful primal state in which civilization gone awry has been atomically expunged. Wiping the slate clean presents some interesting dramatic opportunities for exploring the notion that civilization contains the seeds of its own undoing and that the culprit is not so much technology as the moral failings of its makers. Frequently, it is a resort to technology that is required for humankind to extricate itself from its technologically produced predicaments.

The endurance of these themes in film no doubt owes something to their resonance with concerns of contemporary life and public policy. How can we get along with aliens from outer space if we are unable to abide “aliens” from the country next door, or the neighborhood next door, these films might also be asking? Our xenophobia toward fantastic space creatures is not all that different from our intra-species xenophobia.*

But in that part of the genre that features the city as a character, a common theme is that of an urban society that has become “overdeveloped,” of an urban world where technology has developed beyond the understanding of the individual citizen, where the power and authority to control powerful technologies has fallen into ignoble hands.

Beck

Urban Technological Dystopias

Perhaps the first major film to employ the city as an expression of the potential achievements and the power of technology was German director Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*.** Lang was reputedly extremely impressed with the verticality and energy of New York City in his visit there in the early 1920s, and enlisted architect Lionel Feininger to design sets based on the architecture he saw in New York, which expressed what he considered would be the urban scale and form of the city a century later.

Set in the future year of 2026, a century after Lang’s visit, *Metropolis* is a city of soaring structures, connected by sky-bridges and traversed by various modes of transit, some wildly futuristic, others amusingly anachronistic, that surely influenced the urban morphology of Ridley Scott’s futuristic film, *Blade Runner*.

But *Metropolis* was a film born of a different view of the promises and perils of technology and urbanism. In many respects, it is a late nineteenth-century point of concern about the effects of science, technology, and industrialism upon traditional institutional structures, especially work and religion. Lang’s wife, Thea von Harbou, wrote a melodramatic screenplay that is suffused with religious imagery, with an overriding theme that, in embracing technology and urbanism, humans have lost touch with their metaphysical roots.

In *Metropolis*, a ruling elite enjoys the sybaritic pleasures of the powerful and privileged. They play and rule from the soaring structures of the upper city and are supported by a subterranean dwelling and laboring proletariat living a life of drone-like drudgery that is physically and socially beneath those above ground. The workers of

**In Enemy Mine, a 1985 science fiction film directed by Wolfgang Petersen, the Robinson Crusoe premise strands a human (Dennis Quaid) and a “Drac” (a dual-sexed, bi-pedal reptilian played by Lou Gossett, Jr.) on a volcanic planet. They are warriors from their respective “races” and mutually despised enemies who see the other as an inferior race. Although well-acted and designed, the movie is un-daring in its treatment of racial (actually species) differences, and reaches, predictably, for a “feel good” ending.*

***In the 1920s, German Expressionism was the vogue among artists in various media. Expressionist painter Ludwig Meidner’s agonized depictions of cities in calamity presented the city as psychologically disorienting. The works of Otto Dix and George Grosz presented an urbanism of greed, debauchery, and intolerance that would take two world wars to sweep away.*

the urban netherworld toil on a ziggurat-like structure that, in a dream sequence, becomes the mouth of the devouring ancient pagan deity, Moloch; the clock serves as symbol of the crucifix upon which one worker is, so to speak, “chronified.” Another dream sequence shows legions of workers attempting to construct the Tower of Babel, the ultimate argument that salvation is to be reached by faith, not technology. Von Harbou mined the New Testament for allegory as well: the heroine of the movie is named, appropriately, Maria. If these clues are insufficient, there is a deluge that floods the underground city and the reconciliation of the ruling and the ruled in the ending takes place in front of a cathedral.

The narrative line, often muddled by the stew of class politics and religion, allusions to ancient history, myth, and science fiction, is driven by guilt. Freder Fredersen (Gustave Frolich), son of Joh Fredersen (Alfred Abel), the “Master of Metropolis,” realizes that he lives a life of indolence and privilege purchased at the expense of hard and dangerous labor by the people of the lower city. He becomes infatuated with Maria (Brigitte Helm), a schoolteacher from the lower city, and visits its “industrial bowels.”

Freder returns to the surface and begs his father to consider the exploitation he has observed, but the “Master” has problems of his own, among them secret cells of disgruntled workers who may be plotting insurrection. Joh consults the scientist, Rotwang, who interprets the drawing and leads the master to the catacombs in the lower city where Maria is preaching a message of mediation between the workers and the administrators of the city. Not trusting the workers, Joh enlists Rotwang’s more sinister powers and the mad scientist kidnaps Maria and turns her into a *doppelganger* evil robot to sow discord among the workers. Thus the woman whose evangelism was supposed to save Metropolis is turned by science and technology into a monster.

Technology is itself very much a part of the production of this film, which has been called the first “science fiction” film. Lang effectively employed new special effects in the transformation of Maria and used elaborate and expensive sets. Cinematographer Eugene Shufftan also developed a method of simultaneously shooting two separate images, one full-sized, and the other miniature, to produce monumental images without double exposure. Produced at a cost of over five million marks and employing over thirty-seven thousand actors and extras, it was perhaps the most expensive film of its time.

**Perhaps another religious allusion, to the immolation of Jeanne d’Arc in this case, but this is an auto da fe of technology in the hands of Satanic powers.*

Ott

The evil Maria is eventually burned at the stake* by the workers and the true Maria emerges, after saving children from a flood in the

lower city, to be abducted once more by Rotwang and dragged to the top of the cathedral. In the final scene, she is rescued by Freder, who hurls Rotwang from the cathedral roof. The heroic couple then emerge from the cathedral and effect a reconciliation between the workers and the “master.” Thus, *Metropolis* concludes by reaching back to an older set of values, one of religion and a social system of seigneur and serf. There is an implication that technology itself could be accommodated if the social system had not lost touch with these values. Presumably, there still would be an upper city and a lower city in the metropolis, with its corresponding class distinctions.

But technology’s power is as undisputed as it is indispensable in Lang and Harbou’s *Metropolis* in what is now a much more proximate future. It has pushed the urban skyline well beyond the spires of the cathedral and the seat of urban power is secular, not sacred. Despite the filmmakers’ nostalgia for aspects of the old social order, much of that had already been swept away with the assistance of technology during World War I just a few years before their picture was released. But whatever its flaws in prognostication, *Metropolis*, widely regarded as the first “science fiction” film, proved to have a considerable influence on futuristic films.

Its influence is readily evident in *Modern Times*, written, directed, and starring Charlie Chaplin. As does Lang, Chaplin employs the clock as a metaphor for the machine and industrialization, and portrays industrial workers as drones (sheep in the title sequence). The president of the factory in which Chaplin works bears a strong resemblance to the “Master of Metropolis,” and he even uses a similar technical surveillance system to control his workers. He is obsessed with increasing productivity to the point that he considers devising a feeding machine that will allow his workers to continue working through their lunch hour.

While Chaplin avoids reference to religious themes, he does portray factory work as monotonous and dangerous and the workers as subject to the greed of the owners, in spite of the fact that the factory appears clean and efficient. The increased pace and monotony finally induces madness in Chaplin’s character of an assembly line worker, and he runs amok in the factory, playing with the machinery and taunting workers and administrators. The film contains the now classic scene of Chaplin literally drawn into a giant piece of machinery, a visual metaphor that requires no further explanation.* He is carted off to jail, but the film continues with several misadventures that allow Chaplin to make oblique comedic reference to his liberal politics.

The twenty-fifth century is the setting of *THX 1138*. Based on an assignment George Lucas completed while a film student at the

*It is also noteworthy that *Modern Times* was first viewed by audiences in the midst of the American Great Depression.

University of Southern California, the film constructs a world (mostly set in the tunnels of the then under-construction Bay Area Rapid Transit System) of several levels of technology. Workers in this subterranean world are suspiciously drone-like as were those of *Metropolis*. In fact, the film is an *homage* to science fiction luminaries, referencing Orwell’s “Big Brother,” and Huxley’s *Brave New World*. Released in 1971, it is full of allusions and references to contemporary TV programming, and to the infamous HUAC phrase (“Are you now or have you ever been...”).

Conventional names have been replaced by names that sound like automobile license plates. *THX 1138* is reputedly derived from Lucas’s San Francisco phone number.* For the creator of the immensely popular *Star Wars* series, *THX 1138* is a film that is more serious and interesting, if less expensively produced and less easy to view. Lucas creates a visually claustrophobic world that matches that of the social world portrayed in the film. Tight camera shots, looped tracks, and montages are accompanied by what has come to be called “elevator music.”

Technology is everywhere in the world of *THX 1138*. Workers perform repetitive tasks using remote manipulation arms to handle radioactive materials while being constantly monitored for their performance. Their recreation consists of sitting in their sterile residences and watching stultifying hologram TV programs featuring Blacks engaging in gratuitous sex and violence. However, they are required to control any sexual urges that might be stimulated by using suppressive drugs. If they break the rules of this micro-managed society of constant video monitoring, they are hunted down by cyborg police and placed in jails without walls or boundaries, reconditioned by machines and electronic shocks.** LUH 3417 (Maggie McOmie), the roommate whom THX impregnated because she tampered with his libido-dampening drugs, is “recycled.”

One never discovers just what it is that this underground city produces.*** THX’s job seems to have something to do with radiation. Two fatal industrial accidents occur in the film and are treated as unfortunate only because they interfere with productivity. But the film discloses nothing of the political structure of this future world except for the fact that it is a society that is managed and regulated in the extreme, whose nearly every feature is controlled, monitored, and enforced by technology, even its metaphysics.

Yet it is an attribute of a technologically managed society that allows THX to escape from this oppressive society. His flight from his subterranean world to “freedom” in a high-speed automobile ends at a tunnel that leads to the surface. He is nearly apprehended by cyborg

*It is also reprised in Lucas’ American Graffiti, as the license plate on Milner’s hot rod.

**This being a clear reference to experiments conducted in some California universities in the 1960s on “authoritarian” behavior.

***This is typical of this genre of films. What forms the economic base of *Metropolis*, *Modern Times*, or *Blade Runner*, is also not indicated. Yet each film contains an implicit or explicit exhortation to increase production, and in the case of *THX 1138*, consumption.

police, but they are recalled at the last minute because the computers have calculated that the cost of their pursuit has exceeded its budget. It is ironic that, in this over-managed, oppressive future city, it is possible for the hero to be liberated by the unlikely *deus ex machina* of a computer-processed, cost-benefit ratio.

But at the end of *THX 1138*, the viewer really has no idea what kind of “surface” world THX has emerged into. The cyborg cops exhort him to surrender and return, saying, “You have nowhere to go,” but he climbs a long shaft to the surface, only to emerge into a frame of ambiguity.* He stands motionless before a huge setting sun, and although a bird flies through the frame, we are unsure whether he has emerged into perhaps a post-nuclear holocaust environment, or maybe a healthy natural world that is now reserved for only the very few privileged and powerful, or a world that is kept from all human habitation. The scene extends, only the setting sun altering the frame, suggesting that the director wanted the audience to consider those and other questions.

THX 1138 might be considered to be a possible, not too remote, world. The working conditions, the use of drugs, the numbing use of media, even the perspective on religion, the exploitation and dehumanization of minorities, and the loss of privacy, are not implausible futuristic extensions of conditions to be found at large in contemporary society. Despite the historical perspective that the city has been a vehicle for human liberation, the over-managed city of *THX 1138* is a claustrophobic place of repression and technologically assisted social domination.**

Indeed, a refugee from the world of *THX 1138* might plausibly expect to find the urban future of *Blade Runner*. Set in twenty-first-century Los Angeles, it is a brilliantly conceived and designed futuristic film based on Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* In contrast to *THX 1138*, the city of *Blade Runner* is well above ground and, in place of *THX*’s blanched backdrops, the Los Angeles of 2019 is a blaring, gaudy, acid rain drizzled megacity viewed mostly at night. Most of the people, rather than living mole-like subterranean existences, are here denizens of massive, soaring, mastaba-like high-rise buildings or, if among the poorer classes, making do in the run-down remnants of an earlier era’s housing. Since there is neither sufficient space nor resources, many citizens of this futuristic society are required to live as extraterrestrials in “off-world” colonies.

Artfully and carefully dressed (director Scott is a former graphic designer), the film has a convincing look of the kind of futuristic city we just might get. A visual fusion of contemporary Los Angeles that

*Lucas’s use of “Nowhere” is perhaps a reference to Samuel Butler’s 1871 satirical novel about a utopia, Erewhon.

**It is chilling to consider the prospects for social control suggested by one scene in the movie in which SEN (Donald Pleasance) encounters a group of elementary-age school children. Like him, they are dressed completely in white and have their heads shaved. One quickly notices that the children have small IV bottles attached to their arms. The bottle has become loose on one of the children and SEN offers to reattach it, remarking that back when he went to school “economics took two large bottles and a whole week.”

is also part Hong Kong, part Tokyo’s Ginza, and part Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*, this future megacity is seen mostly at night through rising steam, mist, and glare, combining the *film noir* elements of the story with the refractions and reflections that give the city the mystery of multiple levels of reality.

The social makeup of the city of *Blade Runner* is a melange of races, cultures, and languages, mostly Asian, reflected as well in the food establishments and advertising that occupy the busy street life of the city. There is little indication of what class structure might obtain in this future world beyond the fact that most people live in the “off-world” and those remaining terrestrials reside in slum-like areas with blighted buildings as well as in luxurious apartments in the stratosphere of high-rise structures. The division of social classes by altitude appears derived from *Metropolis*.

The story, like the settings, is reminiscent of film detective genre.* Deckard (Harrison Ford) is a blade runner, or a bounty hunter, who specializes in running down and eliminating “replicants,” or cyborgs, whose human likenesses are so well conceived and executed that special tests with an iris-scanning lie detector are needed to determine their true identity. Indeed, much of the film is concerned with the subject of identity. The very essence of humanity, one’s identity, has become muddled in this future world by a technology that is capable of “manufacturing” an identity so effectively its replicants can even be convinced of their humanity. It is suggested, at least in Dick’s novel, that even Deckard might unknowingly be a replicant.

*There is also a Chandleresque voice-over from Deckard in the original version, removed in a later “director’s cut.”

Much of the plot is driven by the quest of four replicants who have escaped from the off-world and are in quest to find their identity by finding the scientists and technicians who have designed them. Although they are the latest and most advanced models of their kind, the “Nexus 6,” like other “products,” are designed to obsolesce and their “deaths” have been pre-programmed. Reminiscent of *Brave New World*, they, too, have been “designed” for specific purposes: to mete out violence, or in the case of “Pris,” as a “pleasure model.” Finding their way to the residence of the head of the Tyrell Corporation that designed them, they “meet their maker” and, realizing that their fate is sealed, dispatch him.

However the replicants are hunted down, one by one, and, in violent confrontations, “retired.” Faithful to the *film noir* detective form, Deckard’s behavior is often ambiguous. He is pulled out of his own “retirement” as a blade runner to hunt down and kill replicants with the same *sang-froid* as they might display toward him. Indeed, the ambiguity extends to the prospect that Deckard himself might be a replicant. He falls in love, or lust, with the beautiful Rachael, a replicant in denial, and eventually runs off with her to an uncertain fate: how long before her designed obsolescence comes due?

Deckard already knows that it might not be that long. He had his own life spared by one, Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer). In one of the film's most powerful sequences, he is pursued by Roy, angered by the detective's killing of Pris, through a derelict building dripping with rain running through its floors. A warrior model, Roy is physically superior to Deckard, but once he corners him, elects to let him live. "Time to die," Roy intones, but he means himself, and he expires in front of a puzzled Deckard.*

Thus, the city in *Blade Runner* is one of blurred identities, an exponential version of the social world of the contemporary metropolis that, increasingly, is a world of strangers, invented personalities, and affective behaviors. In the future Los Angeles of *Blade Runner*, the very origins of identities are obscured by a technology of "replication" that is capable of programming personal history, confounding "What am I?" with the question, "Who am I?" Who and what one is, in this world of resource scarcity, determines as well where one is allowed to be.

The technological world of *Blade Runner* is one in which technology first apparently has played a major role in the ruination of the natural world, and now is applied to replicating it. Not only humanoids, but also animals are now created out of a highly advanced bio-tech science.

It is a grim view of the future, one of a ravaged natural environment, and a built environment that seems to have been planned by mad real estate agents and scientists.

Faulty Futurism and Failed Cities

Despite the excellence of films such as *THX 1138* and *Blade Runner*, it seems that one of the weaknesses of futuristic projections of the city in the cinema is that they seem rather superficial. To some extent, the film maker's problems in projecting the future city are similar to those of the urban planner: it is difficult to imagine in any realistic way what the city of the future will be like without imagining with some confidence what the people of the future will be like. Hence, futuristic portrayals of human behavior tend to revolve around simple dualities, easy class divisions: the controllers and the controlled, masters and servants, human and non (or semi) humans, etc. Those who have better knowledge or control of technology are those with privilege and power.

Cities tend to be imagined as extensions of the technology that would permit greater size, concentration, density, and verticality to urban form. Overpopulation, post-holocaustal conditions, particu-

**The unanswered questions and ambiguities of Blade Runner have been a gold mine for academic critics taking the deconstructionist or post-modern view of film.*

larly destruction of the natural environment and economic and biological aberrations form the most popular conditions that are caused by and addressed by the use of technology.

These factors may, of course, be partly a product of the necessary conceits of the cinematic form, the need for simple narrative line and the requirements of “resolution” within the time frame of the motion picture. But as one student of the subject asserts, “...the treatment of the future city needs to be seen in the light of the cinema’s treatment of the city in general. Throughout its history, the cinema has shared that intellectual bias against the city that has marked contemporary literature and the arts” (125).

Gold

Dystopic views of the future bear a similarity to utopian views in that they are often necessarily “contained” within some place that allows their authors and screenwriters to focus on what are often ersatz and limited features of future society. The most common of these is that the future city is a “stand alone” city, not imbedded in a larger society or universe (even when that future city is on some other planet), and that technology is used as a means of totalitarian control over people’s lives and over nature in general.

Thus, films such as *Brazil* and *A Clockwork Orange* are both derivative of Orwellian phobias about over-controlled societies, and the forces of control are always pervasive, powerful, and sinister, whether they are being visited on clerks or urban “droogies.”* Even Woody Allen, in his futuristic comedy romp, *Sleeper* awakes two hundred years in the future to a world controlled by a “Big Brother” figure called the “Leader,” who, somewhat similar to *THX 1138*’s deity who is just a large photo, is only a nose, not even a whole person. Yet, despite the prognostication of *1984*, which Orwell wrote in 1948 at the onset of the Cold War, by the time the second film version was released in the same year as the title, the walls of totalitarianism were crumbling and were only a few years from coming down altogether. Science fiction writers and futurists predicted neither that event, nor the yet-to-be adequately defined “new world order.”

*“Droogies” are the urban gangs of a near-future London in *A Clockwork Orange*. Based on Anthony Burgess’s book of the same title, the story raises the question of the uses of behavioral modification techniques and drugs as means of reducing crime in society by re-conditioning criminal types. The film questions the propriety of society taking such extreme measures to protect itself that they deprive even antisocial individuals of their freedom of choice.

Cities also seem to figure in futuristic dystopic visions of urbanism as places that somehow have failed. In films such as *Escape from New York*, the city seems to have devolved into what some ethologists might consider a “behavioral sinkhole,” a place in which all vestiges of civilization have disappeared, and survival requires some primal form of survivalist behavior in order to continue to exist among the ruins of some erstwhile metropolis. In this case, Manhattan has been turned into a maximum-security prison, largely run, as most prisons are believed to be, by the most brutal inmates.

Similar to *Escape from New York*, other films in the post-holocaustal sub-genre tend to use the city as both the premise and locus for rather simplistic science fiction themes. Charlton Heston reprises his former biblical role as Moses with the same moral assurance in *Soylent Green* and the *Omega Man*, both set in urban environments, the latter film, once again, in New York City. The premise in *Soylent Green* is that in this overcrowded urban setting, there is not enough food to go around. The population continues to burgeon and so the human “surplus” is being used to supplement the soybean and lentil food that the title refers to. Heston is messianic again as the Omega Man because, in an apocalyptic world ruined by a biological war between Russia and China, everyone but Heston suffers from a plague that makes people sensitive to light and forces them to live in the dark to protect their milky-glazed eyes. The plague also makes them nasty and ghoulish. Heston’s blood contains the antibody to this plague, but he is unwilling to shed any of it for such unworthy people. His loneliness is assuaged when he does manage to hook up with a small racially mixed group who have yet to succumb to the plague and inoculates one of them with a transfusion.

By far the most popular and commercially successful post-holocaustal science fiction films have been the *Planet of the Apes* series, a pentology released in the turbulent political years from 1968 to 1973. Here again is Charlton Heston, grimacing in the face of evil and injustice in a world that had devolved (or evolved) to the hegemony of primates. A wandering astronaut, he finds himself in a world on the other side of the human–primate hierarchy, a man who is enslaved because he is regarded as being an evolutionary dead end and is believed only to be miming his captors when he speaks. It was a premise that found resonance in the social period marked by the Civil Rights Movement, but also in which other interests, from women’s rights to animal rights, found parallels.

But the premise of *Planet of the Apes* could hardly be allowed to stand much longer than the drive it gives to the films’ stories. Given the opportunity to establish a new civilization, the apes *ape* their predecessors; they are good and evil, sagacious and stupid, vicious and charitable. In the first (1968) film, astronaut Heston complains from his space capsule: “...somewhere in the universe there must be something better than Man.” But man and ape turn out to be more closely related than even their nearly identical DNA profiles. By the end of the series, they have done little to vanquish prejudice, lust for power, and war, and, in the final episode, man and ape battle for dominion of the planet.

But where the apes do seem to have deviated from humans is in forsaking the city. Their degree of urbanization does not approach the heights and magnitudes of the urban civilizations they have replaced (nearly all of the film was shot in seaside Malibu, California). The most telling statement about urbanism that is made in the series is when Heston’s character, an astronaut who has thought all along that he has crash landed on another planet, discovers that he has been contesting apes on the buried ruins of what used to be, yet again, New York City. He discovers the partially buried fallen symbol of freedom, the Statue of Liberty, protruding from the sand on a beach. He really has not traveled anywhere.

Imagining the Future

That may be, in another sense, the problem with science fiction. It remains one of the most popular genres in both novels and films, but it has generally failed to gain intellectual respectability and even has critics among its practitioners.

One of its successful authors has written that “...science fiction should be accounted, and can best be understood as, a branch of children’s literature. [He notes] how often a taste for Sci-Fi is acquired in early adolescence—the golden age of science fiction, our tribal wisdom has it, is thirteen.”

Disch

Given the immense commercial successes of the *Star Wars* series, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *ET* and other rather jejune science fiction film offerings, there seems more than ample empirical evidence for such an assertion. Most extensions into the “unknown” future are, in fact, derived from the known past and present. Alien creatures are primarily bipedal, bi-focal, intelligent beings of a nasty or amiable demeanor or are extensions of known animal and insect forms. Their behaviors and their roles in narrative plots are extensions of human hopes and fears. Stripped of futuristic technology, many such films are merely high-tech “westerns,” “swashbucklers,” “crime dramas,” or in the case of *ET*, that staple of children’s films, “a boy and his dog.” It is also notable that the futuristic technology shown in these films is typically employed in a positive, if not, amusing way. Moreover, there is little concern in these films for portraying technology in ways that are, or likely would be, consistent with known physical laws.

While such films are not the primary concern of this essay, they merit mention because they represent one side of the larger debate

between technophiles and technophobes that influences both cinematic and “real world” views of technology. From the simple throwing stick to the intercontinental ballistic missile, from the cuneiform tablet to the computer, technology has been regarded as a two-edged sword that severs the old relationships between Man-and-Man and Man-and-Nature for both good and ill. Despite the benefits of technological advancements in transportation, communications, production, medicine, and virtually any dimension of human society, there are those who lament the social change, the altered power relationships, the threats to older institutions, the counterintuitive side effects, and other “negatives” of technology.

“Luddism,” the anti-technology movement founded in the midst of the Industrial Revolution in England, represents the extreme reaction to the negatives of technology, an uncompromising position that has some current day adherents in the more extreme environmental and anti-globalism activists.* Nevertheless, there is a more pervasive and modulated concern over the negative effects of various technologies. Environmental disasters, from Love Canal, to Chernobyl, to massive oil spills, all reflect on the uses and requirements of modern technology. Less dramatic but more insidious are the grievances of manufacturing workers made redundant by robotic technology, the concerns over privacy and identity theft by those who find themselves increasingly within the frame of surveillance cameras or risking submission of personal information in a simple commercial transaction, the worries of parents over the information accessible to their children over the Internet, and the legion of other concerns about the price that is exacted for the benefits and blessings of greater speed, productivity, convenience, and information that technology affords. Cloning, genetically engineered food, and other technological marvels are also not without their Faustian consequences. Technophobia is no longer just for extremists or robotically replaced factory workers.

Technology has its champions as well. In a world in which it is possible to design micro-robots that can be injected into the blood stream to perform diagnostic and clinical procedures, it is easy to understand the almost giddy zeal of technophiles.** One might expect such a personal beneficiary of technology as Bill Gates to enthuse: “Over time, the new machine finds a place in our everyday lives because it not only offers convenience and saves labor, but it can also inspire us to new creative heights. It assumes a trusted place beside our other tools. A new generation grows up with it, changing and humanizing it—playing with it”(209). But there are many others who see technology’s glass as more than half full, if not overflowing with the passion of Gates.

**The movement was founded by Ned Ludd, a weaver from Nottinghamshire, who felt that new textile factories were a threat to his and his followers’ livelihoods. The movement spread to France, where adherents of Luddism threw their wooden shoes, sabots, into machinery (giving us the word “sabotage”). Luddites literally attacked new machinery, but they also had many supporters among philosophers, poets, and social reformers.*

***A notion realized first in cinematic imagination in Fantastic Voyage and Innerspace.*

Gates

Mitchell
Hardison

It may be that the negative portrayal of technology in films, therefore, does not so much reflect the divisions in society over the blessing and curses of technology as it does the requisites of the film narrative. Cinema is a dramatic form, and drama is conflict. The film *The China Syndrome* would not be very interesting (indeed would not get made) if it were a film about how safely and efficiently a nuclear power plant can operate. The misuses of technology or its failures and unanticipated consequences, from *Frankenstein* through countless films of mad scientists, irradiated insects, human and animal monstrosities, and human arrogance, greed, and gullibility, are more dramatically interesting than technological successes. The latter is typically represented in the cinema as an eventual *deus ex machina*, the weapon, vaccine, or other technological “remedy” to the offending technology’s “problem” (e.g., *Armageddon*, *Outbreak*).

It has become axiomatic that the future will contain even more powerful and dazzling technology. That potency will be both lusted after and feared. Perhaps the most inspired illustration of the fact that technology is only an object until a human hand puts it to some (good or evil) use was found in the opening sequence of Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*. In that sequence, the earth was truly a planet of the apes, or in this case, apelike hominids. A hominid picks up a femur bone and subdues a rival hominid with it, instilling fear in the others in his group. Suddenly, even in so primitive a world, much seems instantaneously changed. The bone-wielding hominid exults in his newly discovered power, flinging the new “tool-weapon” into the air.

Imagining the City of the Future

The city is humankind’s most sophisticated and complex “technology.” However, to imagine the city of the future, whether it is the intent of the screenwriter or the city planner, it is not so much necessary to imagine the technology of the future, as to imagine (or perhaps to imagine the imagination of) the *urbanite* of the future.

What makes *Metropolis*, *THX 1138*, and *Blade Runner*, social science fiction is that they are ultimately about human behavior rather than technological determinism. It is not the soaring urban structures and subterranean factories of *Metropolis* that determine the social structure, but human greed, prejudice, and power. It is not cyborgs, cybernetics, and the perverse pharmacology of the urban netherworld of *THX 1138* that create the main character’s claustrophobic existence, but administrative power and control run amok. It is not the threat of an invasion of “replicants” in the future Los Angeles of *Blade*

Runner, but the danger of corporate domination in a world of scarcity. In the end, these are films about what humans do (or intend) with the technology they create, not what technology determines they do. It was noted above that in none of these films does the viewer learn what economic goods are produced to form the economic base of the cities of these films. But it does not matter (nor does the manner of production), because it is not the product, but *production*, that is at issue.

If the cinematic views of future urban life tend to be dystopic, this may owe something to the narrative advantages of the “negative,” and to concerns, fears, and anxieties about the power of technology, but this may also reflect an abiding distrust of “human nature.” It is not that technology changes our behavior, rather, it expands the range and consequences of human behavior.

Perhaps the most positive message that the film industry has had to offer about technology is implied by its embrace of the quantum advances cinema technology has brought to the art of filmmaking itself, seemingly leaving little to the imaginations of the audience. Increasingly, highly realistic computer-animated special effects conjure alien creatures, vast expanses of space, high-tech weaponry and transport vehicles, and fantastic cities that are often used to enhance the fantastic and escapist versions of science fiction films. The special effects have become, for much science fiction, the only “story” it needs for commercial success.

In his book exploring science fiction prognostications about future cities, Robert Sheckley asks:

What will Futuropolis be like? We may be able to put our city together and take it apart like a doll’s house. Perhaps we will put it on wheels or rails, locate it under the sea or out in space. We might even dispense with any formal structure and carry individual sections of our city around with us, to plug in where we please. There are almost limitless possibilities. And of course, the planning of Futuropolis reveals our conflicts and uncertainties as well as our hopes and dreams. To speculate on the future is to express what is wrong with our present life (6).

Contemporary cinematic technology is already capable of rendering these fantastic possibilities of future urban life. But whatever might be the form of future cities, and whether they are constructed in actual or virtual space, it is the nature of their inhabitants, not their technology, that will determine the quality of life in them. Perhaps that is what the cyborg cops in *THX 1138* meant when they warned: “You have nowhere to go.”

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