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The City Plays Itself – Cinema and the City

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Dome and Away: *Logan's Run* Post-Apocalyptic Cityscapes

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The rapid growth of population has been a global concern for quite some time due to its severe environmental, poverty control and social instability implications. A concern that becomes even more acute if one is to accept the United Nations' Population Division latest predictions that by 2050, more than two-thirds of the world's population is to live in cities (United Nations 1). Despite not being new, the concept of smart city has, in recent years, acquired privileged status amongst city planners and imagineers all over the world due to the belief that its focus on innovation, technology, ecology and people's well-being can contribute to a more sustainable urban paradigm (Cowley; Dameri; Lindner). Mostly, smart cities are fast becoming a tangible representation of the futuristic cityscapes which were, till recently, confined to science fiction literature and cinema. Thus, it is no wonder that these tend to be regarded as a sort of dream-come-true project with a strong emphasis on the notion that the products and mechanism generated therein will ultimately "ensure the 'good life'" (Foley et. al. 84). Whether this premise is a hundred percent valid it remains to be seen as smart-city initiatives are still being put to the test. Yet, the dangerous implications of present-day societies' blind faith and dependence on technology have been persistently tackled in science fiction texts since the 1950s. A fine example of one such text is Michael Anderson's film *Logan's Run* (1976), a dystopian account of the pleasures and perils of the inhabitants of a computer controlled domed city in a post-apocalyptic future scenario.

As defended by several researchers (Bina et al.; Foley et. al.), science fiction's speculative spectrum regarding architecture and urban planning is particularly relevant as it provides "alternative insights into what challenges lie ahead," both in terms of "future 'possibilities' and 'warning signals'" (Bina et. al. 167). Consequently, both material and imaginary cityscapes "mingle and resonate together in complex and unpredictable ways" (Graham 395) since they influence each other. Bearing all this in mind, this article will first consider science fiction's impact in the conception of the city of the future. While doing so, it will also consider how the notion of city of the future often carries utopian overtones, only to see them degenerate into dystopian scenarios. Subsequently, it will examine the different architectural styles present in *Logan's Run* and their intended

symbolism. Lastly, it will look into some warning signs regarding the environmental and personal privacy challenges that come with living in a smart city.

Cities of the Imagination

The association of technological development with innovation along with human and social progress explains the allocation of considerable funding for techno-science research in many developed countries. In this context, advanced technology is “described in terms of empowerment and performance improvement” (Bina et. al. 174). In other words, technology is future itself.

This perspective somehow perpetuates the rationalist utopia of the Enlightenment which positions science, technology and rationality as the motivating forces for human development, a notion that found its way into science fiction novels and films having, as its ultimate goal the achievement of a new and better social order. Considering that urban development has always played a considerable part in people’s well-being, European utopians and novelists like Samuel Butler, William Morris, Jules Verne, and H. G. Wells resorted to literature as a means of expressing their concerns regarding the dangers of “a naïve idolatry of the Machine” (Bellagamba 83). With the entrance in the twentieth century, the opposite trend is observed in the United States. The potential of technological civilization is celebrated in pulp science fiction magazines, whose stories and vibrant illustrations “of idealized future cities,” on many occasions, suggest “the perfectly geometric, often circular or grid form of the ideal cities of the ancient world or the utopias of modern times” (Bellagamba 84).

As the century progressed, this enthusiasm for all things technological started to fade and the city of the future became the epitome of estrangement and authoritarianism in science fiction texts. This is particularly true in filmic narratives where “the visions of utopia” commonly exhibited “prove illusory or oppressive” (King and Krzywinska 15). Technology is no longer seen as the solution to all humankind’s problems. Instead, it is portrayed “as a means of social domination, rationalization and manipulation by government and corporations, leading sometimes to the loss of rights and privacy” (Bina et al. 174). The city is a downright artificial landscape and, in many cases, “separated from nature” (Bina et al. 174). This perception is also backed by Smiljanic and Mlinar, whose study defines five different types of science fiction cities: metropolis (those represented as totalitarian mega cities and which favour Modernist architecture for its simple, yet oppressive and heavy forms, i.e. *Logan’s Run*, 1976; *Metropolis*, 1927); City-Machines (those represented as space stations, i.e. *A Space Odyssey*, 1968); degenerative cities (late-capitalist, decentered megalopolis whose signs of disintegration are starting to show and which display a

preference for a post-modern architectural style, i.e. *Blade Runner*, 1982; *Brazil*, 1985); regressive cities (those set in post-apocalyptic settings which have fallen prey to crime, to social, economic and moral decline due to the collapse of civilization, i.e. the *Mad Max* tetralogy, 1979, 1981, 1985 and 2015); and virtual space cities (those which are abstract entities rather than actual physical spaces, despite adopting the structure of mega western cities, i.e. *The Matrix*, 1999) (250, 253). However, these different categories must not be perceived as rigid given that, more often than not, the cities displayed in them comprise a plurality of architectural registers. Such is the case of *Logan's Run* dome city, as it will be demonstrated.

Due to its plasticity and hybridity, science fiction is a hard to define genre. However, and for the sake of accuracy, henceforward the term *sci-fi* will be used instead due to its strong association with cinema and because it is “the standard term used to designate blockbuster SF cinema and mass market enterprises like the *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* franchises” (Rieder 2). Either way, both designations imply the “interaction of estrangement and cognition” as well as “an imaginative framework alternative to” the creator’s and spectator’s “empirical environment” (Suvin 375). In other words, when undergoing a process of *cognitive estrangement*, the viewers agree to be taken out of their perceived reality into another “world which seems strange and disjointed, but believably so” (Graham 395). Given the fact that all this happens in the realm of speculative imagination, the types of cities mentioned earlier on are “cities of the imagination” (Sobchack, “Cities” 4) as they “exist somewhere between the real of concrete space and the subjective realm of our conception and experience of that space” (Collie 425).

It is now a commonly accepted notion that sci-fi has the power to raise social and political consciousness. Its capacity to make the hypothetical feel “real” contributes to its foresight ability, instigates viewers to question the preview of the future being disclosed and, ultimately, triggers a demand for change (Bina et. al.; Foley et. al.). More so because, rather than referring solely to the future, sci-fi is about the present for it mirrors and, somehow, responds to society’s current fears and anxieties (Matrix 94). Therefore, “sci-fi cities, whilst being futuristic fables, inevitably resonate powerfully with contemporary concerns. They are also, ... , pivotal in constituting the materialities of contemporary cities” (Graham 395). To put it differently, “imaginary architecture ... is more than mere background” (Sobchack, “Cities” 4).

Logan's Run (s)mart Architecture

Based on the 1967 homonymous novel by William F. Nolan and George Clayton Johnson, *Logan's Run* was adapted to film under the direction of Michael Anderson and released in 1976. Both, the novel and the film, disclose a growing feeling of unsteadiness and insecurity caused by “a widespread perception that the foundations of the American Dream had been shattered by years of decline and frustration” (Tomasulo 157). The Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal and the counterculture movements of the 1960s and 70s had all contributed to this perception. Young people's restlessness and their perceived permissive lifestyle were considered threats to American values and social stability. Thus, *Logan's Run* conveys an implicit criticism to the possible emergence of a heavily technological and youth-ruled society (Chapman and Cull 148; Tomasulo 158).

Set in a post-apocalyptic future, a large community made up exclusively of very young people seems to live a leisurely and stress-free life in the City of Domes, a technologically sustained and controlled city-state. The urban environment presented on screen is that of a domed metropolis, carefully planned, featuring modernist/brutalist buildings amidst wide, well-arranged green areas and a lake. A disposition that resembles an architect's model of a futuristic spa resort. The idea of private motor vehicles does not exist. Instead, there is a system of suspended tubed railways where small pod cars slide in an orderly manner and stop at specific stations to drop off or pick up passengers.

The atmosphere is one of pure hedonism with matching futuristic décors. For instance, the interior city spaces reflect a commercial and exhibitional quality projecting the idea that not only are they consumption-based (Babish 28), but they also allow for those who use them to showcase themselves. The city itself resembles a huge Shopping Mall, a mart-like precinct which epitomizes the transition from modernity to postmodernity by embracing its role as a total space of consumption (Babish 202). Plastic surgery, gyms, psychedelic drugs, love shops and dinners are but a few examples of the type of commodities available under the dome. What is more, because the community lacks “a societal system of work” (Babish 203) there are no social classes. Likewise, the concept of nuclear family as well as that of generation have been eradicated seeing that absolutely all aspects of the citizens' lives, from conception to death, are controlled by computers. This always-on monitoring system feeds on big data and pushes people into a data-driven life dynamics (Matrix 93). The City of Domes is, thus, an extreme example of a smart city while also a reflection of Cold War paranoia.

With plenty of free time on their hands, its pleasure-seeking dwellers indulge in physical exercise, recreational drug use and casual sex. Not only is this extreme pursuit of pleasure a *panem et circenses* strategy meant to prevent citizens from questioning and rebelling against the validity of *status quo*, but it also conveys a false yet inebriating sense of freedom that keeps the population compliant with a set of myths (Chapman and Cull 148; Brerenton 171). Being a sci-fi film, this apparent free and “good life” comes with a cost. And a high cost it is, considering that the maintenance of the community’s social equilibrium requires that the life span of all its dwellers be abruptly interrupted at the age of 30 by submitting willingly to “renewal.” By choosing this particular age as the dwellers’ termination date, *Logan’s Run* is alluding to the hippie slogan “don’t trust anyone over 30” (Abbott 110; Telotte and Duchovnay 56) while, simultaneously, condemning it by showing one of its possible consequences.

In order to identify those who must perish, all dwellers carry a life clock in the palm of their hands, in the shape of an implanted crystal whose colour changes according to the age of the person. Once it turns black, it is time for renewal. The renewal ceremony, a euphemism for death, takes place in the arena of a Coliseum-like structure called the carrousel. Once inside, and before an enthusiastic and cheering crowd, the bodies of those up for renewal are lifted and lethally lasered in a choreographed show that resembles a live videogame. Despite the futuristic setting, both the space and the event described are reminiscent of Ancient Rome’s recreational architecture and forms of entertainment (Brerenton 171). An aesthetic choice that seems to stress the *panem et circenses* analogy.

This shocking requisite, which aims to solve resource-scarcity problems by controlling demography, somehow disrupts the utopian appeal of this forever-young community. As a matter of fact, many nearing the “last day” spectrum rebel against this fate and attempt at breaking out of the dome – the *runners*. Yet, their chances of escaping are dim as the *sandmen*, an all-male state police whose job is to “monitor and regulate this chronopolitical economy” (Matrix 88), which will hunt and mercilessly eradicate them. Nonetheless, this order of things is greatly unsettled when Logan 5 (Michael York), a sandman, starts to question it and becomes a runner himself. Together with Jessica 6 (Jenny Agutter), a dissenter that belongs to an underground resistance movement, Logan 5 embarks on an odyssey, outside the dome, with numerous perils that need to be overcome in order to reach “Sanctuary”; that is, the runners’ hypothetical promised land.

As noticed by Stephen Babish, *Logan’s Run* exhibits several “consistent diegetic spaces” (25) emerging from specific *mise en scène* architectural choices which should be “subject to the same interpretative protocols as film and literature” (23). Borrowing from Beatriz Colomina, Babish

defends that “architecture is essentially a mass medium” (22-23) and, as such, it is a text that requires reading. For instance, the decision to use geodesic domes as the main structure in the film is both symptomatic and symbolic. First and foremost, the concept came out of R. Buckminster Fuller’s utopian impulse to provide energy-efficient and inexpensive housing for 1950s America. Due to their environmental friendly and functional nature, as well as their potential for communal living, they were embraced by the counterculture movements of the 1960s and 70s. On that account, they became a symbol for counterculture utopianisms. However, domes also became “a prototyping technique for generating forms of emergency shelter” (Diaz 94), which is something of an advantage in disaster scenarios, namely a nuclear war. Therefore, domes acquire a twofold significance. While they can be recognized as a utopian production, they can also be read as a foresight signal of a disaster waiting to happen. Yet, the versatility of domes does not end here. They also double as a protection from wild nature’s adversity and as an example of a carceral compound (Abbott 109). While the “hermetically sealed artificial bio-system” (Brerenton 172) safeguards citizens from nature’s ruthlessness, it also blocks them from accessing the natural world.

Two other architectural settings that deserve mentioning, and which stand in clear contrast with the idealized (s)mart cityscape of the domed metropolis, are the decaying industrial structure located under the domes and Cathedral. A point to be made is that they both bring regressive cities to mind and, as such, there is something apocalyptic about them. In the first case, it invokes a prison-break scenario with its dark metal staircases leading to tunnels, secret passages and dungeons. Given its underground status, it becomes the headquarters for the runners’ resistance movement. In the second case, Cathedral stands as an example of a ghettoized, inhospitable and degraded site or quadrant inhabited solely by child and juvenile delinquents – the *cubs*. All things considered, these ominous urban features seem to indicate that not all is well in the City of Domes.

Visions of the Future

Once outside the dome, Logan 5 and Jessica 6 face a reality that can be recognized as the result of an environmental catastrophe. They go from experiencing polar temperatures during their crossing of an ice cave, which serves as a morgue for all runners listed as missing by the Dome’s computer, to enduring the hazards that come with finding oneself amidst territory that has been profusely reclaimed by nature. Having lived all their lives in an urban sociotechnological sheltered *milieu* they initially find it hard to adapt to an untamed natural world where, as Jessica notes,

“everything hurts.” As their journey progresses they reach an abandoned city. Contrary to the City of Domes, which is a purpose built set with no authenticity concerns, the second city staring in *Logan’s Run* is easily recognized as Washington D.C.. Yet, for storytelling purposes, Washington’s tradition and authority has been undermined (Nowell-Smith 104). Its neoclassical grandeur and civilizational value are in a state of decay. Washington is nothing but ruins, “an abandoned landscape on a radically altered planet” (Sobchack, “Cities” 13). The city has been taken over by nature and there is only one inhabitant left – an old man (played by Peter Ustinov) resembling a biblical figure – living at a library, also in decline as if hinting at the loss of the value of knowledge, as opposed to that of information gathered by technological means (Bina et. al. 175). Logan and Jessica’s contact with the old man and with Lincoln’s statue covered in ivy at the Lincoln Memorial, is their first exposure to old age and to a symbol of liberal democracy (Berenton 172), two dimensions that have been eliminated from the City of Domes.

The fact that Washington is presented as a ruin is somehow demonstrative that grand civilizations are perishable too. Again, this seems to illustrate the Cold War dread of annihilation that swept the USA during that anxiety-fueled period. Nevertheless, renewal is always possible. For instance, Washington’s ability to reassert itself as a symbol of freedom is addressed when Logan, while at the library, kills Francis (Richard Jordan), a sandman that has obstinately chased the pair, using the American flag as a weapon and gaining his freedom. Moreover, the state of wilderness they found outside the dome is one that “has the possibilities of social rebirth” (Abbott 110). A prospect that Logan 5 wishes to share with all of those that are still captives of the dome and triggers him to return. Once there, while being interrogated by the central computer, he prompts its destruction by conveying too much information and thus overloading its systems. The destruction of the central computer leads also to the destruction of the domes’ seals and to the consequent release of all the dwellers.

Either way, both Washington and the City of Domes can be understood as the result of an extreme future scenario (Yeoman and Wouters 284). If the former finds itself in a regressive state due to some sort of natural or human caused disaster, the latter is a vision of what the future may hold should climate change, food, water and fuel supply-related disturbances start to escalate. On top of that, the viewers are confronted by “the ambiguities of being human in a world where advanced technology has altered both the contours and meaning of personal and social existence” (Sobchack, “Science Fiction” 231). For the sake of environmental balance, an inflexible biopolitics of birth and death must be enforced through a tight monitorization system, whose constant state of surveillance leads to the dehumanization and disenfranchisement of the popula-

tion (Matrix 87). There is not much room for spontaneity or critical thinking as everything has been prescribed.

As post-apocalyptic cityscapes are concerned, none of the above is appealing as they exhibit a dystopian vision of the world, something that utterly clashes with the City of Domes initial utopian mission. Yet, one should bear in mind that “dystopia is often presented as a failed utopia, as a demonstration of the dangers of attempting to engineer any kind of perfect world” (King and Krzywinska 15). According to Bina et. al. these are examples of the (science) fiction foresight relationship and of the kind of warning signs urban developers are to pay attention to if better solutions to the disturbances mentioned are to be found (168).

Conclusion

Even though the film ends on a positive note, many questions regarding urban management remain unanswered. How did the domed city dwellers manage the waste generated within their mass consumer-driven society? How was their food sourced? Or, on different note, how are they to survive without the guidance of the central computer? How are they to deal with the signs of physical degradation that come with aging? This was, after all, an experience they had been shielded from by the chronopolitical system they have been liberated from. Overall, the future does not seem too bright as these questions are infused with warning signs themselves.

At the same time, and as stated by Margaret Atwood, though science fiction is very often set in the future, it is “always about now” (“Margaret Atwood” par. 2). Therefore, present concerns, fears and anxieties are projected onto the screen. *Logan’s Run* is, thus, a metaphor for the distress brought about by youth culture uprisings in the 1960s and 70s and by the Cold War in the United States. What is more, it also stresses the fact that utopias tend to lead to ideological dogma which, more often than not, degenerate in dystopias.

As for the different architectural styles featured in the film they function as text and as such they contribute to *Logan’s Run* diegesis for they are diegetic spaces themselves. Moreover, as a science fiction cinematic text, it speculates on future developments regarding the consequences of society’s blind reliance on technoscience and on data-thirsty digital technologies. Such a stance can be instrumental in making sense of how cities should be designed and inhabited. However, this approach is nothing short of complexity since the dichotomized relation between factual and imaginary cities is fast becoming a blur (Graham 395). Present day smart cities are an example of the hyper-mediation of the film industry and, as such, this synergy of reality along with fiction can result in unpredictable consequences.

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