



The Metropolis And Mental Strife

The city in science fiction cinema

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"It is not that I have no past; rather, it continually fragments on the terrible and vivid ephemera of now".

Samuel Delany, *Dhalgren*

"When we made *Armageddon*, all of us certainly didn't think we were going to be seeing any of those images in real life... when it actually does happen and you're watching it on CNN, frankly, it gives you the creeps".

Jonathan Hensleigh, screenwriter,
commenting on the events of 11 September 2001

Upon its completion in 1931, the Empire State Building was declared by the *New York Times* to be "a monumental proof of hopefulness" whose designers "must have been firm in the belief that the future of New York is assured".¹ Within this buoyant statement, so full of irony in light of recent events, we find the essence of science fiction film's strong attraction to the architecture of the city. With extrapolation the most common form of time travel in SF narrative, the futuristic cinematic city in its utopian, technophilic guise represents reason encoded in the unity of form and function, its wind-tunnel designed buildings basking in the spectacular white light of technological rationality, sourceless, but all-illuminating (no shadows, naturally). History and memory – indeed all traces of a tumultuous past – are ground into the reflective surfaces of the built environment, so that, as Le Corbusier's maxim goes, "nothing is contradictory anymore, everything is in its place, properly arranged in order and hierarchy". In films from *Just Imagine* to *Things to Come*, from *Buck Rogers* to *Logan's Run* and the countless incarnations of *Star Trek*, the camera lingers over the technological marvel in rapt, sublime contemplation. These films re-enact the utopian imagery familiar to readers of SF magazine fiction, which deploys the icono-

graphy of science and hardware fetishism that informed the pulp zeitgeist of the North American 1930s and elevated the engineer to the status of modernity's architect.²

While the camera caresses the surfaces of the total environment in the SF utopia, in the dystopian city film the camera jabs and prods in fits of distraction. Here, the ecstasies of urban monumentality are inextricable from the anxieties of disenfranchisement, social ferment and sprawling danger: a veritable psychology of urban dread. Erected from the ruins of technocratic urban rationality, the gothic city spaces of *Bladerunner* and *Dark City* depict a phenomenology of urban space that hinges on terror, violence and paranoia. It's little wonder that a contemporary SF film like *Dark City*, with its Piranesi-like perspective and aesthetics of abstraction, turns to the clearly identifiable iconography of the German Expressionists, those early SF pioneers responsible for films like Paul Wegener's *Der Golem* and Robert Wiene's *Das Cabinet des Dr Caligari* which project interior psychological torment on to their delirious set design.

The alignment between architecture, psychology and film design is almost as old as cinema itself. Vachel Lindsay celebrated architecture as the catalyst for creativity in the motion picture, and early film theorists like Hugo Munsterberg claimed that because of its fundamental attention to the mind's internal movements, cinema allowed the spectator a correspondence with the interior world of psychology, memory and imagination. Siegfried Kracauer's exaltation of the urban street eschewed distracted and cluttered artificiality in favour of more realistic depiction, where the camera might record even the most fleeting moments of modern urban life. However it is Kracauer's major theoretical influence, Georg Simmel, who provides the most cogent appraisal of the relationship between film and architecture. Asserting that the fast-paced rhythms of the modern city imbue its citizenry with a psychology that is equivalent to the task of handling the constant barrage of urban stimuli, Simmel (perhaps even by accident) links the psychology of the metropolis with the difference-engine that drives the cinematic experience itself:

"Man is a differentiating creature. His mind is stimulated by the difference between a momentary impression and the one which preceded it. Lasting impressions, impressions which differ only slightly from one another, impressions which take a regular and habitual course and show regular and habitual contrasts – all these use up, so to speak, less consciousness than does the rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions".³

This utterly filmic statement of the differences between urban contemplation and distraction are echoed by Walter Benjamin, who notes that the film landscape "passes in review" for the film spectator, unable to rest on a singular image because of its rapid progression. The attendant perceptual logics of shock succinctly address film's ability to shake the foundations of 'mere' architectural contemplation. Even architecture, the "prototype of a work of art the reception of which is consummated by a collectivity in a state of distraction", provides the radical possibility of "an optics of reception which occurs much less through rapt attention than by noticing the object in incidental fashion".⁴ Benjamin is careful to note that habituation trains the viewer's eye, that the commodification of space itself under urban capitalism creates its own forms of vision, its own genre of the look.

Though it has strong antecedents in myth and the pastoral, science fiction is a narra-

tive form rooted in the urban experience of modernity and clearly invites the modes of interpretation associated with these industrialised phenomenologies of vision. Samuel Delany's fiction has a strong urban sensibility: he notes that his novel *Dhalgren* – with its central city of Bellona constantly aflame – is a “fairly pointed dialogue with all the depressed and burned-out areas of America's great cities”.⁵ Similarly, his classic invocation of the poetics of science fiction, which focuses on the literalisation of metaphor, is clearly architectonic. Asserting that sentences like “her world exploded” or “she turned on her left side” are understood quite differently in the SF text than in “mundane” fiction, Delany describes the reading of SF as a type of speculative geographic survey: “with each sentence we have to ask what in the world of the tale would have to be different from our world in order for such a sentence to be uttered... as the sentences build up, we build up a world in specific dialogue with our present conception of the real”.⁶ SF is a genre of accumulation; it builds narrative worlds through the slow, elaborate and often subtle accumulation of detail. A glimpse of a dirty countertop aboard the *Nostromo* tells us as much about the world of *Alien* as the bone-white plastic surfaces of 2001's Discovery spacecraft. The master of the densely detailed visual landscape, Fritz Lang, remarked on many occasions that the visual dynamism of *Metropolis* was more interesting than its socio-historical context. With its extensive use of the passing reference and the fleeting glance, science fiction tests the limits of our distracted urban consciousness to build, brick by brick, the densely detailed visual landscape of an alternate world. Magnified by the logic of generic habituation, science fiction invites us to think the “not-yet” (to borrow Ernst Bloch's phrase), to play out the drama of anticipation in the realm of the popular. The SF experience is parabolic: like gravity's rainbow, it returns us to an unfamiliar present as ghosts wandering the urban machine, strangers in a strange land.

The city science fiction film takes full advantage of recoding familiar architectural imagery in a transformative fashion. The iconography of Los Angeles is prominent in, for example, *The Terminator*, whose ‘tech-noir’ aesthetic illustrates SF's fascination with the city via the classic American detective films of the 1940s and '50s. Similarly, *Bladerunner* is a postmodern neo-noir that brilliantly inverts Disney's theme-park fascination with the topography and urban psychology of LA.⁷ In contemporary American cinema, LA displaces New York as the center of science fiction's urban imaginary in films like *Predator 2*, *Demolition Man*, and *Terminator 2*. Los Angeles also figures strongly in recent SF films about virtual reality, which demonstrate the powerful influence of cyberpunk as a major urban aesthetic. However, particularly since the early 1980s, New York iconography has become prominent in SF dystopias that range from *Escape from New York* to *Batman* and *Dick Tracy*. *Batman* director Tim Burton, who describes the film's Gotham city set as looking “like Hell erupted through the pavement and kept on going”,⁸ engages the cartography of New York to map the nightmarish urban vision that serves as the film's backdrop.

Recent millennial and apocalyptic anxiety has, however, restored New York fully to the forefront of the mainstream SF film. Of course, Los Angeles figures prominently in the popular imagination of natural disaster, subsuming anti-environmental and man-made profit oriented design under the narrative logic of ecological revenge,⁹ and New York City has been destroyed in classic SF films like *Deluge*, *When Worlds Collide*, and *The Beast*

from *20,000 Fathoms*. Yet there is a distinctive iconographic reversal in these new, mega-budget, SF films. While films like *Metropolis* (Lang claimed that the film was inspired by his first glimpse of the New York skyline), *Just Imagine* and *King Kong* portrayed New York's built environment as a monument to the machine age, these new millennial SF films represent the graphic and repeated destruction of these modernist architectural icons. *Independence Day's* depiction of urban annihilation is so prolonged that its September 16th 2001 US TV showing was pulled by Fox in favor of *Mrs. Doubtfire*. *Armageddon* features the meteor destruction of the Chrysler Building, Grand Central Station and the World Trade Center. Similarly, in *Deep Impact* the World Trade towers topple under the force of a tidal wave that destroys all of New York City, while in *Godzilla* the monster is chased by the military and press alike, demolishing Manhattan to comic effect along the way.¹⁰ At the heart of all these deeply conservative films (most disaster films suggest that renewal is possible through a return to traditional values) beats the spirit of global geopolitical collaboration – the world coming together in the aftermath of American urban destruction to fight a threat who, in the words of the *Independence Day's* mad scientist figure, is “pretty much like us”. *Independence Day* is particularly unabashed about the post-Cold War national catharsis engendered by the world marching to the strains of American triumphalism.

Most science fiction films, Susan Sontag has suggested, are about disaster's “aesthetics of destruction, the peculiar beauties to be found in wreaking havoc, making a mess”.¹¹ These words were written in the 1960s, in a largely dismissive polemic against the way in which “escapist” and technologised spectacles of urban disaster evict any possibility for SF film to mount significant social critique. Sontag's disdain aside, as a genre of the spectacular, science fiction does engage those industrialised phenomenologies of vision made possible by the technology of special effects which direct the spectator to the kinaesthetic qualities of the cinema and the sheer wonder of photographed movement.¹²

Is it not uncanny that these very same special effects technologies are being used to erase even the most fleeting evidence of real urban disaster in upcoming Hollywood releases? In light of the September 11th 2001 attacks on New York's World Trade towers, film executives are caught between the desire for verisimilitude and the worry that even a quick glimpse of the complete tower's existence would exacerbate a national trauma. That is why special effects technicians are working round the clock to digitally remove images of the towers from upcoming releases and trailers, with one digital animator realising with shock that it took her almost exactly as long to remove the background image of the towers in the laboratory as it did for the real towers to fall. In a reversal of Sontag's polemic, we are left to wonder what dangers are posed by the fictional reminders of real disaster, especially since we are continually bombarded by the repetition of the building's collapse, from east and west, from below via tourist snapshots, from above by satellite imagery, punctuated by a staccato televisual rhythm.

As the major purveyors of special effects technology, science fiction films have not been spared the digital knife. Sony subsidiary Columbia Tristar pulled the *Spiderman* theatrical trailer which depicted the ultimate arachnid *flâneur* swinging between the World Trade Towers, spinning a web in which to snag a getaway helicopter. The print poster – which

showed the Towers reflected in Spiderman's eyes – was also removed from circulation within a day of the attack.¹³ In addition, Sony is reshooting the end of *Men In Black 2*, so that a Chrysler Building backdrop will replace the previously filmed Trade Center set. There are also reports of reshoots on the set of *The Time Machine*, which had featured the destruction of New York by a lunar meteorite. Media attention on the photographic fate of the towers has spectators searching the filmic frame for a glimpse of them in what Francois Truffaut called the "privileged moment": those quick flashes of real life that emerge briefly through the veil of cinematic artifice.¹⁴ Yet at the same time that a legitimization crisis has emerged in the representation of disaster, some in the computer graphics community have suggested that all available photographic imagery of the event be combined into a virtual 3D model that might provide more insight into the event than the *real* wreckage,¹⁵ hoping that the digital composite might offer significant clues to help unravel continuing questions of structural engineering and forensic analysis.

There is, of course, no bowing out of the dizzying dance between the represented and the real. This is *Bladerunner's* lesson: the photograph is never an undeniable index of memory.¹⁶ With the removal of the towers from the cinematic imaginary, we are reminded that memory is itself commodified, for sale in a future-present that might have been scripted by Phillip K. Dick. With the hyper-real back-and-forth between the appearance of the intact World Trade Center in the fictional cinematic narrative and its digital absence, perhaps all future films made with a New York set will be rendered strange, a type of science fiction. We will wonder as we compare the fictional world to our own, engaging in Simmel's "sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance", where this screen memory called New York actually was. Perhaps we will share the little girl's remark when she is shown images of the city's past in *Things to Come*: "what a funny place New York was... all sticking up and full of windows". Rather than SF's literalisation of metaphor then, removing glimpses of the World Trade towers from film is about the *obliteration* of metaphor, doubling the symbolic value of the tower as a focal point of the 9/11 attack and completing the cycle of violence.

After 9/11, filmmaker Alexander Kluge remarked that "in the future, there will be no more disaster movies". Yet as science fiction film continues to conduct its post-mortem on the anatomy of metropolitan life, we can only hope that despite a present where disaster is erased from cinematic view, we might renew our memories of past catastrophe in filmed images of the future.

NOTES

1. "Building in Excelsis", *New York Times*, 5/1/1931.
2. Andrew Ross, "Getting out of the Gernsback Continuum" in *Strange Weather: Culture, Science and Technology in the Age of Limits* (New York: Verso, 1991), 101-35.
3. Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life" in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* (London: Glencoe Collier MacMillan, 1950), 410.
4. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936) in *Illuminations: Walter Benjamin Essays and Reflections*, Hannah Arendt ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 240.
5. Samuel Delany, "The Semiology of Silence", *Science-Fiction Studies* 14 (1987), 147.

6. Samuel R. Delany, "Generic Protocols: Science Fiction and the Mundane" in *The Technological Imagination: Theories and Fictions*, Teresa de Lauretis, Andreas Huyssen, and Kathleen Woodward eds. (Madison, WI: Coda Press, 1980), 178.
7. Alexander Wilson, "Technological Utopias" in *South Atlantic Quarterly* 92.1 (Winter 1993), 162.
8. Donald Albrecht, "New York, Olde York: The Rise and Fall of a Celluloid City" in *Film Architecture: Set Designs from Metropolis to Bladerunner*, Dietrich Neumann ed. (New York: Prestel, 1996), 41.
9. See Mike Davis' *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (New York: Vintage, 1999).
10. There are numerous other lesser examples – only two can be detailed here. In the animated *Final Fantasy*, set in a ruined New York, we catch glimpses of the deserted World Trade towers in the frame. Images of the partially submerged towers are also prominent in the post-apocalyptic coda to Steven Spielberg's *AI*. Interestingly enough, these images will be preserved in future releases of *AI*, though Spielberg has ordered the line "No, you're not going as a terrorist" cut from the Halloween scene in the upcoming 20th Anniversary edition of *ET: The Extraterrestrial*.
11. Susan Sontag, "The Imagination of Disaster" in *Against Interpretation* (New York: Dell, 1966), 213.
12. Scott Bukatman, "The End of Offscreen Space" in *The New American Cinema*, Jon Lewis, ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 248-272.
13. Geoffrey Ammer, President of the Columbia Tristar Marketing Group, claimed that "we're human beings first, marketers second", a line that inadvertently reverberates with science fictional promise.
14. Nervous after US Congressional inquiry into game marketing and teen violence, videogame manufacturers have also been quick to respond to the urban disaster. Activision delayed its "Spider-Man 2 Enter: Electro" Sony Playstation game because some imagery "loosely resembled" the World Trade Center. And in the most famous instance, Microsoft delayed its launch date of "Flight Simulator 2002" in order to remove the towers from game scenes, especially after many speculated that the hijackers had used previous versions of the game to learn how to fly.
15. Phil LoPiccolo, "Anti-terror Technologies, Editorial" in *Computer Graphics World* 24. 11 (1 November 2001), 4.
16. After the attack, there was a well-publicised photo of a hijacked plane flying into one of the World Trade towers from the vantage point of a tourist whose camera was reportedly found in the wreckage. The photo was a hoax: a Budapest native allegedly had added the digital image of a Boeing 757 to an older photograph. Taken alongside Hollywood's desire to erase the Towers' existence, however, the *addition* of the disastrous referent via digital technology demonstrates a much less cynical way of dealing with the trauma of catastrophe. It is little wonder that the doctored photograph and the intricate, fake history of its retrieval became a global Internet phenomenon: yet another object lesson that Hollywood can learn from the street-level image pirates, perhaps.