IMPERFECT FUTURE:
TOMORROW'S CITIES IN FILMS

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I. FROM ARCHITECTURE TO THE CITY IN FILMS

Rather than showing what cities are like, the cinema industry is mainly concerned with filming buildings, constructions used to portray an ephemeral urban space, an evocative scene of the right moment for the outcome of a specific dramatic situation.

Very often, in fact, the camera does not even show the whole building, but rather focuses on important parts of it or moves around the outside or the surrounding area, deftly setting the scene where the human relationships that the plot is based on take place. Not all schools in films show even this much of the city, however: it is more frequent in American (Hollywood) than in European cinema, which, despite a strong urban presence underlying the plot (which always unfolds in the city or its outskirts), often fails to show the city due to an overload of close-up shots focusing on complex social relationships.

This is why most of the existing literature tends to study «architecture in films» rather than «the city in films», as the latter is a necessarily interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary approach. Town planning is increasingly about using different skills and responsibilities to deal with the growing complexity presented by the three essential dimensions of a city: the physical space (the setting), the social space (the characters) and the economic space.

In American cinema, the physical space is always at the forefront, to define where the action is set. General shots with a large deployment of means are common, including a bird's eye view, flying the viewer over spaces to where the scene actually takes place. This reinforces the sense of location, particularly when including lettered overlays indicating the city, the building and the time. In other words, the aim is for a real and identifiable physical space to give the plot credibility.

European cinema is more sparing in scenes of this type; the lack of economic resources available may have led to the particular way of focusing interest on the social space, on the relationships between people (the focus is more on the actors than on the setting), and thus on psychological portraits and sociological viewpoints of varying breadth and complexity. Credibility is more down to the correct performance of actors and actresses than to realistic

settings: whereas in American films the city appears on a secondary plane, in European cinema it is relegated to a third or fourth plane, or simply becomes part of an amorphous background space.

Cinema is much less frequently concerned with showing the economic dimension of cities, at least in any explicit way. At most, what is shown are the characters at work, or out of work, and the workplace sometimes appears as a scene of conflict. In films with an urban presence, the most common stereotypes are those that show tertiary-sector settings (journalists, politicians, lawyers, business men, police officers, health workers, traders, street vendors, etc.), i.e. the most characteristic positions in a modern city which, together with the legion of jobless people, shape the socioeconomic space, the space of conflict, that is created in the central business district or neighbourhoods in decay.

The industrial space, which was so groundbreaking and powerful in futuristic films such as *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1926) or *Modern Times* (Charles Chaplin, 1936), where powerful industrial machinery subjugates the workers, has since disappeared. Industry is no longer current (much less futuristic), and the only industrial spaces that appear are residual, decadent and in decay, and are used as settings for crime, chases and criminal or marginalised behaviour.

In this reflection on the urban space in cinema, we have deliberately decided to compare the futuristic image of the city in films with real trends in town planning. This relationship is a fruitful one, in which films have shown the very latest developments in town planning (normally through architecture) by using them in scenes from the future, but with sufficient proximity to be recognisable and believable. At the same time, films have been an effective channel for showing the whole world new urban forms and the new and inherent types of urban behaviour, in such a way that cinema has become an engine of social modernisation and new city forms. Cinema has also been a source of inspiration for new urban and architectural projects, through the demands of clients who wanted to live in settings similar to those they had seen on screen (Ramírez, 1993); however, the relationship has also run in the opposite direction: many filmmakers were inspired by real urban and architectural constructions.

II. THE CITIES OF TOMORROW AND FILM

1. Sociopolis

Cinema has more frequently portrayed a futuristic vision that relegates the concept of citizenship (*civitas*) to a secondary plane and exacerbates the physical form (*urbs*), shown in technological settings where people are subjugated and dominated by machinery, which is a metaphor of the modern technological city that devours its creators, and a paradox in which a decaying and toxic nature wreaks vengeance on the humans that have caused it such harm. Films of this kind, concerned with the portrayal of dystopias, are considered to be real *science fiction* (*Blade Runner, Brazil, Fahrenheit 451, The Matrix* or *The Fifth Element*, among others). However, it is hard to find the Spielberg films *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and *E.T.* in this classification, despite their popularity, as they follow the path of utopia, and probably as a result are disregarded as being too syrupy.

2. Megalopolis

Films about the future, depicting a disintegrated social framework in a highly integrated physical setting, come mainly from futuristic visions inspired by town planners that imagined future settings of infinite mobility, thanks to a limitless use of technology at the service of humans. These are visions of a technopolis designed to accommodate the most advanced means of transport and communication that science has been able to predict. They are metaphors of the city created from the development of individual transport by the automobile industry and advances in building infrastructures, i.e. technology.

3. Mechanopolis

Science fiction in cinema places particular emphasis on the physical form of the cities of the future, and aims to create a setting that is appropriate for dramatic development. These forms have often been inspired by specific projects aimed at solving town planning problems in various places, which have led both to real constructions and, more often than not, to proposed projects that are possible with the technology of the time, though not sustainable from a social, economic or environmental point of view. The panoply of new futuristic urban forms has grown from the beginning of the 20th century, together with a sense of romance towards the future, which emerges in new forms that reject neoclassicism and, later, rationalism.

4. Metapolis

Ascher defines the concept of metapolis as the urban form that exceeds the idea of the metropolis or megalopolis, resulting from the limitless extension of urban aspects over the land (fragmentation taken to its extreme), which brings substantial changes in how people live and adapt to new physical structures (Ascher, 1995). This brings about an important social change, in which *urbanites* progressively give way to *territorians* or *metapolitans*: inhabitants who in their daily lives make extensive use of a territory that far exceeds the urban limits (and urban supply) of a single municipality, due to how widespread the automobile and other means of transport have become, but who, precisely because of technological advances, lead a less urban life, one that is more encapsulated and hedonistic, enclosed in intelligent homes which, by providing all kinds of services and sensations, actually short-circuit the desire for human relationships.

III. SYNTHESIS: UTOPIA, ECOTOPIA, PRIVATOPIA, PLEASURETOPIA AND DYSTOPIA: COMING FULL CIRCLE

In line with observable trends in the present, the city of the future suggests a break in terms of both its physical form and its social fabric. In other words, we are heading towards a process of de-urbanisation and an artificial insertion into nature, with serious environmental impact on it. Low density, horizontality, small portions of nature (domesticated and closed off for private use), segregation of uses and new meeting places

that are perfectly controlled and designed for happy and hedonistic consumption are the physical forms of the metropolis, brought together through people's high levels of mobility.

However, the decrease in personal relationships and the increase in communication through technological intermediaries such as e-mail, e-work, e-commerce, e-relationships (e.g. chat rooms and texting) encourage a lack of knowledge between people, and increased fear and mistrust.

Without entering into where the change first occurred, whether it was in the *civitas* or in the *urbs*, what is certain is that the dialectic between the urban form and the way it is inhabited suggests a city of the future, a *cyborg* home in an e-urbanised space, which will be sustained by invisible or hidden megastructures or *infostructures* to prevent them impacting on a landscape that has become an essential resource of property consumption. In other words, the megacities of cinema have got that point wrong, as they are more concerned with portraying scenes that are dramatic rather than potentially real (what drama is there in a suburban residential area?). Current reflections on the sustainable city, eco-urbanism and neo-landscapism are responses aimed at resolving social demands generated by ecotopias and pleasuretopias that have a growing influence on the property market, either for the private acquisition of land, or for safe and hedonistic consumption.