

**Session 7 Urban Images And Representations In Europe And
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‘Virtual Cities’ as ‘Old’ Cities in the Cyber Age

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In a recent poll British and American scientists voted Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (made in 1982 and starring Harrison Ford) as the best science fiction film ever made, beating Scott’s other classic, *Alien* (1979), and surpassing even that other great iconic science fiction classic by Stanley Kubrick, *2001 A Space Odyssey*. Naturally enough, the small group of scientists invited to participate in the poll were impressed by the representation of their respective branches of science in *Blade Runner*, and in particular by the film’s portrayal of neuroscience and cybernetics, said to be ‘way ahead of its time’. Made two decades ago and based on the novel, *Neuromancer* by William Gibson, *Blade Runner* and its science is very much with us today. At the very least its subject matter occupies a place in contemporary discussions on the role of science and technology and the question of bio-ethics in what one author terms an age of ‘post-biological humanity’.

But the film also speaks to an audience beyond the scientific community. Its aesthetic qualities address urban and cultural historians too. Most of us are likely to remember the film less for its prophetic science, or its rather simplistic ‘detective’ plot

or the fight between the forces of evil and good (typically the narrative trope with most of this genre), but for its dystopian images of a dark future megalopolis, represented here by Los Angeles in 2019. Indeed, most futuristic imagery on the big screen tends to operate within this trope of the dark city recast and repositioned underground, as in the tense sequences in *Alien II* or in the violent urban battle scenes of the equally dystopian future in *Terminator II Judgement Day*, and finding their latter day apotheosis in the *Matrix*, among others. These celluloid representations of the future city are really composites of present-day urban violence (one thinks of the riots in Los Angeles during the mid-1980s or the now almost annual battle-style confrontations between heavily militarized police and anti-global campaigners on the streets of cities wherever the G7 countries meet) on the one hand, and official predictions of urban trends on the other hand.

But this late twentieth-century representation of threatening urban spaces is hardly new. The immediate and obvious comparison that comes to mind is surely Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (one might say, the *Blade Runner* of its day). In this film depicting the city-world at the beginning of the twentieth-first century, buildings rise out of the earth to touch the sky; the traffic pulsates along the high- and skyways; electronic communications and close-circuit surveillance systems provide a grid of control over the sullen and disempowered masses. The threat to the social order comes from below, from the labyrinth and the fugitive lives it harbours; and from above, from the (secret and unregulated) scientific experiments of the mad scientist Rotwang who plays at being god by creating not a mere robot, but a cyborg (the 'robot' Maria!). And yet, chaos is not allowed to reign and to destroy the city.

Strictly speaking, science fiction films up to the 1980s depict an urban landscape that draws on an earlier historical reality. The megalopolis, as we have come to understand it through the narrative plots and discourses in the last quarter of the twentieth century, had not yet arrived in 1926. None the less, the growth of cities, mostly through their suburbanization, was beginning to challenge the spatial imagination at that time. And Lang's film, much like its late twentieth-century

equivalents was in some ways both trying to negotiate the specific changes of its time and offering a prognosis of where these changes could lead if left unmanaged. The film also inscribed upon the contemporary - and it has to be said, the historical - imagination a particular aesthetic representation of the urban world that has become construed as its reality. In other words, the *Blade Runner* genre half a century since the making of *Metropolis* has been little more than a continual reworking of Lang's iconic film, borrowing freely from the cultural trope of early twentieth century urban experience. And even more recent offerings such as the post-urban apocalyptic Japanese anime *Akira* and the *Matrix* films, or the somewhat more mundane *Hackers*, borrow heavily from the representational aesthetic of the early twentieth-century metropolis in their depictions of cyberspace and virtual cities.

Like the earlier transition from country to city, cyberization as both a technological process and as cultural experience represents neither a linear flow nor a radical break. The prediction that a cybernetic teleworld will evolve chrysalis-like from our modern urban world has been challenged by the sociologists Stephen Graham, among others. Graham argues effectively that cyberization (though he does not use that term) will not lead inevitably to the displacing of urban structures, but rather will both reinforce existing structures and create new ones. Indeed, the languages employed, whether in written texts or in visual imagery, to describe or represent cyberization and 'virtual cities' is all too familiar in terms of its spatial aesthetic.

Indeed, looked at in terms of geography, class, gender and age, it shares many of the features of urbanization. The globe may even have become a digital community linked by the internet and world-wide web, but its regions will still echo with the districts familiar to us from the twentieth-century city: there will be west-ends, business and leisure zones, slums and sprawling suburbs spread across cyberspace. Even the structure of cybercommunities sprawling out along superhighways actually replicates the geometric axes of the modernist city/nation of the mid-twentieth century.

As we can see from numerous images depicting the physical forms of 'life' in

cyberspace and its virtual cities, we do not need to go very far to find similar representations depicting the process of urbanization and of the modern city from the earlier part of the twentieth century. Clearly both the imagination and the language of the cyber-age offer little that is really new to us. Its representations are clearly locked onto an urban paradigm that was formed in the early part of the previous century and which sought first to chart and then to colonize what at the time was also believed to be infinite space.

Until now, much of the discussion of cyberspace and virtual reality in relation to the city as an aesthetic construct has been mostly confined to sociology and cultural theory. In this paper (which offers nothing more than merely a set of tentative reflections) I will try and tackle a number of issues that form the focus of our panel: namely, the production and reproduction of urban images; the translation of those images into built structures of the imagination; the power relations that resulted from the transmission of certain urban tropes as historical process. I want to argue that the early twentieth-century city, as physical space and cultural artefact, was a controlled and regulatory environment that emerged in response to (largely anti-urban) discourses; and by extension, that its cybernetic form, the 'virtual city' emerges as a positive and necessary construct from a similar negative discourse about the dangers of cyberspace that replicates earlier fears of urban modernity. The 'virtual city' like its original provides a regulatory grid (or matrix) in an otherwise ethereal cyberspace.