FUTURE SCENARIOS. A cinematic perspective

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«Later, as he sat on his balcony eating the dog, Dr Robert Laing reflected on the unusual events that had taken place within this huge apartment building during the previous three months» (Ballard, 1975).

Ballard's brilliant opening sentence could be construed as summarising today's world events – a thoroughly unhinged and disturbed world and for which Ballard's High-Rise can, in part, act as a metaphor. Ballard's vision of 1975 was subsequently successfully translated for the screen by Ben Wheatly and Amy Jump in 2015. The film is an adaptation not of a future imagined in 2015 but of how the future would have looked forty years earlier – a form of retro backcasting. Wheatly explained: «The future Ballard was projecting was forward of '75 and we have lived into that future. We were making a futuristic film about a projected past and because we have seen what happened and Ballard saw it coming down the pipe [...]. The film is a look at the book from the perspective of the people that survived it. We are in a perpetual 70s/80s/90s. Boom followed by bust, then boom followed by bust again» (Wood, 2018).

High-Rise's enticing trailer's voice-over[1] evokes perfectly the potential of a better future, inviting us to be immersed into a carefully constructed film world: 'Ever wanted something more? Ever thought there could be a better way to live free from the shackles of the old tired world? This development is the culmination of a lifetime's work by esteemed architect Anthony Royal. The high-rise has 40 floors of luxury apartments filled with every modern convenience. Onsite we have a fully stocked supermarket, gym facilities, swimming pool, spa and school, there is almost no reason to leave [...] ...so why not join us...join us!'».

But the promise of this better future turns out to be a chaotic nightmare; a fast spreading epidemic of violence amongst residents soon reaches pandemic proportion, leading to self- isolation and barricades, while fighting over nearly empty supermarket shelves. Presiding over this fine mess is the god-like-figure of the architect Anthony Royal, who symbolically occupies the whole penthouse floor, most of the time hunched over his drawing board, dressed in full modernist attire, and seemingly unperturbed by the chaos below. Allegedly Ballard had been inspired by the example of modernist architect Ernö Goldfinger, who «had famously moved into Flat 130 of the Balfron Tower for two months in 1968 to "test" the design of the building» (Luckhurst, 2016).

In search of film sets, Wheatley was inspired by a range of buildings, especially Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation in Marseille inaugurated in 1952. The influence is palpable with the High-Rise supermarket halfway up the building and the gymnasium on the roof. Wheatley embraced the brutalist aesthetic of the béton brut that had been sprouting everywhere in London in the 1960s and 70s. Indeed the model of L'Unité d'Habitation in Marseille had paradoxically more resonance in London than in France. «In the United Kingdom the celebrated near-realization of such a ville radieuse would be the Alton West Housing project (1955-59), Roehampton Lane, London, on its sylvan site sloping towards Richmond Park, built under the LCC team [...]» (Kite, 2010).

Memorably, the Alton West Housing project, the English vision of la ville radieuse became the prime location for François Truffaut's translation of Ray Bradbury's dystopian vision of Fahrenheit 451 (1966), the setting of a repressive, totalitarian regime seeking out to burn all books. Stanley Kubrick, with *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), also used to good effect the emerging brutalist architecture of London South Bank and the newly constructed Thamesmead Estate in East London. The new modernist aesthetic and the purity of the form afforded by le *béton brut* had become shorthand for dehumanised spaces, the perfect setting for Alex and his 'droogs' to indulge in a 'bit of ultra-violence'.

High-Rise, Fahrenheit 451 and *A Clockwork Orange* have all in common that they associate modernism and brutalism with dystopia – and we may ask ourselves – why is that? Why is it that the new aesthetic found itself associated with violence, fascism and debauchery? The explanation resides partly in the fact that in the 1970s the brutalist aesthetic was very unpopular at the time – indeed «it is hard now to recollect quite how much high-rise housing was demonized and despised in the mid-1970s. After the 1968 collapse of the system-built Ronan Point [...], towers essentially stopped getting built, with the assumption that they were unsafe structurally and potentially hugely damaging socially, creating 'no-go areas' and dystopias [...]» (Hatherley, 2016).

In fact, if we look at the history of cinema, modernism is almost invariably associated with dystopia, as remarked by Andersen: 'The most celebrated episode in Hollywood's war against modern architecture is *L.A. Confidential*. Richard Neutra's Lovell house, the first great manifestation of the International Style in southern California, plays the home of Pierce Patchett, pornographer, pimp, prince of the shadow city where whatever you desire is for sale'[2]. The implication is that by associating modern architecture with characters of dubious reputations, such as Pierce Patchett, cinema is seen as being critical of modernism. There is a perceived reflexive relationship between the setting and the action, between the architecture and the film's narrative. In other words, the Lovell House found itself tarred with the same brush as the criminals that occupy it[3].

This mechanism of association between space and narrative is central to cinema. In order to convey the required dramatic effect, filmmakers carefully select architectural features to underline the emotion of the drama. This device can be referred to as "spatially organised drama", whereby a narrative, a story, is both spatially and dramatically organized. And the choice of location

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and architectural setting is paramount to a successful *mise-en-scène* underline the emotion of the drama. This device can be referred to as 'spatially organised drama', whereby a narrative, a story, is both spatially and dramatically organized. And the choice of location and architectural setting is paramount to a successful *mise-en-scène*.

Cinema constructs very approachable worlds that we are invited to enter and share in the same way as we would enter a home. As spectators we become fully immersed into a carefully crafted biosphere with its own ecology and climate, the architectural equivalent would be what architect Peter Zumthor calls 'atmosphere' (Zumthor, 2006). Every detail counts in order to maintain this carefully crafted ecology. Therefore the association of a modern building in a film is never an accident but a deliberate choice to serve the purpose of the narrative – and more often than not, it turns out to be a site for a dystopic narrative. In the case of the Lovell House and *L.A. Confidential*, the architecture critic of the Los Angeles Times attempted to explain this mechanism in the following terms: «The house's slick, meticulous forms seem the perfect frame for that kind of power [...]. Neutra's glass walls open up to expose the dark side of our lives - they suggest the erotic, the broken, the psychologically impure»[4]. While Neutra would have no doubt turned in his grave at this suggestion, it does raise the question of the gap between the vision of a modernist architecture and its perception and reception by the general public. And cinema, especially the so-called Hollywood cinema, as a popular medium partly reflects and capitalizes on the collective imagination of the masses. Le Corbusier's spirit of *L'Esprit Nouveau* presented in the celebrated photographs of the Villa Savoye exemplifying a new way of life, «a vision of certain eternal goods: the loaf of bread, the can of milk, the bottle of wine, light and air, access to the earth and the sky, physical health» (Anderson, 1987) remains a hard sell!

But whether it is Le Corbusier or Anthony Royal, architects always plan for the future – imagining a world not yet in existence, and in that sense they are futurists. Their work is evocative of new worlds and may help us to think of possible responses for future living. Planners and urbanists also need to have a long-term vision. By contrast nobody expects filmmakers to propose achievable future visions – although they occasionally try, for example in science fiction films, a particular genre not discussed in this essay. The vast majority of films are about the present addressing issues of the time. And if anything, when a film is released, the images projected on the screen are already of the past – however recent – same for photography – and this temporal gap can never be reduced. But this ontological challenge is no handicap for the value of film as rightly argued by Žižek: «in order to understand today's world, we need cinema, literally. It's only in cinema that we get that crucial dimension we are not ready to confront in our reality. If you are looking for what is in reality more real than reality itself, look into cinematic fiction» (Fiennes, 2006).

I regard fiction film as a barometer, an indicator of societal issues and I subscribe to Ferro's view that «In its relation to society and history, film was for a long time treated only as a work of art [...] Grasping film in its relation to history requires more than just better chronicles of the works or a description of how the various genres evolved. It must look at the historical function of film, at its relationship with the societies that produce and consume it, at the social processes involved in the making of the works, at cinema as a source of history» (Ferro, 1983, p.358). Toubiana goes further by taking a specific example, that of Jacques Tati: «Tati has filmed something essential in the course of the 20th century: he filmed the countryside, the everyday life in the countryside (Jour de fête), then he filmed 'la vie pavillonnaire' (*Mon Oncle*) [...] he especially filmed and captured in an ultra- sensitive manner, not unlike a virtuoso seismograph, the passage from the countryside to the city, this epic migration of man and objects from an ancient world towards the modern world [...] Everything was changed, the gestures, the trajectories, the atmospheres, the way people dressed. And of course the architecture. The Villa Arpel in *Mon Oncle* was replaced by the ultramodern buildings of *Playtim*e [...] words only can't convey such scale of transformation. That's why Tati's films are mute. They just exist. They are visual noises. They observe with a very precise look, they drill an entomologist's gaze onto the human world» [5] (Makeieff *et al.*, 2009) (Toubiana, 2009).

Parasite (Bong Joon-ho, 2019) provides a more recent example from which we can derive very similar observations. It is not only a hugely successful award-winning film, highly gripping and entertaining, but also a poignant exposure of Seoul's social structures and inequalities – an excellent example of film as an agent, product and source of history (after Ferro). The contrast between rich and poor is laid bare as the story reflects on the lives of the urban poor living in semi-basements, while the wealthy reside in the upper part of Seoul. Predictably the wealthy family in *Parasite* lives in a stunning modern house (a studio set), another prime example of the modernist aesthetic association with dystopia. But more to the point within the context of this essay, *Parasite* is shot in a present that will influence the future as the South Korean Government has announced that, as a direct result of the film, it will offer substantial grants to improve the semi-basement dwellings with a view «to enhance heating systems, replace floors, and install air conditioners, dehumidifiers, ventilators, windows and fire alarms»[6]. This is a particularly vivid and direct example of what Keiller had predicted: «In films, one can explore the spaces of the past in order to better anticipate the spaces of the future» (Keiller, 2013).

For the purpose of this essay, I have assigned to fiction films a

number of crucial characteristics and features. Key to my argument is that the filmic image shows the visible side of a society and an epoch that image makers try to grasp in order to transmit it. And that it constitutes a valid mode of observation to reflect on future scenarios. Film has also the advantage of simplifying a complex reality, making it more digestible. It can be construed as a form of 'equipment for living', providing an accelerated education in experiencing convoluted situations.[7]

In the light of this hypothesis, I am proposing to do a rapid survey of the history of future scenarios as portrayed in cinema, concentrating on how the architecture and the city have been represented. As highlighted above, the architecture in film is never a mere background but a crucial part of the narrative from which we can derive some insights as to how historically the future was envisioned.

It would be difficult to discuss how films have depicted the future without mentioning Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), with its celebrated vision of the future city inspired by Manhattan. In the same breath we must mention *Things to Come* (William Cameron Menzies, 1936), HG Wells vision of the future city which is purposely diametrically opposed to *Metropolis* as the new city has developed underground. So, no agreement there as to what the future would look like and that's at least a consistent aspect of future depictions on the silver screen, they are all slightly at odds with each other. But interestingly both *Metropolis* and *Things to Come* are projected in a faraway future, a 100 years on. They also both hail a rather positive future where technologies are a central part of life.

Following from that, and pre-World War II, we find films that evoke what I would call the near future, looking only at 10 to 30 years ahead. Such a selection would include Murnau's Sunrise (1927), where the city is inspired by the Bauhaus or Maurice Elvey's High Treason (1929), a London in 1940 made of existing buildings and 'new ones'. *A Nous la Liberté* (René Clair, 1931) also fits this category with Lazare Meerson's acclaimed sets of the assembly line factory that evokes a prison, an idea that Chaplin would perfect in *Modern Times* (Charlie Chaplin, 1936). All such movies create a near future made of carefully constructed film sets entirely inspired by modernism. And on the dystopian scale, it is a rather mild form, especially in comparison to *High-Rise, Fahrenheit 451* and *A Clockwork Orange*.

Post-World War II, the near future grouping would include *Tati's Playtime* (1967), a near future film, based on the Seagram building. It evokes what *Le quartier de la Défense* in Paris would look like in the 1990s. The Villa Arpel scenes in *Mon Oncle* would also fall in this category. Both films are a humorous and rather gentle critic of modernism. In the same category we could also include the evocation of future cities but using the existing city such as Godard's *Alphaville* (1965) entirely made up of existing locations in Paris. Truffaut's *Fahrentheit 451*, already evoked, also uses the existing fabric of the city, ditto for *A Clockwork Orange*. Similarly, Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962), a dystopian authoritarian vision of a future society, is set in the aftermath of World War III in a post-apocalyptic Paris and is entirely shot in existing buildings. The trend in using existing cities evolves further with *La Mort en Direct* (Bertrand Tavernier, 1980) shot in Glasgow. Most famously *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998), shot in the existing town of Seaside Florida, is an Orwellian big brother vision of the world. Worth also mentioning is *Gattaca* (Andrew Niccol, 1997), shot in Frank Lloyd Wright's last building project, Marin County Civic Center (CA, USA), which tackles the emergence of a disturbing biological future.

Closer to us is *Children of Men* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2006), a film where London, subject to terrorist attacks, is fully recognizable. Michael Winterbottom's *Code 46* (2003) also belongs to the near future group, a useful film because of the way it brings in visions of the globalized future cities – Shanghai, Dubai, etc. – offering a culturally diverse vision of the future. But there is no longer grand cinematic vision as explored by *Metropolis* and *Things to Come*. One of the latest examples of what could be construed as an atrophied vision is *Vivarium* (Lorcan Finnegan, 2020). Gone are the grand and utopian architectural gestures to be replaced by an endless labyrinth of cloned detached houses out of which a young couple will never manage to escape. The most disturbing element in *Vivarium* is the estate itself, the endless suburban pavilions that remind us of what Graham Greene wrote about the semi-detached houses: «these houses represented something worse than the meanness of poverty, the meanness of the spirit» (Greene, 2001). It makes us yearn for the chaotic environment of *High-Rise*.

There is also a perceptible erosion of the belief that technology and science can solve problems. In fact, as we progress across the 20th century to present days, films imply that technologies and sciences have become the problem as opposed to the solution. What also emerges out of this quick overview, is that films looking at the future have a tendency to look at no more than 10 to 20 years ahead – *Children Of Men* a 2006 film is set in 2027 or they may stand outside time as with Michael Hanneke's *Time of the Wolf* (2003). The bold 100 years future visions of *Metropolis* and *Things to Come* are no more. Several films in the 1960s and 1970s were an evocation of the year 2000 e.g. Godard's *Alphaville* and Truffaut's *Fahrentheit 451* are set respectively in 2000 and 1999. But a different tendency emerges past this landmark. A particularly poignant case is *Amélie* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 2001), a film rooted in the present but harking back to the poetic realism of Marcel Carné, Doisneaux and Prévert of the 1930s. It indicates that the past is more reassuring than the future. In the same vein, we could add the Harry Potter franchise; its popularity indicates

that there is reassurance in looking at a past of mythology and waving magic wands. The history of future scenarios as portrayed in cinema indicates that filmmakers may have lost sight of the future, their entomologist vision is getting blurred. Cinematic futures are getting closer and closer to the present – to the point of looking to the past. There is no Hollywood happy ending for future scenarios – architects remain the only true futurists. But one thing that films teach us for sure is that whatever future we may consider, it will be dystopian to a degree.

NOTES

[1] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XRBeZGYisLg.

[2] Voice-over in Thom Andersen's *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (US, 2003).

[3] For a more detailed explanation see Penz, 2017, p. 121.

[4] Voice-over in Thom Andersen's *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (US, 2003).

[5] My own translation from French.

[6] See: http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200218000706.

[7] I have developed this argument at some length elsewhere, see Penz, 2018, p. 55.

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