We are IntechOpen, the world's leading publisher of Open Access books Built by scientists, for scientists

6,300

Open access books available

172,000

International authors and editors

190M

Downloads

Our authors are among the

154

Countries delivered to

TOP 1%

most cited scientists

12.2%

Contributors from top 500 universities

WEB OF SCIENCE™

Selection of our books indexed in the Book Citation Index
in Web of Science™ Core Collection (BKCI)

Interested in publishing with us?
Contact book.department@intechopen.com

Numbers displayed above are based on latest data collected.
For more information visit www.intechopen.com

Future Urban Environments in Science Fiction: Initiated Thought Experiments

Britt Johanne Farstad

Abstract

Is it possible that science fiction-films have influenced modern architecture and buildings in the real world? Ideas about the design and purpose of future cities often start with visions. Science fiction can be understood as a kind of thought experiment. The experimenter, the writer or filmmaker, begins with a hypothesis and sets up initial conditions. SF writers take notice of their colleagues' work and results; they often borrow fundamental concepts from previous generations of writers. Authors elaborate on and transform these concepts, apply and test them in new situations, and add new ideas. I argue that our capacity to imagine things and phenomena that do not yet exist is important in the process of constructing and reorganizing human life and, hence, also urban environments. The concepts of "city" and "countryside", both of which are often projected and experienced as opposites, with contradictions and conflicts built into them, are examined. Urban Transition through some of the most influential dystopian sf-movies with *Metropolis* is my starting point, films where the idea of the city can be said to be the main protagonist.

Keywords: Science fiction, dystopia, archetypes, *city*, *countryside*

1. Introduction

You know, there's one thing about Blade Runner: Yes, it's gritty and it's scary, and it is obvious unbelievable unequal as a future society – but the nightlife looks amazing [1].

I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhauser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain. Time to die. Roy Batty, Blade Runner

Is it possible that science fiction-films have influenced modern architecture and buildings in the real world? "Urban transition" is a highly interesting topic, and I started to wonder if it was possible to find robust links between the SF-genre and modern architecture. It was almost too easy to establish connections between the sphere of fantasy and real-world architecture. A simple google-search settled the question: science fiction plus modern architecture led me directly to interviews with the architects who built the most spectacular buildings during the last decades.

Furthermore, I found several articles exploring these connections. Professor of Urban Historical Geography J. R. Gold, states quite simply that the “relationship between cinematic film and the city is close and multifaceted.” [2] My own knowledge in the genre helped to ask relevant questions to the material I found. SF can be said to be an expression of a “Zeitgeist”, or ‘spirit of the age’. [3] It became obvious in this material that certain ideas in fact have wandered from fiction to reality. Other thoughts have wandered the other way, from reality to fiction. It’s an ongoing dance of ideas.

What are the prominent features of the science fiction genre (SF) that make it relevant to focus on in relation to ideas and discussions about “urban transition”? Although technology plays an important role in many SF texts and films, the genre is intensely occupied with ideas about human life, its meaning and purpose, and other existential questions. SF is often labeled “a literature of ideas”, which indicates that the genre provides good models of thought concerning science and ethics and provokes and challenges ideas about the human condition. SF literature is by tradition didactic, and many writers and creators working within the genre have played important roles in the ethical and social debates of their time [4].

As technology and science are both integral parts of contemporary culture and society, the effects of science on human lives and societies have increased. Given that SF is characterized by hypothetical thought experiments, it is well suited to debates about how future cities could or should be organized. Scientist and SF author Karlheinz Steinmüller argues that SF is the mythology of the modern, scientific age [5] and states that SF “has become a unique medium for discussing science and technology, their prospects and hazards, and more generally their social and cultural impacts” [6]. As part of postmodern culture, the SF genre has influenced the different forms of media. Steinmüller writes that for “many scientists and engineers, science fiction provides the imaginary of their visions” and claims that SF can be understood as a kind of thought experiment similar to those in science: “The experimenter – the writer – begins with a hypothesis and sets up initial conditions.” [7] Steinmüller argues that in some ways, “SF is quasi-scientific and, like science itself, a collective enterprise. Like scientists, SF writers take notice of their colleague’s work and results; they borrow the fundamental concepts from previous generations of writers. They elaborate on and transform these concepts, apply and test them in new situations, and add new ideas.” [7] Hence, I find it relevant to explore ideas about *the city* in SF films and investigate whether or how SF visions have influenced the design and structure of the actual cities that are built? Here, I look at the ideas and the fantasies that appear in architectural visions and real life.

Three connecting topics concerning *urban transition* are discussed in this chapter. In the first part I argue that our capacity to imagine things and phenomena that do not yet exist is important in the process of constructing and reorganizing human life and, hence, also urban environments. SF as “initiated thought experiments” is discussed in this part with *Metropolis* (1927) as the starting point.

In the next part I examine the concepts of “city” and “countryside”, both of which are often projected and experienced as opposites, with contradictions and conflicts built into them. The ancient notion, in fact built on mythological tales, of one as better and the other as worse is constantly reproduced in fiction and film. According to these myths, *human life takes place between the mythical and lost Garden of Eden and the New Jerusalem to come. One significant occurrence between these events is when human beings build their first great city, the Tower of Babel.* Hence, mythological conflicts influence the creation of SF films, many of which are often occupied with existential questions. This is important when it comes to ideas about the organization of city life, as well as in depictions of life in the countryside.

I argue that notions about what is preferable can be found in some of the mythological tales that have been reproduced in fiction.

In the last part I discuss the connections between SF films and the construction of modern cities around the world. My idea is that our fantasies affect what we want to achieve in the real world. Furthermore, I ask if some of these fantasies and ideas stem from literature and film. For over a century, SF films have depicted futuristic cities. Some of these cities are bright, shiny and positive, while others are described as dark, dirty and rough. In these chapter focus is on the dystopian branch of SF: film history become relevant when it turns out that prominent architects in our time are deeply influenced by the visual visions they experienced as young persons. However, we may need to look elsewhere to find film visions of green, sustainable, future cities, as these do not seem to appear in SF films. Where, I wonder, might such film visions be found?

2. “In the beginning there was Metropolis”

In some of the most significant SF films and their visions of the future, the City can be said to be the protagonist [8]. In a review of SF films and authentic modern architecture, film critic Rich Haridy states: “In the beginning there was *Metropolis*” [8]. *Metropolis*, by Fritz Lang (1927), is a vision of a vertical city and an important film when it comes to real world images of the city. The film is also depicting a society with deep conflicts between classes in the society with a harsh hierarchy between rulers and the ruled. A much later film that was strongly influenced by *Metropolis* is *Blade Runner*, by Ridley Scott (1982). Here, hypothetical visions of architectural concepts of the future city are visualized in a more technically advanced and globalized world than in Lang’s film, which was created in the early days of the industrial world. *Blade Runner* is set in 2019 and is an example of how earlier ideas are developed and reproduced. With the film, Scott builds a bridge between 1927 and 1982 in film history. Social hierarchies are even grimmer than in *Metropolis*: the rich have left the planet for another world. Acid rain is falling to let us understand that Earth’s climate is seriously disrupted.

In *Blade Runner 2049*, also by Ridley Scott (2017), the themes and motifs are developed further. This is a sequel to *Blade Runner* released in 1982 and according to the film’s narrative, 30 years have passed. In both films, Scott deals with the climate crisis and the challenges that future generations may have to deal with in megacities. In these visions of future cities and city life, architecture, infrastructure and human life are representations of extreme abundance and extreme impoverishment, highly advanced technology and collapsing systems, decaying buildings and shattered infrastructure. The vision of future life in cities that is portrayed in this SF film is bleak. The rich and healthy have left Earth to live in new settlements in the colonies. Even in the film *Cloud Atlas* by Wachowski, Wachowski and Tykwer (2012), human beings have fled from the cities to try to make a living for themselves elsewhere [9]. Fantastic technology and architecture are hidden and forgotten. The only way for human beings to survive is for them to leave the planet and find a new and greener one.

Frederik Pohl writes in “The Politics of Prophecy”, that to “speak of ‘political science fiction’ is almost to commit a tautology, for I would argue that there is very little science fiction, perhaps even that there is no good science fiction at all, that is not to some degree political” [10]. Pohl was the initiator of the New York association “The Futurians”, which was active in the late 1930s and early 1940s. This was a group of SF writers, critics, publishers and illustrators who believed that “SF fans

should be forward-looking ('futurian') and constructive." [11]. Socially critical SF was important because:

Their injection of social consciousness into the fandom world had an enduring effect at a time when the pulp stories were beginning to address the future of authoritarian social orders. Graduating to the ranks of professional editors and writers at the end of the decade, they eventually formed something of a counterculture operating against the established power of the field's publishers and editors [11].

Media researcher Jenkins writes that "the Futurians were committed to the idea that science fiction might function as a vehicle for social criticism and political transformation" [12]. Philosopher Hans Jonas argues that fiction provides thought models for ethics and morality and writes that the "serious side of science fiction lies precisely in its performing such well-informed thought experiments, whose vivid imaginary results may assume the heuristic function here proposed. (See, e.g., A. Huxley's *Brave New World*)." [13]

Jonas highlights Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* as an example of an initiated thought experiment and argues that in hypothetical thought experiments there is an opportunity to find ethical foundations through statements that can claim probability. This is sufficient where they should not be evidence but illustrations [14]. As society is becoming increasingly complex, and technological development is rapidly accelerating, it is becoming increasingly difficult for people to have an overview. Jonas writes that "the knowledge of the possible" is "heuristically sufficient for the doctrine of principles" [14]. A complex narrative can accordingly help to get a grip of the challenges that lie ahead [15]. The SF genre, as the *Zeitgeist* of modernity and an artistic expression with the ability to put real, complex, moral and ethical problems under the microscope, can visualize possible futures. By analyzing futuristic fiction by scientifically trained authors as "initiated thought experiments", as Hans Jonas puts it, it is possible to say something about the hopes and fears that well-informed researchers associate with new technologies. Further, the SF genre's fictional representations of science and technology make it possible to discuss complex thought models based on hypothetical consequences. In Hans Jonas' opinion, these initiated thought experiments can add knowledge about ethical difficulties related to scientific research. Prof. J. R. Gold's opinion is that it "is seldom the case that the film-maker reveals the future city with extraordinary accuracy, and it unquestionably pays to be sanguine about science-fiction film as a medium of prediction" [16]. At the same time, he thinks that "such film can supply us with an accessible and intriguing route into a series of core issues about representations of place." [16] As Hans Jonas even Gold thinks that the more distinguished SF-films "can supply incisive images that help us to pose questions about the relationship of people and place, and where that relationship is headed."

SF films can thus be helpful when it comes to discussions about different kinds of dangers. One problem that becomes obvious in my project is that futuristic cities are mostly portrayed in ruins in SF films, and it is too late to survive in them. People instead flee to the countryside or to other worlds in order to survive. Prof. J. R. Gold writes that

Representation of the city stems from the development and constant reiteration of a handful of urban prototypes. Certainly, in the 75 years since Metropolis codified the essence of the vertical city, only the future noir city has emerged as a fully-fledged alternative [17].

Ursula Heisse also states that dystopian “views of the cities make up the overwhelming majority of futuristic urban literature and film” [18]. In short, in dystopias the big cities are always in ruins and life is over. The future exists on alien green planets or in rural districts outside the city gates. I will come back to this futuristic vision – which in fact may well be a SF vision of the “New Jerusalem”.

3. Human life between the garden of Eden and the New Jerusalem

The archetypal concepts of “city”, “country” and “countryside” are relevant in relation to “urban transition” and SF films depicting images of future cities. Modern SF has repeatedly reproduced contrasts between the city and the wilderness surrounding it. The city can be enclosed in huge plastic domes - thus making it easy to differentiate between city life and rural life. Another commonly used narrative is that of old cities that have fallen into disrepair, where memories of lost greatness are uncovered in reminiscences of decay. Narratives of a future city environment in which humans move in the shadow of hostile artifacts are also common. The central idea is the city as fundamentally dystopian. In this text I mention three of the most influential twentieth century dystopias, Zamiatin’s *We* (1924), Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) and Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). These books and the film-adaptations have laid a fundament for the following dystopias. The narrative takes place in cities from which escape is impossible. The city is an artificial place, is potentially dangerous and will eventually disrupt. In the end it will be a danger to human beings.

Scientists warn for an ecological disaster at a global level. At present, with global warming and rising sea levels as a result, it is obvious that many of our megacities around the world are facing challenges. Cities located near the coast will be dramatically affected by rising sea levels. Consequently, an important topic in scientific research, politics and popular culture is the narrative about the threat of great floods. This archaic theme has been communicated over thousands of years by word of mouth, as written and printed texts and now through modern films. In SF, several parallel movements occur simultaneously and human life in cities is scrutinized more than ever. As SF expert John-Henri Holmberg states: “The city is the focal point of our civilization, and images of the city of the future bring into sharp relief the expectations and fears with which we imagine the future of civilization.” [19]

In my view, mythical contradictions and conflicts have been built into concepts and ideas about the city and the countryside. These contradictions have often been reproduced, and mythical conflicts have influenced the creation of fiction and to a certain degree people’s mindset when thinking about future megacities. The starting point for this idea is to be found in the first chapters of *Genesis*, the first book in the *Old Testament*, and in the last chapters in *Revelation*, the last book in the *New Testament*. Hence, we look backwards before looking forwards.

To understand the ideas behind this conflict we will turn to the first mythological home of mankind - the Garden of Eden - as it is described in *Genesis*:

Genesis 2:8 And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed. 2:9 And out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. 2:10 And a river went out of Eden to water the garden; and from thence it was parted, and became into four heads. 2:15 And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it [20].

As we know, Adam and Eve failed to live according to God's will and were therefore banished from the flourishing garden. As yet there is no city in sight. The next narrative is the first fratricidal murder in our narrative history. Cain murders his brother Abel and is expelled from the land. He is said to build a city, which is the first to mentioned in these ancient stories:

Genesis 4:15 And the Lord said unto him, Therefore whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And the Lord set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him. 4:16 And Cain went out from the presence of the Lord, and dwelt in the land of Nod, on the east of Eden. 4:17 And Cain knew his wife; and she conceived, and bare Enoch: and he builded a city, and called the name of the city, after the name of his son, Enoch [21].

After these mythological events a famous city is built. The Tower of Babel rose in the land, perhaps built on the foundation Cain once made:

Genesis 11:4 And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth. 11:5 And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded. 11:7 Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. 11:8 So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city [22].

This is one of the most important myths to be retold and reproduced from the biblical tales: how God denigrated the hard work of human beings. The annihilation is extreme – their language is confused so that they can no longer communicate. Hence, they can no longer make elaborate plans and agree on great achievements. Too advanced technological skills and advanced constructions are equated with megalomania and struck down. It is like eating the apple once again. The Great Flood and the Tower of Babel are two major events in which God strikes hard against people's creative powers.

The Biblical Apocalypse is described in the *Book of Revelation* in the New Testament. First, the dystopian future to come is described. Finally, the heavenly city is revealed to the prophet as it emerges from the sky:

Revelation 21:10 And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and shewed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, 21:19 And the foundations of the wall of the city were garnished with all manner of precious stones [23].

Revelation 22:14 Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city. 22:15 For without are dogs, and sorcerers, and whoremongers, and murderers, and idolaters, and whosoever loveth and maketh a lie [24].

The future paradise is a city with the tree of life in the middle of it. It is in fact the vision of Eden restored, this time within the walls of a marvelous city made of gold and all the emeralds they could ever name. Even the future city of peace and love needs high walls to keep evil out. This heavenly city is obviously a place for the chosen ones, the privileged and the blessed.

The Garden of Eden is an idea about the lost utopia. A major part of mankind's mythical and historical existence thereafter plays out between two contrasting

ideas: The heavenly Garden of the long-gone Paradise Eden and the Paradise to come. The last of this complex book that we call the Bible ends up in a narrative circle, where the first main tropes are combined into one. The New Jerusalem is about doom and salvation and, finally, the City represents salvation from disaster and chaos. There are laws, order and structure, high walls, streets, clean house bodies – everything built with the most precious of materials. Chaos still exists but it is outside the gates. The shining city represents enchantment, order and security, as opposed to chaos in the unbridled landscape outside the city walls. The narrative about the return to Paradise happens in harmony with nature. The city in *Genesis*, the Tower of Babel, represents a society that collapses into chaos.

On the other hand, the much-acclaimed SF author Ursula K. Le Guin's novels emanate from another idea. One of her novels is called *The Word for World is Forest* (1972) and is a landmark when it comes to contrasting the position of the city and rural areas. Her narrative uses nature as the starting point, the focal point, and cities are the unfamiliar and unnatural habitat. She depicts Nature as the normal place for human beings to live and thrive in contrast to glittering – and hence artificial – cities. The novel can be said to start a movement and growing sub-genre in SF literature called “eco-fiction”. In his dissertation *Places of Rest: in worlds of Ruin: Havens in Post-Apocalyptic Fiction* (2021), Andreas Nyström investigates the lost paradise as a focal point in the dystopian branch of the sf-genre. He writes that the “pastoral sensibilities expressed in many post-apocalyptic havens are part of a millennia-long, cross-cultural history of mythologization of paradisiacal gardens” [25].

The “New Jerusalem” in *Revelations* represents a glittering utopian city, where important elements from the lost Paradise are incorporated, such as significant trees and the river that according to the first myth is said to float through the paradise city to come. Our mythological history and background are important allusions and intertexts in the narratives that follow, as mythological ideas and contradictions are recreated and reproduced in modern narratives.

4. “The Burj Khalifa is not just a skyscraper, and *Metropolis* is much more than a film”

Robust evidence of connections between fiction and modern architecture exists in several articles about one of the most famous architects of our time, Adrian Smith (1944) [1, 26]. Among other assignments, Smith is a Senior Fellow of The Design Futures Council. This is an interdisciplinary network of design, product and construction leaders exploring global trends, challenges and opportunities to advance innovation and shape the future of industry and the environment [27]. What is interesting in this context is that references to a film immediately pop up in interviews with the architect. The vision of the biblical New Jerusalem is here as well. In *The Wizard of Oz* we find an emerald city with deep roots in this very old narrative:

21:19 And the foundations of the wall of the city were garnished with all manner of precious stones. The first foundation was jasper; the second, sapphire; the third, a chalcedony; the fourth, an emerald... [23]

The film version of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) is referred to as a vision and his pictorial starting point. As Adrian Smith designed Burj Dubai, he claims to have been thinking of “another metropolis: the forest of gleaming towers that is the Emerald City, as glimpsed by Dorothy and her friends from the poppy field in the

film version of *The Wizard of Oz*". Smith says that the vision from the film was in his mind when he planned the extravagant skyscraper in Dubai, "although in a subliminal way. I didn't research the way it looked -- I just remembered the glassy, crystalline structure coming up in the middle of what seemed like nowhere" [28]. The reference to *The Wizard of Oz* is also important in an older presentation of Adrian Smith's work:

If Chicago were the modern-day Land of Oz, the Trump Tower would be its Emerald Palace. (...) As I approach the beaming building there's an extra bounce in my step, and I can't help but think of Dorothy, Toto and her storybook friends skipping along the yellow brick road. Instead of a yellow road, the tower has the Chicago River – and the two have a lot in common. Like the river, the tower is made up of curves and is predominantly blue [29].

In the interviews with Smith, the connection between the film and the architect's visions is highlighted. The ideas for the design of some of the most startling buildings in modern times originate from films depicting fantasies. Can we then say that ideas forego reality?

What is striking now, is the tendency for some futuristic cities, such as Dubai, to be so explicitly influenced by SF visions that are profoundly rooted in dystopian perspectives. Inspired by video games and big Hollywood cinema, this new wave of big oil-led design is dominated by multi-billionaires developing futuristic worlds. Dubai is a hotbed of Gulf futurism. Syd Mead, Hollywood's much-acclaimed futuristic conceptualist, designer, artist and one of the key designers behind *Blade Runner*, says that the Middle East is a "fantastic example of how reality is catching up with the future as the size, scope and vision of some of the region's projects clearly show. I would like to be a part of the region's horizon and help shape it for a better tomorrow" [30]. Mead claims that life imitates art, and art imitates life, and that this ceaseless movement back and forth can be seen explicitly in the evolution of our cities over the last century [30].

In an article investigating SF cities, Rich Haridy wonders "How our future visions influence the cities we build." [26] Haridy refers to Fritz Lang, the "grand-daddy of all futuristic urban visions" and *Metropolis* as a vision of a future city that has influenced a century of filmmakers. Haridy also claims that *Metropolis* has influenced a century of architects:

Taking us through the looking glass, one of the strangest ironies in 21st century architecture is the growing influence films such as Blade Runner are having on real-life constructions. The recently termed movement, gulf futurism, describes a very particular brand of architecture and urban design that is powering through the Middle East [26].

Once again, architect Adrian Smith's spectacular buildings are used as an example of how fiction impacts modern architecture. Even Haridy stresses that Adrian Smith's hugely influential practice in Chicago, which designs most of the world's supertall skyscrapers, has shown that "his inspiration for designing the Burj Khalifa came from watching *Wizard of Oz* as a child — the Emerald City being these gleaming towers looming high above flat, endless plains" [1].

John R. Gold has examined SF films and the role of futuristic depictions of cities. In the article *Under Darkened Skies: The City in Science-fiction Film*, Gold writes: "Nevertheless, if *Metropolis* is regarded as the work that crystalized the screen portrayal of the vertical city, then Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) codified the future noir city. *Blade Runner* created a bridge in film development." [31] *Metropolis*

is a “dystopian vision of a vertical city and *Blade Runner* develops and transforms the idea to the modern world of 1982” [8]. It is possible that the idea behind this vertical city design in films is that future megacities will be dominated by massive skyscrapers and the “urban footprint will not spread outward but instead we will build taller and taller buildings that will ultimately encompass all aspects of a human society within a single tiered building” [8].

However, it is more likely that the vertical city was an effective way of visualizing inequalities in economic and political power: the high city rises from a fundament consisting of a base of workers and slaves living and producing necessary goods underground. For much of the 20th century, the vertical city idea became intrinsically interlinked with dystopian SF visions. The rich lived at the top and the poor scrambled about on the grim streets below in exactly the same way that Fritz Lang pictured the future city in 1927. This literal illustration of a class-based hierarchy has been portrayed in a number of interesting SF novels and films from the early days of film to more recent stories, such as *Elysium* (2013) and *Altered Carbon* (2018) [8]. The world of *Blade Runner* is a compact industrial, ethnic and lingual mishmash. The city center, where the enormous Tyrell concern is situated, is constructed upwards. Images of the city with skylines and flying vehicles remind us of *Metropolis*, but the Tyrell building reminds us even more of an ancient Mayan temple and paintings of the Tower of Babel. The Fredersen headquarters in *Metropolis* is called the New Tower of Babel. As we can see, Biblical allusions are frequent in these narratives.

Stephen Graham, Professor of Cities and Society with a particular focus on cities and speculative fiction, sees a somewhat unsettling trend playing out in some of these new, large-scale architectural visions. In *Vertical: The City from Satellites to Bunkers* (2016), he describes the almost shocking experience of landing in Dubai in 2020 and seeing the 830-metre high Burj Khalifa: “It felt as though we’d arrived on some vast stage set for a highly sanitised sequel to *Blade Runner* made by Disney.” [32] He describes the horizontal vs. vertical constructions and their impact on the landscape, water supplies and so on. The first priority in the new megacities is hardly sustainability. In the article “How science fiction dystopias became blueprints for city planners” [1] Graham says that there is “a really startling and disturbing similarity between a lot of these sci-fi vertical dystopias and the current practice in, say, the Gulf, where the elites inhabit their penthouses and fly around in helicopters and business jets while literally thousands of workers are dying every year to construct these edifices” [1]. He emphasizes that: “These are not just imagined cityscapes: The way these putative futures are imagined have enormous implications for our contemporary urban life.” [1] These examples thus make it possible to suggest that the ideas behind planning and construction stem from ideals and archetypes shaped out of images and impressions inflicted on us as individuals and as collective consumers of pictures, films, fiction and narratives. Super-rich builders are obviously attracted by the idea of the vertical city.

The time may have come when the two separated worlds will be combined. The best parts of life in the green, flourishing rural world merged with the best parts of urban life to make life more sustainable for more people. Green sustainable cities emerge as visions in the fictive and political landscapes. In SF, the Lost Paradise and The Tower of Babel have been portrayed time and time again. It may be time for the New Jerusalem to be the new vision to be investigated in narrative form.

5. Green cities: a synthesis and a sustainable vision?

In the introduction to the film *The Human Scale – Bringing Cities to life* (2012), film director Andreas Møl Dalsgaard states that: “The megacities are a reality, and

it looks a lot like the visions of the science fiction-films, gigacities are soon to be” [33]. More than half of the world’s population live in cities and, among other things, face the challenges of climate change, urban development and overpopulation. Urbanization is rapidly increasing. It is estimated that by 2050, 70 per cent of the global population will be living in urban areas [34]. Climate change adaptation, green cities and smart cities are buzzwords. Stimulating urban transition and transformation to achieve sustainable and resilient cities is one of the greatest challenges of our time [35]. Policy documents and political agendas are debated and written at national and global levels: “In this unprecedented era of increasing urbanization, and in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Paris Agreement, and other global development agreements and frameworks, we have reached a critical point in understanding that cities can be the source of solutions to, rather than the cause of, the challenges that our world is facing today.” [36] The idea is that “well-planned” and “well-managed” urbanization can be a powerful tool for sustainable development for both developing and developed countries [36].

Urban transition implies that urban environments will undergo important changes that are critical from many points of view. Agreeing on sustainable solutions to the multitudes of challenges that humanity is facing is difficult due to conflicting values and views about natural resources [37]. One obstacle that can be difficult to overcome is determining what a sustainable city really is. Hence, we need to discuss *the city* as a phenomenon: one that is both an abstract idea and a physical and mental reality. Ideas about “a city” consist of resilient stereotypes and mental conceptions, where the countryside or rural environments are the most recognizable opposites and juxtapositions.

Cities are economic and administrative centers in nations and societies, as opposed to the peripheral areas outside a city’s boundaries: the rural countryside that provides the city with necessary goods. Cities thus represent power, and rural areas less power. City dominance is manifested in complex buildings, advanced logistical systems and infrastructure to make all parts of the city function. Status and power are manifested in the number of luxurious homes and business districts for the people in power. At the same time, there are poor districts within cities, bad housing and crowded spaces for the less fortunate living there. In good times, cities represent abundance, law and order, often in contrast to insufficiency and less control outside the city’s domain. The precondition for people to live in cities is that the countryside provides them with the necessary goods and resources. In times of economic problems, war, famine or pandemics, the situation is drastically reversed. Major cities are the most vulnerable and will be attacked first if war threatens. People will try to escape to the countryside, which will then become a place of shelter and survival.

Cities can be said to be in a constant state of *transition*. The sustainable and dignified conditions that we try to realize in modern cities, and the notions of how modern urban societies could be organized, start with ideas. These ideas affect how we think that cities could be constructed, what ought to be prioritized, what we consider to be a good life and how a good life can be organized. What role might SF have in envisioning the future? Hopes and fears are often concretized in the SF genre’s hypothetical narrative method: what will be the result if ...? There are plenty of dystopias and doomsday stories and a noticeable lack of optimistic narratives.

6. Conclusions

Earlier I stated that we may need to look elsewhere to find film visions of green, sustainable, future cities, as these do not seem to appear in SF films. The great

blockbuster films continue to reproduce the archetypical narrative of the conflicts between cities and rural districts. The disasters are due to environmental problems as we know them from scientific and news reports all over the world. Tipping points are pandemics, overpopulation, rising sea-levels, a new ice age, genetic manipulation, AI, intelligent robots and so on, all of which are said to cause the world as we know it to collapse. The stage may be set in intergalactic contexts, but the story remains the same: the countryside, which may be our old Earth, in conflict with new cities, in the form of interstellar societies to which the rich and powerful have emigrated. SF films, as opposed to novels in this case [38], seem stuck in archetypes as well as being dependent on big money.

Despite this, films are created by actors other than large corporations and money machines. Many of them also tell other and different stories. Under the parole “More Than Movies: A Movement”, the San Francisco Green Film Festival is working to tell other stories. As a non-profit organization “committed to using the power of film to bring audiences into the global conversation on environmental solutions” [39]. and to “spark green ideas and actions”. According to the presentation, it is “dedicated to sharing stories from the environmental front-lines that inspire, inform, and ignite change” [40]. Under the heading “Films for the Earth”, educational films are collected on a website in the same spirit to inform that change is necessary and possible to achieve [41]. Perspectives are turned upside down: finally, human beings are at the center of the planned transformations in cities. In a film called *Edible City: Grow the Revolution*, activists and initiatives from people living in cities demonstrate how they grow their own food. People spread knowledge, develop local economic cycles and find hopeful solutions to monumental problems. The film demonstrates how people develop models for healthy and sustainable local food systems that are environmentally friendly and crisis resistant [42]. In the film called *The Nature of Cities*, architecture professor Timothy Beatley visits several cities to investigate how city planners, landscape architects, ecologists and residents view the symbiosis between cities and rural landscapes. Here, two archetypes merge into visions about the new cities.

Filmmakers are creating new and sustainable visions of futuristic cities in which the inhabitants produce food and take nature into their towns. Plants grow on house walls and on roofs, while vegetables grow in open green areas in the middle of the city. The filmmaker’s idea is to inspire people around the globe to make this happen and be part of a solution for sustainable city life. They film to visualize new futures but without the cataclysmic conflicts that SF films are in need of for the dramaturgy to work. In SF-films we find dystopias which can be helpful when we can discuss what went wrong, but we seldom find the utopias where inspiring ideas of solutions are found. When it comes to literature it’s a totally different story [43]. The circle of ideas continues the dance, where reality and fiction affect one another. Despite this, blockbuster SF films about well organized, beautiful and thriving green cities are still missing in the world.

IntechOpen

IntechOpen

Author details

Britt Johanne Farstad

Department of Humanities, Faculty of Education and Business Studies, University of Gävle, Sweden

*Address all correspondence to: britt.j.farstad@hig.se

IntechOpen

© 2021 The Author(s). Licensee IntechOpen. This chapter is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

References

- [1] <https://www.inverse.com/article/18488-science-fiction-future-city-planning-dubai-skyscrapers-dystopia>
- [2] J. R. Gold, "Under darkened skies: the city in science fiction film", *Geography*, 86(4), 337.
- [3] Zeitgeist means the general intellectual, moral, and cultural climate of an era. Zeit means time and Geist means spirit, i.e. spirit of the age.
- [4] Britt Farstad, *The Glass Bead Player: New Worlds, Ethics and Androcentrism in Peter Nilson's Science Fiction Novels*, Umeå University Press 2013, p. 33 ff.
- [5] Karlheinz Steinmüller, "Science Fiction and Science in the Twentieth Century", p. 352 in *Companion to Science in the Twentieth Century*, ed. John Krige and Dominique Pestre, (London - Routledge 2003).
- [6] Karlheinz Steinmüller, "Science Fiction and Science in the Twentieth Century", p. 339 in *Companion to Science in the Twentieth Century*, ed. John Krige and Dominique Pestre, (London - Routledge 2003).
- [7] Karlheinz Steinmüller, "Science Fiction and Science in the Twentieth Century", p. 360 in *Companion to Science in the Twentieth Century*, ed. John Krige and Dominique Pestre, (London - Routledge 2003).
- [8] <https://newatlas.com/science-fiction-cities-future-urban-visions-architecture/55569/>
- [9] Another example is *Elysium* by Neill Blomkamp (2013).
- [10] Donald M. Hassler and Clyde Wilcox, ed., *Political Science fiction*, p. 7. (University of South Carolina Press, 1996).
- [11] http://web.mit.edu/m-i-t/science_fiction/profiles/pohl.html
- [12] Henry Jenkins, *Science fiction, media and imagination*, p. 1. http://web.mit.edu/m-i-t/science_fiction/profiles/pohl.html
- [13] Hans Jonas, *The imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, p. 30.
- [14] Hans Jonas, *The imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, p. 29.
- [15] Martha Nussbaum, *Narrative Emotions: Becketts Genealogy of Love*, p. 225ff., p. 228ff. I *Ethics: Symposium on Morality and Literature*, Vol. 98, January 1988, nr. 2, ed. Russel Hardin (The University of Chicago Press 1988).
- [16] J. R. Gold, "Under darkened skies: the city in science fiction film", *Geography*, 86(4), 347.
- [17] J. R. Gold, "Under darkened skies: the city in science fiction film", *Geography*, 86(4), 345.
- [18] <https://www.thenatureofcities.com/2019/05/27/imagining-future-cities-in-an-age-of-ecological-change/>
- [19] <http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/cities>
- [20] <https://classic.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=genesis+2&version=KJV>
- [21] <https://classic.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+4&version=KJV>
- [22] <https://classic.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+11&version=KJV>
- [23] <https://classic.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=revelation+21&version=KJV>

- [24] <https://classic.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Revelation+22&version=KJV>
- [25] Andreas Nyström, *Places of Rest: in worlds of Ruin*, p. 141.
- [26] Rich Haridy, 2018, <https://newatlas.com/science-fiction-cities-future-urban-visions-architecture/55569/>
- [27] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Design_Futures_Council <https://web.archive.org/web/20071112040544/http://www.di.net/>
- [28] http://smithgill.com/news/chicago_sun-times_27_nov/
- [29] <https://blueprintchicago.wordpress.com/2010/05/27/the-trump-tower/>
- [30] <https://www.albawaba.com/news/syd-mead-visit-dubai>
- [31] *Under darkened skies: The City in Science-fiction Film*, John R. Gold, Geography Volume 86(4), p. 340.
- [32] https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B01LXRV1T8/ref=rdr_kindle_ext_tmb, (2016) preface pp. 1-3.
- [33] <https://www.doclounge.se/films/the-human-scale-bringing-cities-to-life> *The Human Scale – Bringing Cities to Life*, Director, Andreas Møl Dalsgaard, Denmark 2012.
- [34] *international_guidelines_on_urban_and_territorial_planning_-_handbook_*, p. 3.
- [35] <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1364032118304398>
- [36] <https://uploads.habitat3.org/hb3/NUA-English.pdf>
- [37] <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1364032118304398#bib3>
- [38] Good examples on literature on this topic are Kim Stanley Robinson's novels *Red Mars* (1992), *Green Mars* (1993), *Blue Mars* (1996) and *New York 2140* (2017).
- [39] <https://www.greenfilmfest.org/about>
- [40] <https://www.greenfilmfest.org/filmarchive>
- [41] <https://filmsfortheearth.org/en/issues/urbanization-smart-cities>
- [42] Directed by Andrew Hasse and Carl Grether, UK 2014.
- [43] A few resource that can be mentioned are <https://cambridgeecofiction.org/resources/> and a book by William H. Baarschers, *Eco-facts and Eco-fiction: Understanding the Environmental Debate*, (Routledge 1996)