

Playing the Starring Role of Utopia/Dystopia: Architecture in Film

Michael J. Crosbie

Faith & Form, Essex, Connecticut

mcrosbie@faithandform.com

University of Hartford, West Hartford, Connecticut

crosbie@hartford.edu

Theodore Sawruk

University of Hartford, West Hartford, Connecticut

sawruk@hartford.edu

Summary statement

Our primary opportunity for visual and auditory experience of utopia/dystopia is through the medium of film, in which architecture plays the primary or “starring” role, a character that makes the utopia/dystopia manifest. In this paper, film utopia/dystopias is examined and their architectural characteristics assessed to understand how architecture and design brings to life the utopian/dystopian world in cinema.

Topic

Utopian/Dystopian Design

Scope

The design and creation of utopian communities such as New Harmony, Indiana, and of utopias never realized, such as Frank Lloyd Wright’s Broadacre City, rest on the belief that architecture has an important role to play in shaping human behavior for the betterment of those who inhabit it. The carefully considered architecture of such communities can result in places where justice, fairness, freedom, privacy, spirituality, harmony, and happiness can be attained. A parallel argument would be that carefully designed architecture can also contribute to the creation of dystopia: places where anxiety, fear, oppression, alienation, surveillance, spiritual suppression, disharmony, and the crushing power of the state or the corporation are the result. Readers can “experience” such dystopias in the books of George Orwell in *1984*, and *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley. However, our primary opportunity for visual and auditory experiences of planned or designed utopias/dystopias is through film, in which the architecture actually plays a part, a character, to manifest the utopia/dystopia. This experience is particularly evident in the case of several films where utopia and dystopia are depicted simultaneously in the same film, and how their depiction is made possible through architecture and design.

Juhani Pallasmaa describes the use of architecture in film and the structure of film itself as “amplifiers” to transport the viewer into utopian or dystopian experiences: “Cinematic architecture evokes and sustains specific mental states; the architecture of film is an architecture of terror, anguish, suspense, boredom, alienation, melancholy, happiness or ecstasy, depending on the essence of the particular cinematic narrative and the director’s intention. Space and architectural imagery are the amplifiers of specific emotions.”¹ This paper examines film utopias/dystopias and

¹Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Architecture of Image: Existential Space in Cinema* (Helsinki: Rakennustieto Oy, 2001), p. 7.

their architectural characteristics—how the portrayal of utopia/dystopia is achieved through the experience of architecture and its elements by both the film’s characters and by the film’s viewers. A concise discussion of the role of architecture in film, relying primarily on the work of such scholars of the subject as Pallasmaa, Nezar AlSayyad, Mark Lamster, and Dietrich Neumann (see references) lays the groundwork for an analysis of how architecture operates in film to portray utopia/dystopia. This is followed by case-study analyses of films in which architecture is used as the primary medium to create the utopian/dystopian environment.

Case Studies

Although architecture has had a starring role as utopia/dystopia in several films over the past 90 years, four films are discussed and their dystopian architecture compared and contrasted: Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927); Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982); Terry Gilliam’s *Brazil* (1985); and Jens Lien’s *The Bothersome Man (Den brysomme mannen)* (2006).

Architectural historian Nezar AlSayyad characterizes *Metropolis* as the first film to depict utopia/dystopia, and that it set the “visual and architectural language” that has been used to depict utopia/dystopia in films that followed it.² *Metropolis* provided the template for spatial organization of utopia/dystopia in cinema over the next 90 years: the elites who inhabit their utopia live in the upper echelons of the city, while the incarcerated victims of dystopia occupy the lower depths of the metropolis (Figure 1). Above is light and air; below is darkness and suffocating atmosphere. In the upper reaches of grand buildings are those who surveil, while those beneath the ground plane of the city are those who are under surveillance. Many of the architectural symbols of power in *Metropolis* are totally symmetrical, such as building-sized machines and the “Tower of Babel” that occupies the city’s center. The architecture implies social, political, and technological stasis, control, and domination through perfect compositional balance.

A similar spatial arrangement that sets the character of utopia/dystopia is found in *Blade Runner*, where the corporate privileged occupy the tallest building in 2019-era Los Angeles—a 700-story tower in the shape of a Mayan pyramid. The powerless live in the depths, in low- to mid-rise buildings, which are old and covered with a patchwork of retrofits and exposed mechanical systems (Figure 2). Visual futurist Syd Mead, who set the visual tone of *Blade Runner*, explains: “Everything had to look old, sleazy, and odd... a strange, compacted crowded look that exaggerates the danger and hopelessness of these people’s lives.”³

A similar technique is used in *Brazil*, where architecture’s mechanical systems (ducts, pipes, ventilators, hoses, fans, wires, outlets, cables) are the film’s primary characters, ciphers for an out-of-control bureaucracy (Figure 3). According to AlSayyad, film-maker John Matthews has suggested that these architectural elements “are reflective of the control of the individual by the state, ‘as if the ducts are umbilical.’”⁴ In *Brazil*, dystopia has permeated every level of society; in fact while the elites inhabit more spacious environments than the proles, their apartments and offices are likewise dominated by these aggressive architectural elements. The primary signifier of the environment of the elites is a predominance of Classical architectural styles or Postmodernism (the movie was made at the height of PM, in 1985) while the exploited underclasses are relegated to buildings of stripped Modernism.

² Nezar AlSayyad, *Cinematic Urbanism: A History of the Modern from Reel to Real* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 72.

³ Dietrich Neumann, editor, *Film Architecture: Set Designs from Metropolis to Blade Runner*. New York: Prestel Verlag, 1999), 45.

⁴ AlSayyad, *Cinematic Urbanism*, 84.

Jens Lien's *The Bothered Man* (*Den brydsomme mannen*) is a unique depiction of utopia/dystopia in that the exact same built environment can be seen as either utopian or dystopian; it is the interpretation of and the interaction with the architecture by the film's characters that reveals how the environment is being viewed. The film is set in the present and the architecture is almost exclusively a bland late-Modernism (Figure 4). There is little color, contrast, or ornament: the built environment is a washed-out monotone of grays, whites, and blacks. A similar blandness is found in the food, which the film's protagonist, Andreas, finds tasteless, and alcohol, which has no intoxicating qualities. Sight, taste, smell, touch, and sound are all drained of joy, and the architecture reflects this pallid state. The film's characters, except for Andreas, are oblivious to the dullness of the environment and believe they are living in a utopia, where little is demanded of them except to behave as good consumers. Near the end of the film Andreas discovers a utopian architecture behind a thick basement wall in an old building. Through a crack, he reaches into a room alive with color, warmth, freshly baked bread, ornamented antiques, and music—it is like grandma's kitchen. He manages to grab a piece of tasty bread before the authorities arrest him and banish him from the city.

Intended Conclusions

The intended conclusions of the paper are to understand the different ways that architecture is used to portray utopia/dystopia in film and the techniques used to achieve that portrayal. The movie viewer can virtually inhabit a world in which architecture "stands in" as a motif—a physical manifestation—for the social, cultural, and economic forces that have created and perpetuate the utopia/dystopia. The case studies offer examples of how architecture in film employs space, relational scale, natural and artificial light, materials, ornament, symbols, style, color, shadow, and sound to create a dystopian environment. The architecture portrayed in the case study films also illustrates that utopia and dystopia can be expressed in a film, sometimes even in the same frame, depending on camera angles, the visual stratification of space, and the comparison of vast public/corporate space versus condensed, constricting personal space.

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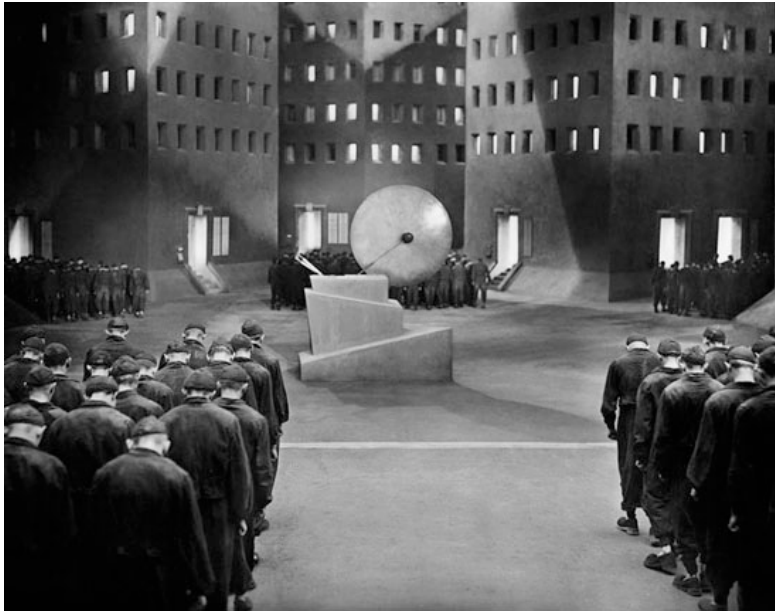


Fig. 1: The workers in the strata of dystopia in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) live in a shadowy underground city, beneath the utopian city of the rulers.



Fig. 2: The tight LA streets of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) are dense with old and new architecture, retrofitted and crumbling.



Fig. 3: The overbearing nature of a bureaucratic state out of control in Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (1985) is expressed in the abundance of hideous ducts and pipes that dominate virtually every space in the film.



Fig. 4: Simultaneously utopia/dystopia, the bland, colorless Modern city in Jens Lien's *The Bothersome Man* (2006) reflects the emotional and spiritual vacancy of the inhabitants who choose to live there (except one).