The Future in the City

Utopic films and urbanity

by

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Introduction

Since the beginning of film history the SF-film was an important part of it. From the French film pioneer Méliès to Fritz Lang's Metropolis followed by 1950ts monster movies, cold war subjects and leading to George Lucas, Ridley Scott, John Carpenter, James Cameron, Kathrine Bigelow,…

Beside the danger in and from outer space there are a second hardly unnoticed constant in this films: the city. The city as location for utopic film and as a place where you can show the potential of the future. For my essay I have chosen three different aspects in SF-films and their effect for the shown cities.

- City as a utopic place which reflects the present situation
- The utopic city as a place for well-known genres
- The city as "moloch"

Today's problems and their realization in film

Most of the utopic films are nothing else then a stocktaking of their time and social surrounding, "verfremdet" with an futuristic design and plot. Not only the technical progress is very easy to spot in SF-films, also the social and psychological turns of the nations and societies. Think for example about all the "Freud Symbols" of "King Kong" (USA 1933), the Japanese Godzilla-movies or every single season of Star Trek.[1]

Also the city changes its face but the problems still from today.

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[1] King Kong as symbol for the black man, who is been kidnapped by white men. They bring him into their world to exploit him. He escapes, steals the white woman and climbs with her upon the Empire State Building, gets killed and tumbles down from the Phallus symbol.

Godzilla destroys Tokyo because someone has wake him up by incident. The trauma of nuclear destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasake could in film only explained with the creation of a big monster.

Metropolis and Alphaville

Fritz Lang was influenced by Manhattan skyline 1924 when he realised three years later "Metropolis". His city exists with skyscrapers, several levels of streets and highways crossing the abysses between the buildings, also aeroplanes fly within this traffic. The brighter, upper part of the city belongs to the rich and powerful people, the workers vegetate in the basement areas of the city in darkness like slaves. After a catastrophe both parts become reconciled.

I want not talk about the plot. This naive happy end was very comfortable for the Nazis, which used Metropolis for propaganda because of the metaphorical language and the contents. The script wrote Langs wife Thea von Harbon who believed in Nazi-ideology and get divorced after Langs emigration.
Nevertheless Metropolis reflects the last decade in Germany. The seperation between rich and poor, the difference of classes, the horrible conditions for the working class was reality in Germany of Emperor Wilhelm II. And after the great disaster of World War I the Status Quo was destroyed, but there was no reconciliation.
Metropolis shows many ideas, which one can find in many later films:

- Huge cities with traffic jams and chaos as an indication for prosperity and mobility
- A bigger isolation for people
- The possibility to influence a whole group of people
- The mad scientist
- A disaster erases the modern Babel, with water or with fire

Jean Luc Godard shows us in "Alphaville" (Fra.,1965) an other way the present a utopic city.
Alphaville is not futuristic styled city. The whole movie was shot on location in Paris at night. The neon-lights and the empty streets and highways create such cold and stifling atmosphere. Alphaville stands for a technocratic world without human feelings and emotions. The city is not disguised with utopic decoration, the reality of the scene reflects the present and opens an uncomfortable vision. Godard said about Alphaville: "I describe the present of the future!"

Social conflicts of today were also transported into the future cities.
In most movies there is a better and wiser civilization within a modern and bright city. This hyper modern city has, in opposite to the threatening cities of today clean air, green parks and hardly skyscrapers. It is spacious and there is no crime.
But all the beauty is fake, the people living in the city are isolated from the rest and cold-hearted. Their society bases on ancient ruins formerly cities. The society in the city is not perfect. There are separation of young and old (e.g. Logan´s Run USA 1976) rich and poor or well educated and barbarians (e.g. Zardoz GB 1974). Then a hero shows up and destroys the solid social structure, often symbolised with the destruction of the city.

Well known genres

Camera shows the fingers of the clock. Still four hours to go until the train will arrive. The citizens are hiding in their houses, the marshal is almost alone, facing the duel and doing some preparations …
Camera shows the red figures of the clock. A computer voice tells the time. Still four hours to go until the "Earth-shuttle" will arrive. The mine-workers are sitting in the bar, the marshal is almost alone, facing the duel and doing some preparations….

The movie "Outland" (GB, 1980) uses particlly the same camera - shots like in Zinnemans "High Noon" (USA 1 952).
But Outland is located an a Jupiter moon. It is a mine-city. The impossibility of escape and the isolation of the Marshal is boosted by the surrounding. The city is a threatening construction of steel, plastic and glass, protected by the mine-company and the synthetic atmosphere. The city is the place for the duel and also for the spectators, who can watch on video screens what happens. First, the city itself is not an advantage for the Marshal, it is narrow and dark and there is no place where he can hide. But at the end he turns it around, uses the city with all its resources and finally gains a victory.

Ridley Scott's "Bladerunner" (USA 1981) shows the future of L.A. Again high buildings, narrow streets and a Japanese influence is evident. The city is space for a private-eye sneaking for "replicants", artificial life -forms. Foggy streets, rain and darkness express the depressive atmosphere. Only huge billboards shine bright in the dark, selling products or keep people in touch with information. The city stands still for consume. Like in classic Humphrey Bogart movies the city provides danger, mystic and different races.

Unusual, but worth to mention it:
The porn-movies "Latex" and "Shock" from the early 90ths use an utopic city for their plot.
Beside the usual scenes the spectator watches a very surrealistic city, painted in cold colours which indicates the captivity of the humans in this world. High skyscrapers with perspective contortion, neon lights, big stairways, enormous portals, metallic surfaces on the buildings underline the fetishism of the story and generate symbols which normally can not be expected in pornographic movies.

The City as moloch

Cities have the ability to create attributes. One can discuss if habitants form the city or vice versa. One of the attributes is the threatening of big cities for all persons living there. The peoples fear of other creatures, the anonymity, the large size. You can make an arrangement with the city but you will never win against it.
This dark and pessimistic feelings are recognizable in "Batman" (USA 1989). The city looks like the buildings become thicker on their top levels. Surrealistic architecture seems to come right out of a nightmare. Gothic figures decorate the corners of the buildings, an eternal darkness lies over "Gotham City". Also "Bladerunner" shows the city as moloch.

Not a dark but also immense city presents Luc Besson in "The 5th element" (Fra., 1997). The city spreads wildly and expanses in almost every direction. One element, which reminds me at Metropolis is the large vertical expansion of the city. Huge buildings are stretching into the sky, the artificial canyons are kilometres deep and in between there are the traffic. Extreme

supervision should make life easier and simple, the omnipotence of the executive cooperates with the technical perfection of urban infrastructure.

The movie "Strange Days" (USA 1995) director Kathrine Bigelow shows the city of L.A. with an utopic story. Like Godard she did not create a new L.A. like in Bladerunner. She uses the real city and puts a utopic story in it. All problems of the city are the some of today: racism, drugs, rape, corruption, violence….
Like other big cities (Mexiko City, Kairo, Tokyo, Johannisburg,…) L.A. is even now a moloch.

One step beyond is John Carpenters "Escape from New York" (USA 1980) Like in all apocalyptical movies (e.g. Mad Max, Terminator,…) the city is a battlefield, the last witness of an ancient civilisation. Manhattan is ruined, just a single giant prison, supervised from outside behind high walls. Onto the island there is a society recommending a martial law. Economy, art and culture have lost against the crime. The city was ill and they have to cut away the necrotic part. They sacrifice one piece for healing the rest.
The sujet of sacrificing is often seen in SF-movies.

Last but not least the city as illusion. There is no escape, it is only an illusion for the citizens. The city calms them, makes them secure like in "Truman Show" (USA 1998) or the whole city doesn't exist like in "Matrix" (USA 1999).

Appendix

Literature:

Hellmann, Christian: Der Science fiction Film. (Heyne Filmbibliothek TB 54: 1986)

Filmographie:

Alphaville	(Fran. 1965)	Jean Luc Godard
Bladerunner	(USA 1981)	Ridley Scott
Escape from New York	(USA 1980)	John Carpenter
Gojira	(Jap. 1954)	Inoshira Honda
King Kong	(USA 1933)	Ernest Schoedsoch & Merian C. Cooper
Logan´s Run	(USA 1976)	Michael Anderson
Matrix	(USA 1999)	Larry & Andy Wachowski
Metropolis	(D 1925/27)	Fritz Lang
Outland	(GB 1980)	Peter Hyams
Strange Days	(USA 1996)	Kathrine Bigelow
Terminator	(USA 1984)	James Cameron
The 5th element	(Fra. 1997)	Luc Besson
Zardoz	(USA 1974)	John Boorman