Imaginary urbanism in the cinema

Lucio Altarelli, Ghisi Grütter

Cinema acts as a spectacular time machine, able to get through either the past or the future. Peplum movies are obliged to be close to the reality; for example, they can represent The Passion of the Christ in a small town as Matera, but the centurions have to be dressed properly. On the contrary, among the science fiction projected towards the future, the cinema is completely free without any commitment. In addition to that, most contaminations between cities and architectures are in science fiction moving pictures. At the end of 19th century and at the beginning of 20th the modern city influences movies, as in Lumiére’s film sequences; in more recent period the movies imaginary creates new urban scenery. We want to investigate different relationship between cities, arts and movies and their reciprocal effects on urban utopías particularly in a post-modern condition that the architects look like more involved to design a single building rather than to project new living habitat. Architecture is related to physical space, to a “stone town”, we could call it urb. On the contrary, cinema is a virtual space that represent mainly the citàt, to say to plot and people in a “scenery” made by urban landscapes either existent or imagined. In a moving pictures vision the scenes successions underlines the architectural structure. The camera simulates what spectator’s eye would see “going through” an architecture or urban space. Therefore, is quite interesting to compare the two different means in creating imaginary spaces. This essay would have “binary” images as much is possible in order to put together some of movies still frames to certain pictures came from both architectural world and art one.

Keywords: architecture, cinema, science fiction.

1. The city of the future in films of the past

The history of the relationship between cinema and cities is characterised by both mutual contamination and radical differences developed over more than a century, from the original nitrate films to today’s digital resources. In one sense, cinema and architecture converge in the comparable space/time dimension to which they both belong. This is bound to which they both belong. This is bound to reverberate in the comparable space/time dimension to which they both belong. This is bound to reverberate in the comparable space/time dimension. The city of the future in films of the past is a fascinating subject to explore. The city of the future is a concept that has been depicted in various forms throughout history. From ancient architectural visions to modern sci-fi movies, the idea of a city of the future has captivated the imagination of both filmmakers and architects. The relationship between cinema and architecture is a complex one, influenced by various factors such as technological advances and societal changes. This essay aims to explore the different ways in which the city of the future has been portrayed in film and how these portrayals have shaped our understanding of what the future city might look like.

1. Text by Lucio Altarelli.

L’immaginario urbano nel cinema

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Il cinema, da sempre, agisce come una spettacolare macchina del tempo, in grado tanto di attra-versare il passato quanto di prefigurare il futuro. Nel peplum il cinema è obbligato, comunque, a una “fidelità” sia pure parziale: si può rappresentare La passione di Cristo a Matera, ma i centurioni devono comunque indossare abiti da centurioni. Viceversa è nella fiction di fantascienza, nella anticipazione di mondi a venire, che esso dispiega appieno la sua “libertà” narrativa in un ambito totalmente privo di condizionamenti. Nella fantascienza filmica trovano, inoltre, rappresentazione le diverse dialettiche e contaminazioni tra città e architettura. Se da un lato, soprattutto agli albori del cinema, è la città moderna che con i suoi ritmi ispira il cinema, come nelle sequenze dei fratelli Lumière, in tempi più recenti è il cinema a proiettare le città e gli urban scenari futuri. Largamente proposto intende analizzare le diverse relazioni tra città e ci- nema valutando in che misura nella contemporaneità l’immagine urbana condiziona quella del cine-ma o, piuttosto, come il cinema si faccia carico di quelle prefigurazioni e utopie che nel contesto postmoderno non sembrano essere declinate dagli architetti, legati più alla concezione del singolo oggetto edilizio piuttosto che alle grandi mappe e narrazioni del passato. L’architettura riguarda lo spazio fisico, la città di pietra, in altre parole l’arch. Il cinema invece è uno spazio virtuale, simulato, che rappresenta essenzialmente la cità, ovvero l’intrico di storie e soprattutto di persone che si muovono nel “fondale” rappresentato dallo spazio dei paesaggi urbani, presenti o futuri. Il dinamismo che distingue l’architettura congiunge il fruitore a percorrere gli spazi ed a apprezzarne le continuità o le discontinuità, di scala e di forma. Nella visione cinematografica la successione delle scene, fluida o contrastata, mette in evidenza la struttura spaziale di un’architettura. Ciò che la macchina da presa poneva passando da un’inquadratura all’altra simulava quello che vede l’occhio di un osservatore attento mentre “attraversa” un’opera o uno spazio dotato di senso architettonico. È pertanto interessante indagare i reciproci rapporti tra queste due diverse espressioni artistiche nelle loro rispettive capacità di dare forma ed immagine al futuro. L’articolo è accompagnato da alcune immagini “binate” finalizzate a mettere a confronto lo still frame di alcuni particolari film con altrettante immagini parallele esistenti dal mondo dell’architettura e da quello dell’arte.

Parole chiave: architettura, cinema, fantascienza.

1. Text by Lucio Altarelli.
4. La storia delle relazioni tra cinema e città è caratterizzata da reciproche contaminazioni, ma quanto da radicali differenze che si svilup-pano lungo l’arco di più di un secolo: dalle originarie pellicole in nitrato fino alle odierne risorse del digitale. Per un verso cinema e architettura convergono nell’adesione ad una confrontabile dimensione spazio/temporale. Legata, quest’ultima, all’esperienza e all’attraversamento degli spazi in campo sia architettonico che urbano da parte del fruitore; per contro, le tecniche del montaggio nei meccanismi di post-produzione del cinema diffammano le sequenze narrative di ciascun film. Dunque Spazio, tempo e architettu-ra per citare l’opera di Sigfried Giedion del 1941, ma parimenti spazio, tempo e cinema. Del resto il registar Sergej Eisenstein nello scrut-inare le forme dello spazio delle penitenze di fantascienza, citato da Manfredo Tafuri, afferma che “l’undi-bbio pro-gramma della rappresentazione della città come architettura” e rafforza tale enunciato mettendo in sintonia lo spazio delle esc inespirate, caratterizzate da una sequenza di “spazi indipendenti” in collisione tra loro, con le tecniche del montaggio e con i dispositivi del “movimento cinematografico”.

Tuttavia questa concorrenza è anche un essere concorrente: l’architettura è peso e materia, il cinema è virtualità. L’una è radicata nell’espe- rienza del reale; l’altra rivendica un grado di visionarietà e la capacità di attraversare tempi lontani quantunque quella di prefigurare mondi a venire. Il cinema è una fantastica macchina del tempo in grado di rappresentare il presente, il passato e il futuro. Questo avviene in tem- po reale, durante lo svolgimento stesso della pellicola; mentre in architettura il tempo, so-
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films and their subsequent transfiguration in the mechanisms of fiction: from the historical to science-fiction, starting from the era of silent films. The origins of cinema, such as the films of the Lumière brothers, are essentially documentary. It is the urban wonders of the city with its stations, passages and boulevards that are exalted by the film images. Through the eye of the cinema, the spectator becomes a citizen of the world. In the cinema, Benjamin’s flânerie finds further significances to orient his own urban “disorientation”.* At its origins, cinema has an impressionist vision, that of crowds, squares, cafes, shop windows and universal positions: the scenes of the Lumière brothers intensify the urban wonderment.

But very soon, starting from the time of silent films, the cinema takes its leave from the documentary and intensifies its potential in the fantasy genre, including both intercontinental travel Jules Verne style and hypothetical space explorations. While the first historical films, such as Abel Gance’s Napoléon from 1927, there is an obligation to accuracy, if only in the costumes, uniforms and weapons of the time, it is above all in the fantasy world of science fiction that the cinema reveals its projective capacity to imagine future worlds and others in total expressive freedom. In this specific narrative genre, it achieves the triumph of its own urban “disorientation”.*

The very term Luna Park, still in use today, derives from a pavilion created in the early 1900s at Buffalo on the occasion of the Pan–American Exposition and subsequently repeated at Coney Island. This attraction, known as A Trip to the moon, simulated a moon landing, with visitors aboard a spaceship known as Luna, translating the English “moon” into Latin. An enormous public success, the pavilion gave its name to many amusement parks of the future. The amusement parks, dioramas, panoramas and music halls of New York, together with the skyscrapers and elevators, are described by Rem Koolhaas in Delirious New York as the epiphany of an incipient modernity. For Koolhaas, the emergent New York represents a “retroactive manifesto” of modern thought, as in the subtitle of his book which reinforces the themes of contemporaneity*.

A less heroic interpretation of New York comes in 1993 at the beginning of the Great Depression with the film King Kong. Through the theme of “the beauty and the beast”, the film by Merian Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack introduces the recurrent conflicts of modernity and progress, oscillating between unconditional support and more cautious reserve. The colossal monkey which attacks the Empire State Building represents a threat to abiti, uniformi e armamenti d’epoca, è sopratutto nelle fiction di fantascienza che il cinema rivela le sue capacità proiettive di immaginare, in totale libertà espressiva, mondi ed assetti futuri: trovando in questo specifico genere narrativo l’esaltazione della sua spettacolare visionarietà.

 Nel 1902 Georges Méliès con Le voyage dans la lune, considerato uno dei primi film di fantascienza, risponde all’immaginario collettivo per i viaggi interplanetari, legando modernità ed inventione, sia pure ricorrendo ad una vera più ironica che scientifica, come la celebre immagine della navicella che si schianta sull’oceano della luna. Ma già allora il falso appare più vero del vero o, quantomeno, del possibilistic. Compito dell’opera di Méliès è alimentare la fantasia, non la conoscenza.

Lo stesso termine Luna Park, tutt’ora in uso, deriva da un padiglione creato ai primi del Novecento a Buffalo, in occasione della Esposizione Pan-americana, e replicato successivamente a Coney Island. Tale attrazione, chiamata A trip to the moon, simulava un alunaggio; la navicella su cui salivano i visitatori era chiamata Luna, traducendo in latino l’inglese moon. Questo padiglione, di grande successo di pubblico, diede il nome a tutti i parchi giochi che sono seguiti.

* Luna Park, i diorama, i panorama e i music
moves around a surprisingly immobile and silent Paris. René Clair’s film was made as an interlude during a performance of the ballet Relâche by Francis Picabia, French exponent first of Dadaism, then Surrealism. The true star of Paris qui dort is the Eiffel Tower in its absolute modernity as the “celibate machine” made of emptiness and air. Completely useless from a functional point of view, the object’s only purpose is to show Paris from above and in turn to be seen as a “landmark” from the entire cityscape. The Tower serves as a catalyst for the “policy of gares”. Already in the ascent upwards in the elevator, the Paris landscape is broken up by the spider’s web structure of its articulated crossbeams, a high-cinematic experience, yesterday as today. This theme is meticulously glorified in the sequences of René Clair’s film. By showing the image of the Tower from various points of view, Paris qui dort is true to a theme recurrent in early films: that of a manifest union between modern city and cinema as the epipheny of a common sentiment. Moreover, as René Clair himself declares: “the nearest art to films is architecture”, a statement that evokes the similar declaration by Sergei Eisenstein. In early films, this communion of intent between city and cinema has various aspects. At the most direct level, it is the close collaboration between directors and architects. For other films from the 1920s present a less hesitant vision of modernity, with ample signs of collaboration between cinema and city. These include René Clair’s silent medium-length film Paris qui dort from 1923. The plot is that of a mysterious ray invented by a mad scientist which puts all the inhabitants to sleep, paralyzing all their movements like immobile statues. The only citizens immune to the ray are the night guardian of the Eiffel Tower and his niece, saved from the spell by the height of the tower. When they awake, they realise that the city is completely paralysed. These inhabitants are joined by five people who have arrived in Paris by plane and have therefore not been affected by the ray. This heterogeneous group is joined by five people who have arrived in Paris by plane and have therefore not been affected by the ray. This heterogeneous group

affected by the ray. This heterogeneous group

Figure 5


Figure 6


Figure 7


Figure 8


Figure 9


Figure 10

example, between director Carl Boese and archi- 

The urban settings of utopias and designs of architects and urbanists able to take on and sometimes go beyond the poster, transforming the cinema into a visionary contrapuntal register. The narratives of the early 1900s are thus revealed as much in the vision of the architects as in the cinematic science fiction settings which depict the "elsewhere." If we compare the science fiction films of the past with those produced more recently, there are obviously numerous differences. One aspect standing out amongst the many is, however, the fact that the virtuous circle between cinema and architecture as the shared tools of Modernism has been interrupted. This is due to a number of factors. One of these is of an essentially cultural nature. In the present day, the architect and architecture are no longer called on to produce totalising visions concerning the destinies of metropolises and the relative social-political order in the near future. The urban imaginary architecture ends in the 1960s and 1970s. The work of Archigram, Metabolism, Architecton and Superstudio represents both the apex and the end of the virtuous circle, the creativity of the world of architects and architecture. In Post Modernity, the part prevails over the whole. Today, it is the isolated presentation of the often decontextualised single object-building that is required, rather than elaboration of a wider overall design. There are no longer the revolutionary expectations and transgressive climate which characterised the past season of protes in 1968, when the watchword was "power to 6. Tutti questi film degli anni Venti come avviene in Sunrisecited da Anton Kaes in Film architecture-fattiene direttamente nelle scenografie urbane di alcuni film, come avviene in Sunriserevendicato da Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau dove figura la riproduzione della Berliner Tageblatt di Erich Mendelsohn, e che è evidenziato da Anton Kaes in Film architecture. Tutti questi film degli anni Venti creano una familiarità tra cinema e architettura come linguaggi propri della modernità e in gran- do di creare particolari atmosfere e suggestioni. Un altro aspetto è legato alla rieduca- zione di città e realtà possibili in film dichiarata- tamente di fantasia. Le immagini di Metropolis, celebre film del 1927 di Fritz Lang, progettano una realtà distopica, quella di un ipotetico 2026, dove la classe dirigente di in- dustriali o oligarchici governa la città dall'al- to di superbi quanto inaccessibili grattacieli, mentre costruisce ad un deflagrante lavoro la classe operaia che vive relegata nel sottosu- 

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the imagination”. Then there was the subsequent collapse of ideologies, represented in concrete terms by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the end of the great maps and narration which had characterized the last century. The other aspect is of an essentially technical nature. In the era of digital and complex post-production mechanisms, film settings, particular in science fiction, require highly specialized skills beyond those of the traditional competencies of the architect. The cinema of today continues to explore possible future scenarios, but these are conceived in a context independent from the professional world of the architect. The relationship between cinema and city today finds other forms of inspiration linked to the global impressions of the civilisation of images and the world of comics and videogames, for example. Superman, Batman, Sin City, Dick Tracy, Spiderman and Capitan America, with their respective urban imagery, started out life as graphic novels, and were only later translated into film.

Representations of the city in the most recent science fiction films follow two macro models. One tends to amplify the splendours of the metropolis, with ever higher skyscrapers and ever more omnipresent traffic, lights and shop signs, exaggerating almost furtively the grid of the Real. The second is the Blade Runner saga. On the other hand, another model focuses on anti-urban and dystopic predictions. The collapse of the metropolises for environmental reasons, as for example in the film Wall-E in which an entire planet is invaded by mountains of refuse and has been abandoned by the population who now live in enormouscomfortable spacecrafthe only inhabitant left on the Earth is a surviving robot programmed to compact heaps of refuse. Oppure, as for environmental reasons, as for example in the film Wall-E: in which an entire planet is invaded by mountains of refuse and has been abandoned by the population who now live in enormous comfortable spacecrafthe only inhabitant left on the Earth is a surviving robot programmed to compact heaps of refuse.

During the same years, the desert is also proposed as model and manifesto of an anti-urban vision by the architects of Superstudio in the Life, Education, Ceremony, Love and Death cycle. Superstudio’s visionary works hypothesise an absolute territoriality, devoid of the signs of man, broken only by the grid of the Web and inhabited by a nomadic, self-sufficient population liberated from the traditional rituals of the city. The Web satisfies every energetic, informational and community need.

2. The city of the future in films of the present

Imaginary and real cities are fundamental subjects of cinematography, which does not always manage to draw a boundary between the two. The real city is ascribed strong imaginary connotations and, in turn, the imaginary city is built using elements present in the tangible urban reality.

In some films, such as Edward Scissorhands from 1990 and Big Fish from 2003, both by Tim Burton, the urban model proposed by the cinema greatly resembles that imagined by Frank Lloyd Wright as early as the 1930s. For his urban Broadacre City project, Wright hypothesised an acre of land (corresponding to the Roman jute, namely 4046.72 sq m) for each single family residential unit, contributing to formation of the American imagerie. While in his Ville Contemporaine de 1922, Le Corbusier imagined a city of tower blocks arranged in a park rationalising private transport, Wright’s city had a mainly horizontal extension and was decentralised and close to nature, with almost unlimited individual mobility. As Wright himself said “let fantasy, richness of competencies altamente specialistiche che esulano da quelle tradizionali dell’architetto.

Il cinema attuale continua a farsi carico di visioni futuribili, ma queste vengono concepite in uno spazio indipendente dal mondo professionale dell’architetto. Il rapporto tra città e città trova oggi altre forme di ispirazione legate alle suggestioni complessive della civiltà delle immagini, al mondo per esempio dei fumetti o a quello dei videogiochi. Superman, Batman, Sin City, Dick Tracy, Spiderman e Capitan America, con le loro rispettive immagini urbane, nascono prima come graphic novels e solo successivamente vengono tradotte in film. Le prefigurazioni urbane dei film più recenti di fantascienza seguono due macro modelli. Uno tende ad una densificazione dei fasti della metropoli, con i suoi gratificili sempre più alti, con i traffici, le luci e le isigne commerciali sempre più omnipresenti; esasperando in maniera parassistica le scenografie di Blade Runner, come avviene nel sequel Blade Runner 2049. Un altro modello si attesta invece su previsioni anturbane e distopiche. Il collaudo di metropoli per motivi ambientali come avviene per esempio nel film Wall-E: un intero pianeta invaso da montagne di rifiuti e in quanto tale abbandonato dalla popolazione che vive su grandi e confortevoli navi spaziali. Unico abitante terrestre è un superchic robot programma- to per comparare cataste di rifiuti. Oppure la rappresentazione della città-maceria come esito di insanabili conflitti.

Altri film, prodotti in particolare negli anni 70, mostrano paesaggi totalmente desertificati. Tra questi Guerre stellari di George Lucas e Zabriskie Point di Michelangelo Antonioni. Film profondamente diversi se non per il fatto che l’immagine del deserto figura in entrambi come metafora di un paesaggio dell’assenza e del vuoto che viene contrapposto alla densità fisica e narrativa dei paesaggi metropolitani.

In Guerre stellari il deserto, girato nel Safari tunisino, è la raffigurazione di un ipotetico mondo remotto quello di Tatooine, la sperperata oasi di un lontano pianeta della galassia, luogo natale della famiglia Skywalker. In Zabriskie Point il deserto, girato nella Death Valley californiana, è il luogo in cui i due protagonisti, Mark e Daria, fanno l’amore mentre il paesaggio si anima, improvvisamente, di altre coppi dismesse lungo tutta la valletta. Qui il deserto rappresenta la povera con il passo l’iniziazione di un nuovo percorso esistenziale da parte degli epigoni della Beat Generation, nutriti dalla lettura di Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, William Burroughs e Robert M. Pirsig.

Il deserto come modello e manifesto di una vi- sione anturbana è quello proposto in quegli stessi anni dagli architetti di Superstudio nel ciclo Vita Educazione Cerimonia Amore e Morte. Tra questi progettini di Superstudio ipotizza- no una territorialità assoluta: priva di segni antropici, innaturata unicamente dal recinto della Rete e abitata da una popolazione nomade, autosufficiente e svincolata dai rituali tradizionali della città. La Rete risponde a ogni fabbisogno energetico, informatico e comunitario.
the auto take the city to the country. In 1934, Frank Lloyd Wright expressed his distrust of the traditional city in the book The Disappearing City10, in which he presented the Broadacre City project to the public. This defined a system of 12-lane highways forming a 3.2 km grid incor-
porating factories, collective infrastructure and residential units, with a living density of five to seven inhabitants per hectare. As well as detached houses, there were also 15 to 20 storey residential tower blocks, set far apart and built on platforms with garages and services.

One example of a science fiction film with a suburban urban basis is Peter Weir’s The Truman Show11, and in all science-fiction films, such as Brazil, Big Fish, A.I. Artificial Intelligence, The Fifth Element, Gattaca, Minority Report, Blade Runner and The Zero Theorem – whether invented ex novo or reality transformed12. Three films serve as examples of the exaggerated den-
sification of the metropolis: The Fifth Element, Brazil and The Zero Theorem. The creators of these films either drew on an iconographic repertory taken from the world of illustration, cartooning and architecture considered at the time to be futuristic. Most of science fiction is characterised by that fact that, while the cities may be "futuristic", the social order is always strictly hierarchic and tribal. In many there is a sort of dictatorship, strict police control and very limited freedom. They contain "artefacts", demodè objects or furniture, often from the 1800s or early 1900s. For example, the piano with musi-
cal scores in both Blade Runner and its sequel, Blade Runner 2049. It is apparently not possible to imagine a future made up of free people and which manages to shake off the past. We will now analyse the chosen films in detail.

The Fifth Element by Luc Besson from 1997

12. Tracta, the city reali sono sog-
genitori fondamentali della cinematografia che non sempre riesce a trascinare un confine: la città reale si carica di forti connotazioni imma-
ginarie e, a sua volta, la città immaginaria si costruisce basandosi su elementi presenti nella realtà urbana sensibile. In alcuni film, come ad esempio in Ed Wood (1994) e Big Fish (2003) – entrambi di Tim Bur-
ton – il modello urbano proposto dal cine-
ma assomiglia molto a quello immaginato da Frank Lloyd Wright già negli anni ’30. Wright per il suo progetto urbanistico di Broadacre City aveva ipotizzato un acro di terra (corrispon-
dente allo iuogno romano cioè 406,72 mq) per ogni insediamento abitativo unifamiliare contribuendo alla formazione dell’immaginare americana. Mentre Le Corbusier, con la Ville Contemporaine del 1922, supponeva una città di torri disposte in un parco razionalizzando i trasporti privati, la città di Wright presentava un’espansione prevalentemente orizzontale, decentrata e vicina alla natura, con una mo-
bilità individuale pressoché illimitata. Così ha scritto lo stesso Wright “let the auto take the city to the country”. Nel 1934 Frank Lloyd Wright espresse la sua sfiducia nei confronti della città tradizionale nel libro The Disappa-
earing City. Da allora è stato progettato e costruito centinaia di insediamenti ad alti standard, con milioni di abitanti, che dominano l’immaginario urbanino nel cinema. Da allora sono stati progettati e costruiti centi-
naia e centinaia di villaggi, quartieri e distretti, e recuperati o riurbanizzati tracciati ove l’urbanismo non era mai stato. L’invenzione urbana al cinema in questi ultimi anni ha avuto un’accelerazione grazie alle nuove risorse tecnologiche e allo sviluppo della sciencia. Tutto questo pone il cinema come un regal
mume di un mondo in cui tutto era visibile, tangibile e misurabile, a un mondo in cui è l’immaterialità a dominare, come nelle case di Steel-front-ologram-
mi di Blade Runner 2049. L’apparato scenografi-
ciel cinema fantastico è atteso al presente per creare mondi immaginari o futuri possibili.

In questo genere cinematografico il più delle volte è la città a essere elemento fondamentalmente della storia. La città della fantasticienza possono mostrare piccoli villaggi contaminati da virus, o periferie di una città postindustriale, o basi spa-
ziali, oppure città reale proiettate in un futuro di tipo tribale. In ogni caso, non sempre riesce a trascinare un confine: la città reale si carica di forti connotazioni immaginarie e, a sua volta, la città immaginaria si costruisce basandosi su elementi presenti nella realtà urbana sensibile. In alcuni film, come ad esempio in Ed Wood (1994) e Big Fish (2003) – entrambi di Tim Burton – il modello urbano proposto dal cinema assomiglia molto a quello immaginato da Frank Lloyd Wright già negli anni ’30. Wright per il suo progetto urbanistico di Broadacre City aveva ipotizzato un acro di terra (corrispondente allo iuogno romano cioè 406,72 mq) per ogni insediamento abitativo unifamiliare contribuendo alla formazione dell’immaginare americana. Mentre Le Corbusier, con la Ville Contemporaine del 1922, supponeva una città di torri disposte in un parco razionalizzando i trasporti privati, la città di Wright presentava un’espansione prevalentemente orizzontale, decentrata e vicina alla natura, con una mobilità individuale pressoché illimitata. Così ha scritto lo stesso Wright “let the auto take the city to the country”. Nel 1934 Frank Lloyd Wright espresse la sua sfiducia nei confronti della città tradizionale nel libro The Disappea-
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is a French science fiction film, at the time the most costly ever produced in Europe. The screenplay is by Dan Weil based on drawings by illustrator Jean-Claude Mézières, creator of the Valerian and Laureline comic and the talented Jean Giraud under the name Möbius. The city is a New York projected into the near future where little recognisable has survived. In The Fifth Element the skyscrapers are all towered and connected by pedestrian bridges and roads on a number of levels. The end of the skyscrapers is never seen, with the exception of one building only, that of Zorg, the industrialist who owns the majority of the city and its companies. The film was shot in England in the Pinewood Studios (famous as the shooting location for the James Bond series) in style expressionist on the television series UFO and Space 1999).

From an interview with Jean-Claude Mézières: «Question: While making the film, did you also take into account the fact that there are other people who actually build real cities? Answer: Absolutely not. My initial drawings were mostly based on interpretation of Benson's screenplay, so on my ideas, my sentiment, the way in which I imagined the scene taking place. Question: How do you imagine the city of the future? Answer: At least as far as I'm concerned, a science fiction illustrator has fun dreaming of a future, a possible world, without worrying about whether that reality will ever come about or not. The fact that an illustrator draws a bicycle with wings does not mean that he thinks such objects will actually exist in the future. Making the ordinary extraordinary».

The 1985 film Brazil by Terry Gilliam, one of the founders of the theatrical group Monty Python, is much loved among architects and can be considered a metaphor against dictatorship in the name of freedom. The protagonist of the film is Sam Lowry, a simple clerk, who only accepts promotion at the Information Department in order to trace a woman he has fallen in love with and which had appeared to him in a dream. He identifies her in a lorry driver with whom he has a series of misadventures. The director's aim is to invent a place which evokes a past and at the same time identifies a future, creating a disturbing effect–city in expressionist style. This dystopic urban environment contains artefacts from the past, from the Art Nouveau façades to the verticality of the countless skyscrapers, alienating enormity of the interiors of certain buildings, and cavi aggrovigliati sembrerebbe che il regista si sia ispirato anche con architetti oppure ha lavorato da solo! 

La sua immagine fantastica di città è nata nel confronto con altre persone che, nella realtà, costruiscono davvero le città? Risposta: Assolutamente no. Per chiudere il mio sentimento iniziali si basavano sulla lettura della sceneggiatura di Besson, quindi sulle mie idee, sulle mie storie, su un mondo di cui non si è mai uscito. Il quinto elemento è un film molto amato dagli architetti che possono considerarlo una metafora contro le ditte. Credenza: un disegnatore di fantascienza, almeno per quanto mi riguarda, si diventa un'immagine della realtà un mondo possibile e non si curo di sapere se la realtà verrà così o no. Il fatto che un illustratore disegni una bicicletta con le ali non significa che creda che in un futuro esisteranno degli oggetti simili. 


found their inspiration, perhaps they drew on Hugh Ferriss’ early drawings of New York in the 1920s/1930s in which he indeed imagined the Metropolis of Tomorrow. Gilliam himself states that for this film, he was inspired not only by Fritz Lang's Metropolis (1927) and Michael Radford’s Orwell 1984 (1984), but also by the oeuvre of Federico Fellini. In conclusion, if we consider contemporary architecture and design, it is clear that the city as a system, as a system of spaces to accommodate a new unplanned multi-centre reality, as it is expected a mysterious telephone call which will explain the meaning of life. He therefore convinces the Management to let him work on solving a mysterious mathematical formula, the “Zero Theorem”, equating himself with a super-computer so he never has to leave home. But he is monitored by various micro-bugs placed on him. He works on the task for a number of months without ever finding a solution, but while he does not want to go out into the world, represented as colourful, fun and dynamic, the world wants to enter his home in the person of a delightful girl (replicante?) who wants to help him and with whom he is expected to coincide with the animated two-dimensional city above the old three-dimensional structures in liberty, deco or ecclectic style. The dominant themes are the nonsense of existence, faith or its absence, in other words, the “black box”, but the desired solution is nevertheless flight as in the case of Rachel and Rick in Blade Runner. In other words, the historic city has become one element amongst many in a set or system (metropolitan area). Rupturing of the relationship between centre and suburbs has generated new unplanned multi-centre realties. In addition, there is no pure contraposition between “finding yourself in the city” and “losing yourself in the metropolis”. There is an intermediate stage, consisting of a space defined in numerous “centres and suburbs” which cannot be fully grasped and which is a form of constant disorientation. Numerous academics insist on the concept of “derealisation” and “mediatisation” of the metropolitan experience, comparing for example the view through a car windshield with the goggle-eyed gaze turned to the television monitor or video terminal. Some years ago, interviewed during the 17th Milan Triennial, Gianni Vattimo affirmed that the metropolis experience is lived largely as a loss of the centre and it is here that we must look for the death of the metaphysical thought of the representation as fundamental reality. A little paradoxically, the crisis of the representation can correspond to a lightening of the notion of real and the consequent, almost complete, identification between metropolis and mass media. In other words, the hermeneutic totality in which we always move, and the metropolitan totality in which we live, have always been given to us, yet we do not “totally” possess them. They are therefore provided to us as an immersion in a universe of “communication”. In the contemporary age, everything tends to become simultaneous and this changes a great number of things. For example, in the metropolis you are always everywhere, where and at the same time you are nowhere, as there are no movements towards the centre and new analogies may therefore develop between the experience of time and space.

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