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What is This?
Urban Phantasmagorias: Cinema and the Immanent Future of Cities

Fábio Duarte¹, Rodrigo Firmino¹, and Andrei Crestani²

Abstract
Cities experienced profound changes in the early 20th century, mainly as a result of industrialization. Along with architects and urban planners, fiction writers played a part in shedding light on some perverse or still unknown consequences of technology on society. Cinema is probably the first industrial art form and was from its beginning deeply involved in the creative portrayal of these changes. This ever-present urban imagery, rooted in concrete aspects of a changing reality and supported by existing and fictional technological systems, forms what we call urban phantasmagorias. This article develops this theoretical approach through a brief analytical review of some of the emblematic films that have anticipated shifts in our cities and lifestyle, influenced by the emerging technologies of their time, focusing on *Metropolis*(1927), *Blade Runner* (1982), *Alphaville* (1965), and *The Matrix* (1999).

Keywords
urban phantasmagoria, cinema, technologies, 20th century, *Metropolis, Blade Runner, Alphaville, The Matrix*

Introduction
Technological innovations have always had a close relationship with the practical aspects of our mundane daily routines, and also with how we envisage life in the future—both through prospective plans and the imagination. During the 20th century, this sociotechnical relationship has gained unprecedented pace and intensity. From electricity to information and communications technologies, our cities are molded as technological environments. Technological changes have influenced urban theories and form the foundations of modern urbanism.

Cities experienced profound changes in the early 20th century, mainly as a result of industrialization. On one hand, urban planners, architects, geographers, and sociologists, among others, have played a key role in analyzing the relations between technology and society, and also designing the interfaces of a technological urban environment, while on the other hand, fiction writers have also played a part in shedding light on some still unknown (and sometimes perverse) consequences of technology on society. Cinema is probably the first industrial art form (a collective process involving different and interwoven types of knowledge, arts, and artifacts), and was from its beginning deeply involved in the creative portrayal of these changes.

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The 20th century was also a period of fascination with the city, when artists, scientists, intellectuals, and professional practitioners were constantly reimagining the possible cities of the future; it was a time when cinema fell in love with the city. As Barbara Mennel (2008, p. 2) argues, the strength of the seminal short film, *The arrival of the train at La Ciotat station* (by the Lumière brothers, 1895), lay in the conjunction of “urbanity, speed, cinema, and the city”—in a Paris mesmerized by a myriad technological innovations.

This ever-present collective urban imagery, intrinsically rooted in concrete aspects of a changing reality, and supported by existent and fictional technological systems, forms what we call urban phantasmagorias. Neither a fantastic, impossible world nor a completely materialized reality, a phantasmagoria lies somewhere in between, a potential existence, a virtual realization—in the sense that the virtual is not the opposite of the real but, on the contrary, the expression of a reality to come, as a potential and plausible existence (Lévy, 1995), a reality constantly in the making, but never completely satisfied as imagined, permanently haunting the present. An urban phantasmagoria is therefore essentially a virtual representation of a possible urban reality that is still uncertain, and not desired with any certainty: something that is imagined in a sociotechnological framework in the imminence of existing.

The most important statement about the concept of phantasmagoria is that, unlike fantasy and pure fantastic representation, it is strongly linked to concrete possibilities. According to Marc Berdet (2010), a phantasmagoria may be defined as “a representation of the imaginary relationship of the society to its real condition of existence” (p. 1). Kevin Hetherington (2005, p. 191), following Benjamin, traces the term’s etymological root to Φάντασος, the name of one of the sons of Hypnos, who “was responsible for sending dreams to people of inanimate objects, or things,” suggesting that “his is the figural message concealed within material culture.” And yet, for Hetherington (2005, p. 194) a more suitable etymological definition of phantasmagoria is “phantasma agoreuein: to speak in public (from the agora—a place of public discourse that was also a market place) under the influence of allegory,” that is, “a voice expressed through the materiality of unfinished disposal.”

There is a strong connection between urban phantasmagorias and the real and contemporary city. Fantastic cinema productions are usually too detached from our actual world to be true, but in contrast the realities depicted by phantasmagorias contain a significant level of truth which is absent from urban fantasies. Phantasmagorias are intentionally embedded in indexes of the world the audience lives in. Beyond “indexiality,” Francesco Casetti (2011, p. 97) suggests that the existence of realistic cues “must act as links in the discursive chain, providing an illusory mastery over the discourse while at the same time offering an illusory restitution of reality in its texture and in its density.” That is why we usually feel so frightened, but also fascinated and challenged, by phantasmagorias. Neither utopias nor dystopias, they are critical imaginary depictions of the world we live in, of things that could actually be happening, or have the potential to happen. Phantasmagorias intentionally present a metalinguistic approach to technologies infiltrating daily life and cinema as a technological art form, knitting together life, tools, and drama.

In order to use the concept of urban phantasmagorias as a paradigm for understanding aspects of the relationship between cities and technologies, and mainly the constitution of urban imagery, this article briefly analyzes some of the emblematic films that have anticipated shifts in our cities and lifestyle, influenced by the emerging technologies of their time.

Most of the literature on the relationship between cities and cinema deals with specific features of the interplay between an imagined city and an actual constructed materialization of urban spaces. This literature generally draws a comparison between fiction and realization (not reality!). James Donald (1999) discusses the city as an imagined environment, for instance, analyzing fiction writers (such as Dickens, Joyce, Woolf, and Baudelaire) who describe or imagine actual cities. On one hand, the fictional cities discussed in his book are based mainly on real cities, which the authors were experiencing, while on the other hand imaged real and futuristic
cities rely on real architects (such as Tschumi and Koolhaas), therefore with the concreteness of cities embedded in their imagery. In an earlier study, Donald (1995) argued that in films like King Kong (Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1933), Metropolis (Fritz Lang, 1927), and Blade Runner (Ridley Scott, 1982), “there is a psychic space that can only be given physical substance through the architecture of the film studio and the ingenious artifice of its special effects” (p. 90).

This article attempts to approach this comparison between imagined urban realities by revealing features that connect very specific imagined scenarios from fiction and a present which is permanently in the making, not necessarily realized nor materialized in our cities. We argue that this is something different from fantasy, for by phantasmagorias we are talking about possible futures that constantly “haunt” our present, always with real (sociotechnical) possibilities of being materialized in our cities: They are phantasmagorias.

Metropolis, Blade Runner, Alphaville (Jean-Luc Godard, 1965), and The Matrix (Andy & Larry Wachowski, 1999) are the main films analyzed in this article. Each already has a place in the urban theory literature (Barber, 2002; Clarke, 1997; Mennel, 2008; Shiel & Fitzmaurice, 2001). We have deliberately chosen films for this analysis that were blockbusters in their own time, to emphasize the idea that urban phantasmagorias are neither niche cinema nor a restricted issue of urban studies, but rather that urban imagery overlaps the very idea of what a city may be in a near and uncertain future.

In the final part of the article, we relate these films to the idea of phantasmagorias presented here in an attempt to think through the questions that motivated this discussion, that is, how we can create an understanding of the relationships between cities, technologies, and our perceptions of urban spaces by looking at a specific type of artistic representation.

City, Cinema, and Industry

It goes without saying that 20th century cities are an intrinsic part of a “particular form and type of urbanization” (Lury & Massey, 1999, p. 230), which is at the same time reason for and a consequence of the industrial world, featuring serial production and the massive reproduction of industrial models. According to Jean Baudrillard (1981), the industrial urban form increases the possibility of echoing reality in many different forms, through coexistent and overlapping artificial representations supported by new and sophisticated technologies. This scenario of massive reproduction models compromises our ability to distinguish between the original and its copy, between reality and fiction.

Cinema is an industrial art form. Dietrich Neumann (1999) states the strong link between cinema and reality:

( . . . ) the new art of film could depict the intensely exciting experience of life in the modern city, and it could represent the world of dreams, fantasies, and thoughts more efficiently and provocatively than other media. (p. 37)

The concept of urban phantasmagorias is based on the idea that they both precede and influence the transformation of our actual “concrete” urban world. Urban phantasmagorias share features of both utopian and dystopian films, but are always plausible representations of a city to come. In this article, we shall therefore try to find answers to the following questions: How have cinematic representations anticipated and shaped our perceptions (and projections) of the urban world? What is the importance of such manifestations for our understanding of the sociotechnical construction of contemporary cities?

The reason for discussing urban phantasmagorias through movies echoes Marc Ferro’s intention of analyzing film not as art, but as a sign of its times. In his words, “film is valuable not only
because of what it reveals but also because of the socio-historical approach that it justifies” (Ferro, 1970, p. 27).

**The Immanent Future of Cities**

Urban phantasmagorias are an intrinsic part of the construction of modern urban imagery. The world itself and its representations could be said to coexist and influence each other, becoming reality in our imagination and in the concreteness of the built environment.

Juhani Pallasmaa (2001, p. 18) argues that “both architecture and cinema imply a kinaesthetic way of experiencing space, and images stored in our memory are embodied and haptic images as much as retinal images.” Cinema may strengthen the links between the virtual and the material aspects of the city that emerged with industrialization and are becoming stronger as information and communication technologies infiltrate daily life. The strengthening of the links between the virtual and material aspects of the city takes place through the use of images stored in the memory connected dramatically with prospective images, supported by a technological language that allows a reordering of time sequences and spatial (dis)continuities.

The process of editing film embodies its phantasmagorical potential of creating imagined realities: Realistic images can be disrupted by editing, not necessarily following linear time sequences, and placing contrasting images one after the other to recreate a narrative and therefore a nonlinear sense of time and noncontinual sense of space. As Hans Schaal (1996) says,

> Filming cities and life in real time proved uninteresting from the beginning. It was more exciting to select details of this reality and stick them together in fragments and changing viewpoints. The resulting compression of time and space turned out to be the actual revolutionary feature of this completely new medium. (p. 14)

The films analyzed here offer examples of how the shaping of urban imagery anticipates the way cities and urban life may be transformed under the influence of pervasive innovative technologies and vice-versa, that is to say, how technological society might be inspired by represented realities. As Constable (2006) argues, it “is no longer possible for current science fiction to explore a range of parallel, double or possible universes because such distinctions are eliminated within the single, all-encompassing universe of simulation that constitutes the hyperreal” (p. 238).

It is precisely this confluence between a full range of images and fiction intermingled with our commonplace cities which gives phantasmagorias a mixture of fascination and fear in the face of the possible (actual or virtual?) urban world we are part of.

**The Modern Times of Metropolis**

*Metropolis* could be considered the first urban phantasmagorical film. The leading character in the film is the city, a mixture of expressionist references and an emerging society controlled by oppressive technologies, as if “Piranesi’s nightmares have become film reality” (Schaal, 1996, p. 20).

Dietrich Neumann (1999, p. 35) states that Lang did not attempt to predict the future, but instead illustrated “contemporary fears and ambitions about cities.” Neumann adds that the film’s success is due to the fact that it broadly represents contemporary issues like the “urban poor and social unrest, generational conflicts, vices and virtues of technology” (1999, p. 33). Barbara Mennel (2008, p. 132) goes even further in her view that *Metropolis* turns the utopian society envisaged by the modernist German school of architecture, the Bauhaus, into a dystopian future.

Fritz Lang was the son of a Viennese urban planner, and a former architecture student in Munich and Vienna (Schneider, 1995, p. 28). He visited New York in 1924, and his impressions...
of its skyscrapers became the setting for *Metropolis* on a “monumental and gigantic scale that took them to the frightening plane of science fiction” (Schaal, 1996, p. 102).

*Metropolis* was released in 1927, considered an “annus mirabilis” for cinema, as the year in which many technological and aesthetic innovations were also introduced (Brownlow, 2005). Lang’s references to the archetypical American metropolis are especially interesting when comparing *Metropolis* with other films produced in the United States only a few years later, such as *Just Imagine* (David Butler, 1930) and *Things to Come* (William Cameron Menzies, 1936), which present positive versions of an urban future influenced by technology.

Lang’s approach could instead be argued to represent European disillusion toward technology, still shocked by a recent war which had led Germany into great economic depression and political turmoil. But Americans also took a critical approach to the emerging technological world, as can be seen in Charles Chaplin’s *Modern Times* (1936), with its ironic but caustic view of a mechanical society. Chaplin still keeps men and machines on different sides, however, touching but not transforming each other. For Lang, on the other hand, the interrelationship of men and machines is evident and reciprocal.

In the underground world where the workers live they behave like machines, hardly recognizable as men and women, purposeless, without affection, dull-eyed, and making repetitive movements. They are directly controlled by a human-looking machine. This is a deliberately disturbing feature since it contains a mirror effect: rather than an abstract machine controlling the underworld, it is a humanized machine (actually, a mechanized human being), in which each worker sees himself/herself: a me-machine: what the self would turn into in this mechanized world. Even the upheaval depicted in the film carries the conflicts of the emerging amalgamation of human being and machines. This interweaving of human beings and technological artifacts is the first characteristic we notice in all urban phantasmagorias. The second is the contrast between an upper-city and an under-city, or more precisely, the former controlling technology and the latter controlled by it.

In *Metropolis*, the street level seems to be the ultimate frontier between the upper-city and the under-city. As with all boundaries, there is a blurred zone where the two opposing worlds meet. The limit between these two worlds is only at times clearly defined. In *Metropolis*, the under-city is dark, gray, and shadowy, with little visual information singling out different spaces and mainly on one level. In one of the first scenes of the film, the accelerated speed of the industrial production system is contrasted with the slow pace of the Metropolis workers returning to their “city,” in a reproduction of the conditions being experienced at the time of the film’s release and at the same time exaggerating the potential influences of technology on the city, depicting an over-mechanized way of life.

Machines transform the city in a frightening and oppressive environment. In one scene, Freder—the only heir to the manager of Metropolis—goes down to the under-city and contemplates with amazement the enormous machine operated by men. Almost as hallucination, he sees this technological device as a gateway into a hell to which all workers are led. The upper-city is brighter in comparison, with more visual contrasts, and a range of spaces organized on different levels linked by bridges and flying vehicles. This is the city of those who own and control the means of production. But these upper-city inhabitants are symptomatically not seen. Their presence is only suggested by the sophisticated high-tech world they live in.

The third characteristic of phantasmagorias is based on references to the audience’s experience of daily life. Part of what is being shown on the screen is happening right there in the streets. The buildings of the upper-city in *Metropolis* already existed in the modern cities of the early 20th century, such as New York. The oppression felt by the workers of the under-city reflected the social and spatial conditions of workers living in the emerging industrial world. Film production is seen by its contemporary audience as a sign of its times, reinforcing the fact that urban phantasmagorias emerge from swiftly changing reality.
Does My Uncle Live in Alphaville?

After *Metropolis*, world history was reshaped by major events. Global financial crisis (1929) was followed by the Second World War (1941-1945), the economic renaissance of Europe backed by the United States of America as the indisputable new world leader, and the ideological conflict between capitalism and communism—both based on strong levels of industrialization and contesting global influence. Society became irremediably accustomed to a lifestyle based on industrial technology and its artifacts.

Despite the presence of strong social criticism in fiction, such as Italian neorealist films like *Bicycle Thieves* (Vittorio de Sica, 1948), commercial films did not usually depict the radical technological transformations of cities. Jean-Luc Godard’s *Alphaville* (1965) is an exception. This film portrays an oppressive urban society in which human behavior is controlled by a hidden and omnipresent surveillance system—in something of an echo of George Orwell’s *1984*, first published in 1949. Instead of the monstrous mechanized world of *Metropolis*, the emerging information and communication technologies in *Alphaville* would reshape (or were already reshaping, as the communication theorist Marshall McLuhan insists) social relations and transform the city.

Dwayne Avery (2007) has observed that, “as an emblem of the omnipresent modern office building, Godard’s use of stark, fluorescent lights clearly evokes this myth of total light” (p. 6). This blinding total light is everywhere in the “ghostly, monochrome future-world” (Darke, 2005, p. 86), where a contemporary Paris is represented mainly by infinite sequences of anonymous office buildings and streets.

Just like *Metropolis*, *Alphaville* depicts an urban dystopia, exploring catastrophic scenarios or an exaggerated possible future of class conflict in which the city is used as a coercive mechanism of division and control, strongly supported by technologies. Alpha60, a supercomputer (represented as a flickering light bulb), is housed in a modernist glass and concrete building in the city center. Alpha60 controls all social relations; and for those who try to escape its influence, the alternatives are suicide or “recovery.” Words like love and freedom are unknown, absent from the “bible,” the book containing all permitted expressions and feelings. With no semantic flexibility or freedom, people talk and behave as automatons. Expressions like “thank you, welcome” have lost their meaning and are tossed into any situation. Dialogues based only on phatic expressions are strictly coded, as semantics.

Lemmy Caution, a foreign secret agent from the Outlanders, has the mission of destroying Alpha60. The supercomputer, conceived by Von Braun, is gradually controlling social behavior. But Caution, disguised as a journalist, falls in love with Natasha Von Braun, the scientist’s daughter, who is unable to express her own feelings, since she does not know which words to use. Caution introduces a degree of disruption that eventually has an effect on Alpha60. But the doubting computer in *Alphaville* is somewhat disturbing and phantasmagorical, revealing that the boundaries between human and machine become blurred.

René Prédal argues that Godard’s films insist that we “are trapped by the real, not of the real,” to “denounce the traps of representation. What he questions is the perception, the acceptance of programmed behaviour in daily life” (Prédal, 1989, p. 17). In *Alphaville*, the shape of the city is ordinary; the disturbing urban future is represented by the infiltration of technologies that invade human thoughts to a point where the characteristics of the human and the technological become unclear.

Julie Anne Monty (2006) notes that “Godard’s representation of people of contemporary Western society as slaves on a distant planet, controlled by a giant computer is an effective way to show audiences to themselves without making them defensive” (p. 37). And David Sterritt (1999) states,
Film technology permits true artists to create aesthetically profound works that can stir us to the depths of our souls; yet the same technology has an uncanny knack for seducing us with shallow imitations of genuine thoughts and feeling, all in the service of society’s most acquisitive and materialistic instincts. (p. 14)

In this sense, Godard’s phantasmagoria contrasts with a society increasingly absorbed by the daily wonders of technology, as depicted by another French filmmaker, Jacques Tati. Only the main character in My Uncle (1958), Monsieur Hulot, played by Tati himself, unintentionally reveals the dependency and automation of human behavior in relation to the new technological domestic artifacts, which stand more for social status than efficiency, representative of the modern movement itself, contemporaneous with the film. Jacques Kermabon (1995, p. 134) states that the essential aspects of Tati’s depiction of architecture are the marks with which those spaces impregnate our soul. If Tati’s vision contains any explicit critique, therefore, it is not toward architecture in itself, but toward how people use—and we might add are fascinated by—this undifferentiated modern industrial space anywhere in the world (Kermabon, 1995).

Two points of view come up against each other in Tati’s films: positivist and functionalist modern thinking and vitalist criticism (Alejández, Magallón, Grandal, & Pereña, 2005). In Playtime (1967) Tati expands his criticism of this brand new functional and technological world to the city, replacing the allure of an historic Paris with a modernistic setting in which every movement must follow strict unspoken rules. Once again, “ordered disorder” is demystified when the city is seen through the eyes of Tati’s character.

**Blade Runner in Matrix**

*Blade Runner*, like *Alphaville*, portrays the technological world as enclosed, “a flagrant opposite of utopia” (André, 2005, p. 171). These “technoworlds” are not utopias where entry is not permitted, but rather a place that is almost impossible to escape from. For Danièle André, utopia in *Blade Runner* is reduced to colonies in outer space advertised on avant-garde zeppelins. In contrast, the 2019 Los Angeles depicted in the film is “a tangible future . . . like today, only more so” (Webb, 1999, p. 44). *Blade Runner* has become an icon of postmodernity, and many authors have identified its characteristics as “its fractal geography; the interruption of temporality; . . . the adsorption of referentiality and representation through a proliferation of simulacra and simulations; the lack of authenticity and the indeterminacy of identity” (Doel & Clarke, 1997, p. 142).

Despite these postmodern references, several scenes in *Blade Runner* resemble those of *Metropolis*, such as the polarization between an upper-city characterized by giant skyscrapers, huge multimedia displays, and flying vehicles, and a subterranean city, shady, rainy, dirty, crowded and also invaded by technological gadgets. Those resemblances between 1929 Germany and 2019 Los Angeles reassert the lineage of urban phantasmagorias.

The symbiotic relationship between humans and technology in *Blade Runner* is represented by the replicants, human-like androids created as workers, almost slaves, to live among humans, but who have adapted themselves to the social context they live in and begin to have emotions, feelings, and memory. While *Metropolis* and *Alphaville* depicted a disdained category of human beings unaware of the fact that they are subordinate to technology, the machines in *Blade Runner* intermingle with humans. As replicants acquire the ability to feel and remember, and have their own individual life histories, it becomes difficult to distinguish a replicant from a human being. We wonder whether some of them might not actually be modified human beings. Forest Pyle (2000, p. 130) even suggests that the process of detecting a replicant may also be seen as “a self-detection of a different and disturbing sort: namely, the recognition of the undecidable nature of the opposition between human and its technological double.”
Metropolis, Alphaville, and Blade Runner depict a space with no sense of place. In Metropolis and Alphaville a homogeneous architecture erases any sign of the past, forcing their inhabitants to live in an eternal present. In Blade Runner the sense of place is erased by a multitude of mutually influential physical and multimedia signs. While similarity in Metropolis and Alphaville is intentionally reflected in the homogeneity of human beings, making any one of them equivalent and interchangeable as workers, in Blade Runner the apparent ethnic uniformity extends to making their potential differences insignificant: No trace of history remains. And the replicants became just another piece in this uniformity built upon an apparent diversity.

In The Matrix trilogy (by the Wachowski Brothers), and especially the first film (1999), material and digitally designed spaces merge together as never before. While technological artifacts in most of the previous phantasmagorical films were omnipresent in daily activities (Blade Runner), and often oppressive—either overtly (Metropolis) or by implication (Alphaville)—the rift between a “real” and a “technological” world was clear. Indeed, the narrative of each of these films, and also the ironic Modern Times and My Uncle, was based on this distinction. The essence of The Matrix is confusion between the real and the nonreal, the actual world and the virtual world. So although the narrative clearly sets humans against machines, and also portrays a clear distinction between the technological and real worlds, its main argument is the creation of an illusory world where everything works “normally” (in today’s patterns). So, while humans in a mechanized world are no more than batteries for maintaining autonomous technologies, their brains are connected to a virtual reality program created by the ruling machines that simulates a perfectly imperfect world. This is the ultimate oppressive technological scenario, where we are so seamlessly linked to machines as to form a hybrid technological being and it is almost impossible to separate illusion from reality, which is nicely portrayed in the scene in which Neo has to chose between the red and the blue pill—the former allowing him to make such a distinction and wake up to the real world (by having his real body physically disconnected from the machines), and the latter meaning his return to the matrix and the illusion of a perfect life. He ends up choosing the red one. Therefore, what other way of translating the idea of an urban phantasmagoria is there? We could position these films chronologically to indicate cinematic evolution in the art of illustrating the imminent and possible futures of our cities.

For André Lemos (2011), the territory is “a place of social control of borders, of informational exercise of surveillance and violence.” Even if control systems are present and visible in all previous films, in The Matrix they are pervasive and mainly invisible. Indeed, the very existence of anything depicted in the film is questioned, for it is potentially a creation (or illusion) in a digital matrix. And instead of an artificial scenario reinforcing the presence of technological artifacts, the most frightening thing about this film is the doubt about the limits of reality when everything is embedded in a technological world.

Reality seems to be real in this world programmed by interconnected computers (the matrix), but it might be just an intentional semblance of reality in a completely artificial world. Perhaps this is why The Matrix can be so frightening. While Metropolis clearly distinguished between what was “real” and what was artificial (technological), daily life in Blade Runner was already built upon a mixture of concrete and artificial signs and artifacts, to a point where artificial beings (replicants) could only be recognized by blade runners. In The Matrix the delusion is permanent, and characters and audience can hardly distinguish between what is supposed to be physically real and what is just a computer simulation. Nonetheless, in each of these films the urban scenarios of the future are portrayed as if humanity were on a one-way street to ruin, or as Johannes Von Molike (2001, p. 409) puts it, “science fiction sketches out a future in which the present will have been abandoned as so much historical debris.” Where Von Molike (2001) argues that there is a contrast in The Matrix between “the rubble of urban existence with the illusory reality of matrix itself” (p. 409), we believe that there is also a growing confusion between both worlds that leads the audience into a phantasmagorical feeling of not knowing the limits of reality.
From the beginning of the film, the Wachowski Brothers advance the metaphor of a dream world, since all the signs for convincing Neo that he is probably the chosen one to redeem society from the Matrix are taken from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*. These references begin when Neo is awaked by a message on his computer saying “follow the white rabbit,” immediately followed by a group of people knocking on his door—among them, Dujour, with a rabbit tattooed on her shoulder—and continue with the cat walking on the chessboard pattern of the floor at the Lafayette Hotel, the decision Neo must take between the blue and the red pills, or finally, with the unceasing references to the looking glass, a vague boundary between two interconnected worlds.

For Kevin Warwick (2005, p. 201), there seems to be no doubt that Neo and all the characters are ordinary human beings while not connected to the Matrix, but that they become cyborgs (or in this case, computer programs) when they are connected, having to fight against other cyborgs within the system. In this sense the two worlds seem to be completely separated. But as David J. Chalmers (2005, p. 132) argues, even Neo, the main character—and the whole plot of his existence—is artificiality constructed: Neo “thinks that he lives in a city; he thinks that he has hair; he thinks it is 1999; and he thinks that it is sunny outside.” Neo’s brain is deluded by a computer program, called The Matrix, which is not external to the scene (as in the previous films), but instead part of reality. Indeed, as Chalmers notes (2005, p. 133), “the Matrix in the movie is one example of a matrix,” or a computer and cognitive simulation program that embodies everything in the film—scenes, characters, actions—as Morpheus, a leading character says in the film: “The Matrix is a computer-generated dreamworld built to keep us under control.”

In *The Matrix*, the opposition between an upper-city and an under-city, between a technological and a real world finally fades away completely. In *Metropolis*, this distinction lay at the core of the narrative, both for social criticism and the characterization of the setting and characters. In *Alphaville*, the presence of technology is more subtle but equally omnipresent and oppressive. In *Blade Runner*, artifacts can be distinguished but they are naturally part of daily life, in an infiltrated reality. In *The Matrix*, everything that seems to be high-tech artifact or ordinary object is potentially a digital construction, a false construction of reality. The virtual and the real are irrevocably amalgamated.

**Final Remarks on Urban Phantasmagorias**

Hans Schaal (1996, p. 14) argues that “long before surrealism . . . people and things floated over cities in Méliès films . . . people disappeared in seconds.” Hence, the illusion of external things influencing city life was not uncommon, and all the technological dazzle of cinema only inflates such disturbing fantasies. But these films were clearly fantasy.

In phantasmagorias, the real is questioned by an emerging technological world that infiltrates the known world in such a way as to blur the boundaries. Phantasmagorias are not about an alien world perceived as a distant impossible fantasy. Rather, they are about a reality to be, an imminent future of the cities of today.

One characteristic of phantasmagorias stands out in many of the films analyzed here: a fear of technology taking the place of human beings—not only, as Rose Marie San Juan and Geraldine Pratt (2002, p. 250) point out, with this “dehumanization [exposing] the heavy toll of technology and its demeaning labour practices”—as we really see in *Metropolis* but also questioning identity and self-reference as a human being, as shown in *Blade Runner* or *The Matrix*. This dehumanization may be seen from two perspectives: one is massification of society, controlled by superpowered machines; the other is transformation of human essence itself through the influence of technology.

This imbrication of a “real” world and a “virtual” and technological world is also present in an urban life under the influence of such technologies, and in cinema, with dramatically
constructed narratives, where cutting-edge image technologies and story-telling structures are merged together to bring this overlapping closer to our daily experience.

Two separate worlds, as depicted in *Metropolis*, where an upper-city and an under-city never touch each other, invade the street level in *Alphaville* and *Blade Runner*. Artifacts are everywhere, whether a supercomputer controlling social behavior in *Metropolis*, or gadgets or replicants in *Blade Runner*. But the impressive thing is that this limit between society and technology fades away throughout the history of film phantasmagorias, and in *The Matrix* technology encapsulates everything and infiltrates everywhere, as it becomes the ubiquitous computing of the world of today. No time or space exists outside a technological world; only imagined realities as the immanent and ever-present future of our urban lives.

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Note

1. Probably a reference to the famous German scientist who developed arms in Germany, where presumably Jews worked as slaves. Von Braun became NASA’s director in 1960. Other word-play helps in understanding Godard’s criticism of contemporary society, as the journal Caution works for, Figaro-Pravda.

References


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