

# Hobbes in the City: Urban Dystopias in American Movies

*Thomas Halper and Douglas Muzzio*

The year is 2032. The state is your nanny. Anything that is not good for you is illegal: beef, drugs, alcohol, sex, cigarettes, fattening foods. You get fined for cursing. Though there is an underground underclass, most people are so mellow that there is virtually no crime, and the few criminals are never violent.

This is the Southern California megalopolis of San Angeles in *Demolition Man* (1993). In 1996 renegade cop John Spartan captures psycho drug lord Simon Phoenix, but not before being held responsible for the deaths of twenty or so hostages. Both men are sentenced to cryonic imprisonment, where they are to be rehabilitated to mend their ways. During their frozen slumber, Los Angeles merges with San Diego and Santa Barbara after the “big one of 2010” to become San Angeles, a metropolis made blissful by the rule of a self-styled benevolent despot, one Dr. Cocteau. “The people,” he says, “just wanted the madness over,” and what he wants is “to create the perfect society—San Angeles will be a beacon of order.” The doctor’s only problem is an underground rebel, the libertarian leader of the Scraps, who from his lairs in fetid sewers and tunnels struggles to bring back the good old days of high fat, nicotine, and open pornography. When Phoenix escapes, kills seventeen San Angelenos, and allies himself with the Scrap leader,

Spartan is defrosted to eradicate the menace. Light-hearted mayhem and murder ensue.

Nearly everything about San Angeles is extreme. Its expanse is gigantic. Its rulers are oppressive. Its outlaws are evil. Its technology, above all, is stunning and omnipresent. It is what is extreme about San Angeles that draws us to it, much as we pay special attention to persons who are seven feet tall or have mauve hair. The city of extremes, the movie suggests, may be the city of the future . . . and the extremes are all negative.

In the movies, of course, the extreme is typical: actors are proverbially handsome and beautiful, explosions approximate the Big Bang, chases are heart pounding and ear splitting. In place of the ordinary, where we live our ordinary lives, movies present the extreme. It is no wonder, then, that cinematic cities of the future are extreme.

Why, however, are the extremes almost never positive—that is, utopias? Utopias represent ideals, that is, endpoints, where nearly everything that ought to be done has been done. The problem with all utopias is stasis; the problem with all utopia movies is boredom. Movies need movement, change, and conflict, whether emotional or physical. Hence, the appeal of the standard dystopian scenario of a brave band of brothers (and sometimes sisters) in combat with their hellish world.

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The reel city of the future is Hobbesian. Its dystopias generally are of two kinds: one portrays cities as places of chaos and disorder, whose inhabitants live in a state of nature where none is safe from the depredations of their fellows. The other depicts cities as Leviathans, imposing order and stability in response to the ineradicable human drive for security.

## Utopias and America

“In the beginning,” declared John Locke, “all the world was America” (319), and in America, the future has nearly always looked good. America, a new country in the New World, often biblically described as a new Eden or a new Jerusalem (Pike) promised a new beginning for what de Crèvecoeur famously called “this new man” (39). Hope, adventure, opportunity—everything pointed to the potential that lay somewhere over the rainbow.

In the years before the Civil War, a few idealists, drawing on Christian or European socialism, sought to establish small scale communities that they fancied could serve as models of justice and harmony for the larger society. These included the well-known religious communities of Hopedale, Brook Farm, and Oneida, as well as Robert Owen’s New Harmony and the Fourierist North American Phalanx. None of these utopian experiments was attempted in cities.

The optimism continued throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For apart from the massive exceptions of Africans earlier imported in chains and natives who were already here, the people who populated America came only after deciding that it offered a better life. By the end of the nineteenth century, when America was becoming transformed by immigration, industrialization, and urbanization, the “utopian novel was perhaps the most widely read type of literature in America” (Roemer 3). Such books as Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* (1888), Upton Sinclair’s *The Industrial Republic* (1907), and William Dean Howell’s *Through the Eye of the Needle* (1907) attracted the interest of both intel-

lectuals and the general public. These utopias were not mere literary versions of *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, with its lemonade springs where the bluebird sings at the soda water fountain. Which is to say that they were not elaborate and simple minded reveries on the theme of happiness generated by material abundance. They involve, as in Plato’s *Republic*, the greatest of all utopias, the realization of a premier moral ideal and its application to daily life.

Utopias have always focused on societies, not individuals, positing that through reason (perhaps augmented by faith or science) it is possible to conceive a community that affords us the best possible life. Not a perfect life, for most utopians accept that humanity is flawed: Thomas More, for example, spoke of pride as “a hellish serpent gliding through human hearts—or shall we say, like a sucking fish that clings to the ship of state—[that] is always dragging us back, and obstructing our progress toward a better life” (131), and Plato acknowledged the blemish of death on human existence. As to what constitutes the best possible path to the best possible life, utopias are as diverse as the rest of us, some stressing happiness, others peace, others freedom, others justice (on the elusive idea of utopia, see Levitas).

By the middle of the last century, sophisticated observers had come to regard utopias as hopelessly passé. Judith Shklar, for instance, announced that “the urge to construct grand designs for the political future of mankind is gone. The last vestiges of political faith required for such an enterprise have vanished” (29). Similarly, Dante Germino concluded that political thought had become “increasingly concerned with problems relating to organizational means, rather than questions of ends” (452). Plato, More, Bacon, Harrington—utopias had a long and illustrious history in Western thought, but it had all apparently dwindled to a stop, or at least, to a prolonged pause. The real life attempts to bring about utopias had culminated in unequalled catastrophe (Nazism) or corrupt totalitarianism (Communism). The horrors of two world wars and the Holocaust—plus the despair of the Depression—appeared to refute the assumption of inevitable progress, and make the

imagining of an ideal community appear childish and pointless. Even in the optimistic United States, the utopian spirit seemed played out. (For a Marxist view that utopianism was a casualty of the end of the Cold War, see Buck-Morss.)

Reports of utopia's death turned out to be exaggerated. B. F. Skinner's *Walden Two* (1948), which Shklar failed even to mention, generated considerable interest, with its effort to construct a utopia founded on behavioral engineering (a concept not exactly foreign to discredited Communism and fascism). A few years later, socialism, the dominant utopian idea in Europe for over a century, reasserted itself in *The Port Huron Statement* (Students for a Democratic Society), a declaration by the New Left's Students for a Democratic Society that presented a vision of justice and community that many college students found irresistibly compelling. Around the same time, Martin Luther King galvanized much of the nation with the ideal of a de-racialized society in a speech entitled, "I Have a Dream" (1963/1997). Meanwhile major academic thinkers confounded predictions by focusing on ends, and asking what a good society ought to look like (e.g., Rawls; Nozick). Others followed, praising utopianism's "ethos of hope" (Anderson) that aims "to estrange the taken-for-granted, to interrupt space and time, and to open up perspectives on what might be" (Pinder), for example, or exploring its relevance for consumer marketing research (Maclaran and Brown).

Yet it is obvious that if utopianism survived the past century of horrors, it was left wounded, ragged, and beset by foes. And so it is dystopia—an imaginary place of oppression or suffering—that has won the day. Dystopias had had a long history in America. Indeed, the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century flowering of utopias also saw the publication of Ignatius Donnelly's *Caesar's Column* (1890), Eugene Richter's *Pictures of a Socialist Future* (1893), and Jack London's *The Iron Heel* (1907)—all popular dystopias (and all set in cities). Decades later in the "classic era of the 'utopia of the negative'" (Kumar 224), *Animal Farm* (Orwell 1945), *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Orwell 1948), and *Brave New World* (Huxley 1932/1958) entered the American vocabulary, even of

those who knew only vaguely of their textual existence. Like utopias, dystopias critique contemporary society; but unlike utopias, dystopias offer not a hopeful vision of what ought to be but an angry or despairing picture of where we are said to be headed—or perhaps (though we may not know it) where we already are.

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## Dystopia in the Movies

Perhaps the most powerful current format for dystopian discourse is the movies, and nearly all dystopian movies have been set in cities. Partly, this is because conflict, technology, and sin are generally assumed to weigh heavier in cities than anywhere else. Partly, too, the city setting is a corollary of a longstanding bias against cities. Yes, cities may be fun, exciting, and liberating; as E. B. White observed of postwar Manhattan, "it is to the nation what the white church spire is to the village—the visible symbol of aspiration and faith, the white plume saying that the way is up" (23). Yes, as Simmel noted, the mental life of the city dweller features an "intensification of nervous stimulation" (410). But these obvious attractions may be no more than temptations, seducing the unsuspecting, the naive, the inexperienced to lives of greed, envy, frustration, lust, and failure.

Heartless, Godless, Hell's delight  
Rude by day and lewd by night.

And even if the innocent manage to resist these temptations, they may still fall victim to crime, poverty, or corruption—and live amidst congestion, squalor, and garishness, denied the beauty of nature or such minimal human consolations as simple politeness and neighborliness.

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## The Hobbesian Problem

By and large, urban dystopias fall into one of two opposing categories: the city as chaos or the city as under rigid, comprehensive control. Both

seem derived from the Hobbesian paradigm. Thomas Hobbes' political science posited that every person seeks power; that every person's power resists and burdens the effects of other persons' power; that this leads to an insistent struggle for dominance; and that "every man has a Right to every thing, even to one another's body." In the state of nature, Hobbes taught, we have perfect freedom ("absence of external Impediments") to do whatever we choose, but, selfish, we make this a place of pervasive insecurity, bereft of civilization, where life is "solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short." Life is a perpetual war of all against all, "where every man is Enemy to every man." Perfect freedom must lead to anarchy, and anarchy to terrible insecurity. To escape this intolerable circumstance, to which our natures have consigned us, we all agree to create a sovereign, who takes our liberty and exchanges it for security. Freedom must be sacrificed for the "safety of the people" (Hobbes ch. 13). Our nature requires it.

As perhaps the most powerful exponent of the "new science of politics," Hobbes helped to shape the very premises and direction of Western political thought. If his influence on America's founders remains in dispute,<sup>1</sup> no one doubts that his individualism, egalitarianism, and preoccupation with power resonated deeply. Though the anti-Federalists believed that classical republican character and virtue—one's willingness to sacrifice one's private interests for the public good—ought to form the basis for the new American regime, it was the Federalists who carried the day. Thus, Madison, the celebrated father of the Constitution, wrote of man as driven by "his reason and his self love," resulting in a "propensity . . . to fall into mutual animosities" (Hamilton et al. 55–56). Madison was Hobbesian in his belief that

[h]uman passions . . . have inflamed [mankind] with mutual animosity, and rendered them much more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to co-operate for their common good. So strong is this propensity of mankind to fall into mutual animosities that where no substantial occasion presents itself the most frivolous and fanciful distinc-

tions have been sufficient to kindle their unfriendly passions and excite their most violent conflicts. (Hamilton et al. 79)

Like Hobbes, Madison understood that individuals are propelled by self-interest in public life no less than in private life, that self-interests collide, that there is no overriding public interest that can generate a durable consensus on a multitude of public issues, and that the chief political problem thus becomes the life or death question of managing conflict.<sup>2</sup> And like Hobbes, Madison concluded that the answer to the problem posed by our selfish nature lay in a properly constituted state—and that it was dangerous nonsense to deny it. For both thinkers, too, politics is not a matter of divine logic, but a necessary means to sustaining human society and creating the conditions from which individuals can fashion the good life.

Madison, however, insisted that "there are other qualities in human nature, which justify a certain portion of esteem and confidence," rejecting the view

that there is not sufficient virtue among men for self government; and that nothing less than the chains of despotism can restrain them from destroying and denouncing one another. (Hamilton et al.)<sup>3</sup>

The Hobbesian way out, submission to an overriding authority, was not for Madison. Where Hobbes favored a Leviathan in theory and the Stuarts in practice, Madison and the other framers devised a limited government featuring checks and balances and the filtering and refining of public opinion by representative institutions tied to large and diverse constituencies. The promise of the Constitution was that we could have our cake and eat it, too: we could create a state to impose order on our competing egos, and we could still enjoy broad personal liberty. We could, in other words, enjoy a stable, peaceful, liberal democracy.

Notwithstanding the loudly applauded success of the Madisonian experiment, it is the Hobbesian solution of destroying liberty that has animated nearly all dystopians. Its unyielding logic drags us

to a destination that we would avoid—if only it were not the only way out.

## The City as Chaos

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Movies that posit a future city as a terrifying, chaotic state of nature became a staple in the 1980s, a time when cities, reeling from the 1970s, seemed to many to be in irreversible decline. *Escape from New York* (1981), for example, imagines Manhattan as America's maximum security prison, and in this conglomeration of bad guys and lunatics, there is no one to run things. Once great office buildings are gutted and lifeless. Cars are overturned and set ablaze. Garbage, graffiti, and the detritus of poverty are everywhere. Mimicking art known as the "industrial sublime," the film's scenes rearrange and vandalize familiar things with a powerfully disorienting effect (which repetition over the years has neutered to a cliché).

A sequel, *Escape from L.A.* (1996), echoing a long forgotten Huxley novel (Huxley 1949) and an even longer forgotten dystopia (Jefferies), finds Los Angeles—now an island, after a convenient earthquake—housing the degenerates. If the modern world is doomed, the movies proclaim, do not expect a refuge in its premodern replacement. Thus, what the despairing Henry Adams wrote of nineteenth-century New York applies with equal force to the futuristic visions conjured nearly a century later:

The city had the air and movement of hysteria, and the citizens were crying, in every accent of anger and alarm, that the new faces must at any cost be brought under control. (499)

Such visions also call to mind the "failed cities" or "feral cities" so characteristic of much of the developing world, where public authorities are incapable of imposing law and order; smuggling, black marketeering, extortion, and theft supersede the regulated marketplace; and the rich purchase such security as they can and the poor suffer as they must. Hobbes, these cities proclaim, is no

Englishman dead for over three centuries—he is a commentator on world events of today.

*Robocop* (1987) and *The Crow* (1994) depict a future city (Detroit) in decay and ruin. What government that exists is neither legitimate nor effective. Competing institutions, public and private, legal and illegal—corporations, television networks, paramilitary police, street warlords—struggle to take charge. Similar is *Predator 2* (1992), set in 1997 Los Angeles, where cops are overwhelmed by drug dealers (who themselves are later victimized by an alien). As with *Robocop* and *The Crow*, the Hobbesian sovereign is absent. The tone is set at the beginning, when drug dealers and police face off, and a loudmouthed news reporter fumes, "It's like Dante's hell down here. Smoke, fire, oppressive heat . . . Who the hell's in charge here?!"

"Hell," perhaps, is the operative term. In Gotham City, according to the opening line of the shooting script of *Batman*, "Hell has erupted through the pavement, and carried on growing." Surely, the future of the cinematic big city is hell. A vulnerable wreck, it is the plaything of selfish and manipulative interests. Strangers to guilt and shame, they care only for themselves, warring with their own citizens or cunningly distracting them with bread and circuses, as in *Rollerball* (1975), *Death Race 2000* (1975), and *Running Man* (1987).

## The City as Totalitarian Machine

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One of the first talkies to depict a future city under iron control was the odd *Just Imagine* (1930), a dystopian boy-gets-girl musical comedy set in far off 1980 (on the premier silent dystopian movie, *Metropolis*, see Halper and Muzzio). *Just Imagine* finds a contemporary man awakening in the New York of the future: a grid of boulevards punctuated by enormous towers linked by bridges set against a sky dotted with hovering planes—all clearly meant to be amazing and beautiful. The denizens devote their lives to having fun, ingesting psychoactive pills, and partying. At the same

time, life in *Just Imagine* is dehumanized: the protagonists' names (a jumble of letters and numbers, like those in *We* [Zamyatin]) are J21 and LN18, food has been replaced by pills, a government eugenics office arranges marriages, and there is no street life. In a crude way, *Just Imagine* echoes Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor, who taught that humanity wants not freedom but happiness—which can be purchased only at the cost of rejecting freedom.

We shall give them . . . the happiness of weak creatures . . . And they will be glad to believe in our decisions, because it will relieve them of their present terrible torments of coming to a free decision themselves. (258)

The Leviathan, in sum, rules with dazzling competence and a velvet glove.

Not until the 1960s did the urban dystopia of control resurface in a pair of influential French films, Jean-Luc Godard's *Alphaville* (1965) and François Truffaut's *Fahrenheit 451* (1966). *Alphaville* is set in a futuristic Paris run by a tyrannical computer, Alpha 60, that bans all concepts and emotions it considers illogical, even deleting words from the popular vocabulary that conflict with its goal. Characters speak of the society as an "ant colony," where everyone is confined to narrow roles that wholly define them; language is turned and twisted to facilitate totalitarian control. A comic strip private eye battles Alpha 60, which, faced with overseeing illogical humanity, ultimately self-destructs. As *Alphaville*'s futuristic Paris is obviously Paris of the 1960s (down to the Ford Mustangs it calls Ford Galaxies), the viewer wonders: is Godard attacking the tyranny of rationality or only that of contemporary Western capitalism? Is he alleging that today's public (or at least the sophisticated public that inhabits cosmopolitan cities like Paris) has internalized a dehumanizing rationality that is robbing life of its meaning? Godard is never less than opaque, and so it is hard to know. And that soon after making this movie he publicly embraced Marxism–Leninism, an ideology whose affinity for totalitarianism could hardly have escaped his notice, raises the question as to whether he opposed

all mind control or only that serving the wrong ends.

*Fahrenheit 451*, based on a Ray Bradbury novel intended as an attack on McCarthyism, imagines a society where nearly everyone thinks alike. The story is played out in a city of sparkling efficiency (a wondrous monorail system) and frightening official intrusiveness (huge interactive screens invade living rooms). Totalitarian leaders enforce a conformity so ambitious that books are banned—451° refers to the heat required to burn paper—and dissidents memorize forbidden texts. The hero, who begins as an unthinking book burner but is converted by the love of a good woman, eventually escapes to the countryside, where books (and human values) are permitted to flourish.

Neither *Alphaville* nor *Fahrenheit 451* was a great commercial success, but the renown of their directors helped to propagate the notion of dystopias, and thus had considerable influence. Technology encourages and facilitates tyranny, Godard and Truffaut teach, all but guaranteeing that the sovereign will abuse his authority. The Leviathan of these filmmakers is far darker and more threatening than what had come before.

## The Environmentalist's City

By the end of the 1960s, American youth—the heart of the moviemakers' audience—was preoccupied with Vietnam, urban rioting, and environmental fears. The old, easy-going national self-confidence was giving way to doubt and cynicism. Had Henry Luce's American Century ended decades too soon? *The Planet of the Apes*' (1968) answer was footage of a broken Statue of Liberty.

If Vietnam and urban rioting were too controversial for American movies, the plight of the environment was not. Preoccupation with toxic disasters had surfaced in antiquity (Hughes), and in the modern age William Morris had pioneered ecotopianism in his *News from Nowhere* (1890). (On current ecotopianism, see Pepper.) But none of this generated the interest that in the 1970s

attached to ecology, a word that earlier few had heard of but that now quickly gave birth to Earth Day (1970), a proliferation of best-selling books forecasting terrifying environmental futures (e.g., Ehrlich; Club of Rome), and innumerable popular songs and college courses, all against an extended background of real or threatened disasters (Love Canal, Three Mile Island, Bhopal, Chernobyl, *Exxon Valdez*). The media hammered home the theme of human and natural communities poisoned by careless, greedy corporations ineffectually policed by feeble or corrupt government, and Hollywood began to focus on the toxic future. The answer in this pessimistic era was not Yankee ingenuity, the can-do spirit, or a paroxysm of altruism. It was Hobbes' Leviathan.

*THX-1138* (1970), George Lucas' first film, portrays an urban civilization in the grip of a computer programming elite, and the efforts of one man to burst out. As with *Just Imagine*, *THX-1138*'s characters have numbers and letters in place of names. Sterile and regimented, life is confined to a white protective shell devoid of embellishment. The inhabitants, drugged and monitored, all look alike, and are policed by robots, who seem more alive than *they* do. As with *Fahrenheit 451*, *THX-1138* concludes with the flight of the hero. The theme, again, is how technology eases the sovereign's path to tyranny.

*ZPG* (1971)—i.e., zero population growth—is set in a civilization so beset by overpopulation that the air is literally not fit to breathe. Births are barred under penalty of death. One couple breaks the law, is caught, and in a flimsy rubber raft manages to get away. *Soylent Green* (1973), which takes place in the New York of 2022, also focuses on overpopulation. The city, now with forty million inhabitants, is barely functioning, with people living in stairwells, parked cars, churches, . . . everywhere and anywhere. Illness and despair—made palpable by coughing and weeping—are as common as the ever-present filth and decay or the green haze that constitutes the sky. Recalling Dickens, the very air itself seems to have “gone into mourning . . . for the death of the sun” (11). In the midst of this, a detective learns that the chief food, odorless, tasteless Soylent, can no

longer be made from plankton from the sea (which has become hopelessly polluted), and is now made from dead human bodies. The government (naturally) encourages people to kill themselves, building suicide centers that provide twenty minutes of rudimentary pleasure before easing their customers on their way. Edward G. Robinson, frail in his last role, is a police official who remembers when the environment was clean and food was abundant. Like *ZPG*, *Soylent Green* proudly rejects the totalitarian response to overpopulation—but offers as a substitute nothing more tangible than ringing platitudes about the human spirit. It is a vapid response to a Hobbesian sovereign justifying his tyranny with an environmental imperative.

*Logan's Run* (1976), set after the Catastrophe of 2274 in an underground domed city near what used to be Washington, presents a hedonistic future of beautiful people, abundant sex, even cosmetic surgery free for the asking. Paradise, however, comes at a price: everyone is executed by the state at age thirty. In this totalitarian society, computers make all the decisions, and the populace is drugged into compliance. Uniformity of thought, dress, and behavior is imposed by law, and enforced by humanoid police. Unseen monitors keep watch on everyone. Any sign of individuality is relentlessly squashed. Of course, one of the security police in charge of overseeing all this develops qualms about the execution policy, and tries to escape. Most of us may be too weak or stupid to struggle against totalitarianism made temporarily agreeable, but there will always be heroes among us. The fundamental Hobbesian argument for untrammelled authority, however, is untouched.

The environmentalist's movie city, then, finds humanity struggling to extricate itself from a trap it has set for itself. The struggle is painful and its chance of success problematic, for the city represents nothing less than the renunciation of the pastoral ideal of living in harmony with nature. The city, that is, is where the preoccupation with getting and spending and the indifference to waste and destruction all wreak their terrible vengeance. Thus, the environmentalist's target is not the appalling slums that seem a painful if unavoidable cost of

early industrialization, and have been attacked by reformers for generations. Rather (and ominously), the environmentalist's rage is directed at the consequences of a fully mature system in the throes of inadvertent suicide, its current peril mocking its past arrogance. The appropriate response to all this, we the audience understand, is indignation, anger, and corrective action. The Hobbesian threat is intended to impel us to do good.

## The Postmodern City

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Much more ambitious intellectually and successful commercially was the enormously popular *Matrix* trilogy. Intelligent machines that use human beings as their energy source have devised a technique for hiding their tyranny from the oppressed: they have developed a computer model representation of life in the twentieth century (the *Matrix*), which the populace mistakes for reality. The three movies follow the struggle of a computer programmer (who, as a hacker, is known as Neo), and his few allies, to free humanity from the seductive virtual reality and the oppressive real reality. The story, following innumerable zigs and zags, features acrobatic combat, spectacular computer generated special effects, and oracular philosophizing of the fortune cookie variety.

The virtual reality is occasionally represented as a city of the 1990s—there are shots of rooftops, phone booths, loading docks, skyscrapers—and alludes to well-known Chicago streets. And in the last of these three films, the *Matrix Revolutions* (2004), Neo is tasked with saving a city where humanity is now concentrated. Yet the *Matrix* films are not essentially about urban dystopias because cities *qua* cities play only a modest role in them.

## Retro City

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Just as the city as chaos genre has posited futures of premodern disorder, so did the city as

totalitarian control genre imagine systems riddled with defects and errors. By far the most important of these films was *Blade Runner* (1982), based on *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) by Philip K. Dick. Set in an unrecognizable Los Angeles of 2019—dark, polluted, claustrophobic, and beset by fog and a continual drenching rainfall—*Blade Runner* is a film of dread, tension, anger, and grief. Los Angeles is its major character (though the book was set in San Francisco and the movie was originally conceived as in New York [Scammon 76]) and, indeed, is the star that steals the show.<sup>4</sup>

The choice of Los Angeles is significant for two reasons. First, with its palm trees, sunshine, and Hollywood dream factory, it had years earlier supplanted New York as America's promised land. The trashing of Los Angeles, with no successor in sight, therefore suggested that perhaps no city could any longer provide such a fantasy, perhaps even that the days of fantasy had themselves coasted to a stop.

Second, Los Angeles is the center of the movie industry. Its triumphs and failures, its opportunities and challenges—or more precisely, local discourse on these matters—can hardly avoid influencing the product of the moviemakers, who live and work there. Mike Davis in his widely discussed *City of Quartz* (1990) argued that the Los Angeles establishment is preoccupied with security, defined in racial/class terms, and that its habitual response to perceived perils is aggressive and authoritarian, usually involving a combative police department. In *Ecology of Fear* (1998), Davis extended this grim analysis to cover a broader range of threats. Though the time line excludes the possibility that Davis' views influenced *Blade Runner*, they echo each other with an uncanny resonance.

In *Blade Runner*, nature itself seems bent on maximizing discomfort, with its dour, depressing weather. Yet it is humanity that is truly responsible for the horrid, intimidating environment: immense flying billboards, open sewers, grungy soda bars, and smoky bonfires. *Blade Runner's* visual language is part *film noir* and part jungle—the wet black streets; the omnipresent police



aircraft; the sidewalk vendors peddling noodles, genetic tests, and everything in between; the industrial pipes and ducts; the random craziness in the background. The sound track throbs with eerie sounds, echoes, pounding pistons, and the noises of flying vehicles, like reincarnated pterodactyls, shuttling through the poisonous atmosphere. *Blade Runner's* future, in short, follows H. G. Wells' prescription of "enlarging the present [to construct] a sort of gigantesque caricature of the existing world, everything swollen up to vast proportions and massive beyond measure" (Wells 1906/1987, 11–12). In this, *Blade Runner* echoes the Precisionist painters after World War I, who made bold use of advertisements, billboards, mass packaging, and hard-edged factories and skyscrapers, presaging the geometric abstractions of the 1930s. *Blade Runner* teaches us, then, that the familiar term "empty space" is quite misleading, for the movie's space seems composed of a thousand things: of color, of movement, of shapes, of relationships (people to people and people to things).

*Blade Runner* visually differs entirely from the megastructure of *Just Imagine*, say, or *Logan's Run*, which damned misplaced technological optimism and social engineering. In these films, the architectural/physical setting embodied the ethos of an ideal community, ideally organized—though with horrendous results. Yet *Blade Runner's* Los Angeles embodies not even a coherent dystopian ethos, but is rather an ugly jumble, suggesting an accumulation of ill-fitting, piecemeal adaptations. There is no single mind behind the mass of construction.

One of the movie's designers recalled that he sought a look "as sort of an exotic, technological interpretation of a Third World kind of country," and *Blade Runner's* Los Angeles is truly a bizarre Third World bazaar, a mixture of races and cultures, where inhabitants converse in what a world-weary cop calls "Cityspeak . . . gutter talk . . . a mishmash of Japanese, Spanish, German, what have you." The movie, however, does not celebrate this fantastic multicultural diversity or speak fondly of a melting pot or a gorgeous mosaic. Meanwhile, billboards flash images of Asian

beauties and advertisements that recall the reasons for the twentieth century's great migration to California: "A new life awaits you in the off-world colonies. The chance to begin again in a golden land of opportunity and adventure." Android slaves, called replicants, perform the dirty work in these distant havens.

Housing the rich and powerful, a few enormous pyramids—echoing Los Angeles' well-known neo-Mayan structures of the 1920s built by Robert Satacy-Judd and Francisco Mujica—rise above the miasma and murkiness of the streets, which are, according to the director, "in a state of overkill." Seven hundred stories high resides the developer and manufacturer of the replicants (who seems colder and more bloodless than they are). Notwithstanding his vast authority, he seems, incongruously, to lack the personal power his position implies. As a Hobbesian sovereign, he appears oddly ineffectual.

The city's buildings are a mix of old and new—air, water, and light are pumped from the outside through conduits and tubes, which snake up the sides of the decaying structures. The future is retro; the architecture is a clutter of debris. It is less Los Angeles—the ordinary single-family homes are missing, as are the squat apartment buildings—than doodles drawn by a gaggle of competing, flamboyant cynics, each with a skyscraper-sized chip on the shoulder.

At the same time, however, the Los Angeles of 2019 is not a society in total disarray. It is down-at-the-heels messy, to be sure, but to some degree it works. Indeed, the central plot device is a police hunt for the bad guys (in the form of replicants that have unlawfully come to earth). The Hobbesian sovereign—who has the good fortune to be able to call on Harrison Ford—is ready, willing, and finally able to protect the people by enforcing the law. The enforcer (or blade runner), redeemed by a beautiful replicant who joins him, escapes to the wilderness and a better life—his love for the replicant (in the book he returns to an imperfect marriage with a real woman) reinforcing the conclusion that the movie ought not to be viewed as an antitechnology fable. (Because the movie's premise was that there was nowhere else on earth

to go—hence, the off-world for qualified applicants—this ending made no sense. A director's cut issued in 1992 deleted the happy ending, leaving the couple's fate in doubt.)

*Repo Man* (1984), *Road Warrior* (1982), and *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome* (1985) also present junk retro-futures. So profitable were these films that they produced a swarm of low-cost progeny—*Tracers* (1986), *Cyborg* (1989), etc.—and *fin de siècle* movies (*Strange Days* [1995], *Twelve Monkeys* [1995], *Waterworld* [1995]) continued the cinematic tradition of “futuristic blues.”

All of these were eclipsed by the remarkable George A. Romero's *Land of the Dead* (2005). Fiddler's Green, a ritzy-glitz elite enclave, is isolated by electric fences and drawbridges from the surrounding squalor, which houses down-and-outers and zombies. The boss of Fiddler's Green, Mr. Kaufman, has hired some tough guys to venture into the slum on their zombie-killing super tank to steal food and supplies for his community. When one of them tells Kaufman of his plan to join Fiddler's Green, Kaufman fires him, but not before he absconds with the supertank, and threatens to use it to blow up the enclave. Kaufman responds by enlisting another tough guy (and his loyal side-kick) to retrieve the vehicle, and ward off disaster. By this point, however, the formerly unorganized zombies have gotten together behind their leader, Big Daddy, to attack the enclave that has abused them—and to eat its inhabitants.

Superficially, *Land of the Dead* is a juvenile horror movie, complete with the usual decapitations and eviscerations. But what makes it distinctive is the sympathy we feel for the zombies and their leader (and even the disrespected tough guy). We understand the zombies' rage and even their hunger, and notwithstanding their gory appetite, it is the greedy and ruthless Kaufman who excites our disgust. Thus, in an interview, Romero said of the movie, “it's about disenfranchisement, the schism between the haves and the have-nots,” which he sees in emotional as well as economic terms. “How do you say,” he asks, ““Hey, I'm me. I'm a person.”” Is he condescending to the have-nots by portraying

them as less than human? Perhaps. But his point seems to be that when rapacious selfishness drives out the sense of justice, its victims' humanity is driven out, too—and the consequences for all concerned are calamitous, and beyond the power of even a Hobbesian sovereign to control.

A distinguishing feature of *Land of the Dead*, in contrast to most dystopian movies, is that it takes cities seriously as homes to its people. Indeed, a dispute on where to live triggers the action of the film, and what drives it is an extraordinarily potent irony: the city-as-home provides comfort, stability, and security, while conflict over the city-as-home offers only mayhem, terror, and death. Pursuit of the Hobbesian dream may culminate in a Hobbesian nightmare.

## Final Words

It seems odd, of course, to discuss movies in Hobbesian terms. Where Hobbes stands as a founder of modern political philosophy and one of the most provocative and profound of all political thinkers, moviemakers are only moviemakers. Their purpose is to generate profits through entertainment, and their audiences are presumed to be impatient with Deep Thoughts. One would no more expect Michael Anderson to comment on the *Leviathan* than John Rawls on *Escape from New York*.

Yet though movies can hardly be accused of Hobbesian exegesis, they do sometimes address the Hobbesian bargain of liberty for security. If we refuse to submit to authority, they remind us, we may pay for our arrogance with anarchy, suffering, and death. The need for an overweening force is not merely the self-serving rationalization of a tyrant. This is the lesson of city-as-chaos dystopian films. Yet movie after movie in the control dystopia mode argue that an all-powerful sovereign is no answer to the problem, either. The cost in loss of freedom is too high, and the risk of official error or misconduct too great. The same human qualities that render our perfect freedom intolerable render sovereign control intolerable. We are trapped by our nature.

The city, of course, is exactly where we ought to expect the trap to be sprung. Here is where humanity is most highly concentrated. Here is where the abrasions of stress are most apt to rub away the veneer of courtesy and reflexive altruism that passes for civilization. Are the dystopian movie cities unrealistic? Of course . . . but so was Hobbes' state of nature. The implication is that for all his harshness, Hobbes at least offered a way out. The dystopian movies, taken together, appear not to.

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## Notes

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1. Many authorities emphasize the impact of Locke (Hartz; Becker; Zuckert), but some stress Hobbes (Coleman; Mace; Roelofs). Still others draw attention to the Scottish Enlightenment (Wills) or traditional Christian morality (Kendall and Carey) or a classical republicanism that emphasized the public good and the twin evils of tyranny and corruption (Wood).

2. Madison saw one solution to the Hobbesian problem as impracticable: giving to every citizen the same opinions, the same passions, and the same interests. But the urban Leviathan of the cinematic future sometimes attempts to control its subjects by giving them the same opinions, passions, and interests through drugs (*Logan's Run* [1976]), behavioral conditioning (*A Clockwork Orange* [1971]), terror (1984 [1956, 1984]), or television (*Fahrenheit 451* [1966]).

3. Jefferson, of course, was even more optimistic than Madison, viewing humanity as naturally good and given to cooperative, creative, productive conduct; if only we could be freed from the fetters that bind us—tyranny, ignorance, superstition—we could fulfill our wondrous potential. "Nature hath implanted in our hearts a love of others, a sense of duty to them, a moral instinct, in short, which prompts us irresistibly to feel and to succor their distress" (1136–37). When Franklin announced that "only a virtuous people are capable of freedom" (IX, 80), he voiced the common view that a republic required citizens willing to sacrifice their private interests for the common good; such a system, then, rested on the character and virtue of its people. To Hobbes this would only seem ridiculous. At the same time that Americans professed their commitment to civic virtue, however, they began to practice a competitive, materialistic individualism that would transform the society; this Hobbes would have well understood.

4. *Once a Thief* (1965), a noir film of an earlier generation, featured Los Angeles as one of its characters in its credits.

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These films explore themes of life in African-American urban communities, including poverty, violence, gangsters, education, drugs, sports, and music. Any top hood movies list would be incomplete without a mention of Friday or Next Friday - both funny and classic hood movies. Hood films deal with urban Black culture, often touching on the various struggles of growing up in that type of environment. Vote for your favorite gangsta movies, whether they're hilarious comedies or heart-wrenching dramas, and check out Ranker's list of the best Black movies. Photo #11 of 50 The Very Best Movies About Life in the Ghetto#18 of 21 The Best Ballet Movies. 0. 18. Since George Orwell's penultimate novel 1984, the dystopian genre grew progressively until recently hitting its peak. Some of the key ingredients include oppressive regimes, near future technology, or wealthy bureaucracies, dark tones, and the unlikelihood of a happy ending. Various filmmakers have put their own spin on this, creating some of the most compelling narratives and worlds. It's hard to put a finger on why dystopias are so fascinating. They're dour, depressing, and not likely to put anyone in a good mood. However, the stark contrasts and underlying subtext and social commentary bring This is a list of dystopian films. A dystopia is an imaginary community or society, that is undesirable or frightening. The literal translation, from its Greek origin into the English language, reads as "not-good place"; an antonym of utopia. Dystopian societies appear in many artistic works, most notably, in stories set in a future time-period. Dystopias are often characterized by dehumanization, totalitarian governments, ruthless megacorporations, environmental disaster, or other characteristics