Darker cities
Urban dystopia and science fiction cinema

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ABSTRACT
This article makes use of Darko Suvin's theory of the novum and Raymond Williams's cultural materialism to analyse three urban-dystopian science fiction films: Fritz Lang's Metropolis (1927), Ridley Scott's Blade Runner (1982) and Alex Proyas's Dark City (1998). It argues for the central significance of utopia, dystopia and cinema to SF. It explores the themes of class and gender, the uses of intertextuality, and the representations of the human and the posthuman in these three films. Drawing on Jameson, Baudrillard and others, it argues that the first film exhibits a characteristically modern, the latter two different versions of a characteristically postmodern, 'structure of feeling'.

KEYWORDS
cinema cultural materialism dystopia postmodernism science fiction

Critical theory has transformed science fiction studies from a 'fan' enthusiasm into a scholarly subdiscipline in the years since 1979, when Darko Suvin first published his Metamorphoses of Science Fiction. As one observer recently commented: 'More than any other study, . . . Metamorphoses is the significant forerunner of all the major examinations of the genre' (Hollinger, 1999: 233). Its approach was Western-Marxist in theoretical inspiration (especially Bloch), its disciplinary orientation primarily towards comparative literature. Suvin famously argued that SF was best understood as a 'literature of cognitive estrangement', a genre distinguished by 'the narrative dominance or hegemony of a fictional “novum” . . . validated by cognitive logic'.
There was clear prescriptive intent here: to exclude myth, folklore and fantasy (Suvin, 1979: 4, 63). This insistence on the cognitive functions of SF and the ferocity of the attendant opposition to fantasy have been called into question on more than one occasion. Thus Parrinder: ‘Suvin’s poetics has . . . outlived its moment . . . “Cognitive estrangement” may be taken to be a fact about the 1970s, just as T.S. Eliot’s “dissociation of sensibility” was a fact about the 1920s’ (Parrinder, 2000: 10). Even Suvin now concedes that: ‘Novum is as novum does: it does not supply justification, it demands justification. Where is the progress progressing to?’ (Suvin, 2000: 1). Nevertheless, the Suvinian definition of SF in relation to the novum seems defensible, at least insofar as the focus falls on knowledge as enlightenment in general, rather than on science in particular. This is the sense in which I will use the term here.

As Suvin’s subtitle made clear, his interests were with the poetics of a ‘literary’ genre. But there was always a certain inherent improbability to this resolutely anti-populist intent. The term ‘science fiction’ and its associated generic self-consciousness had derived, after all, not from literature, in any sense that a literary critic would recognize, but from the ‘pulp fiction’ magazines of the inter-war United States. Hugo Gernsback (after whom the annual ‘Hugo awards’ are named) had coined the word ‘scientification’ in 1926 in the first issue of *Amazing Stories*; ‘science fiction’ became common only after 1938, when John W. Campbell Jr changed the name of a rival ‘pulp’ from *Astounding Stories to Astounding Science-Fiction* (Clute and Nicholls, 1993: 25, 64). This was a ‘low’ genre, then, lower than literature, lower than film, perhaps even lower than television. Yet, there is more to a genre than its name. There was indeed, as Suvin recognized, and as even Gernsback had acknowledged, an older tradition of literary and quasi-literary writing about ‘science’. Gernsback himself traced the genre’s origins to Verne, Wells and Poe (Clute and Nicholls, 1993: 311); the most influential history of the genre, written by one of its leading contemporary practitioners, traced its origins to Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (Aldiss, 1986: 7). Despite the absence of the term from earlier writing, this seems right: there is a real, if retrospective, commonality.

The effects of this commonality are contradictory: on the one hand, it threatens to undermine Suvin’s fidelity to the distinction between SF as ‘literature’ and as mere ‘fiction’; but on the other, it acknowledges that the genre has a properly ‘literary’ history, just as Suvin suggests. The value of *Metamorphoses* is thus as a specifically literary history of an only partly literary genre. Its lack of interest in popular fiction pales into insignificance, moreover, when set against its radical indifference to cinema. This is clearly problematic, if only because SF has a long history in film, not merely as a matter of contingent empirical fact, but for reasons that are, in important respects, intrinsic to the nature of the genre. By most accounts, the first SF movie is Georges Méliès’s *Le Voyage dans la lune*, produced in 1902, that
is, less than 7 years after the Lumière brothers organized their first film projections for a paying audience. For Méliès, as for most subsequent SF film directors and their audiences, the genre’s appeal consisted precisely in the use of special effects to render an SF novum visually. No doubt, this is not what Suvin had in mind in his famous definition. Like most fan devotees of literary SF, post-Suvinian literary criticism has tended to assume that special effects preclude SF film from doing what the written form does best: that is, experiment with ideas. Clearly, they each have a point. Film theorists have often taken understandable exception to Adorno and Horkheimer’s thesis that:

The development of the culture industry has led to the predominance of the effect, the obvious touch, and the technical detail over the work itself – which once expressed an idea, but was liquidated together with the idea. (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979: 125)

If this is clearly overstatement as a comment on film in general, it might nonetheless retain a peculiar pertinence to SF cinema in particular. For in this genre, where the literary novum is indeed typically an ‘idea’ and the central cinematic device typically an ‘effect’, there is likely to be a very real tension between the novum and its representation as spectacle. Insofar as this is so, then it will only ever be as a ‘law of tendency’, towards the conceptualization of the novum as idea in the written medium, towards its specularization as effect in the cinematic, but understood as points on a continuum, nevertheless, rather than as permanent structural properties of the respective media.

Theories, methods and texts

I want to approach SF cinema in ways that circumvent both the Adornian high/low binary and the SF community’s own literature/film binary. Hence, my resort to what Raymond Williams termed ‘cultural materialism’. By this he meant ‘a theory of culture as a (social and material) productive process and of specific practices, of “arts”, as social uses of material means of production’ (Williams, 1980a: 243). If Williams has become a distinctly unfashionable figure in popular culture studies, he is almost entirely invisible in SF studies. The critical revolution inaugurated by Suvin has inspired Marxist, feminist, queer and Foucauldian approaches to the genre, but nothing at all equivalent, for example, to the cultural materialism of Dollimore and Sinfield in Renaissance literary studies (1994). This last has become the ‘the new academic order’ according to one observer (Wilson, 1995: viii), ‘the effective horizon of advanced . . . study’ according to another (Ryan, 1996: p. ix). The discrepancy is doubly ironic given Williams’s own comparative indifference to Shakespeare studies and his
enduring interest in SF: he served on the editorial board of *Science Fiction Studies*, wrote one SF novel (Williams, 1978) and an extensive body of SF criticism.

Williams developed his cultural materialism through an engagement with continental European Western Marxism, which led him increasingly to recast his work as ‘social-scientific’ rather than ‘literary-critical’ in character. As is well-known, he substituted a Gramscian theory of hegemony for both literary-humanist notions of culture and orthodoxly Marxist notions of ideology. More generally, however, he also sought to substitute description and explanation for judgement and canonization, as the central purposes of analysis. This is precisely what we have come to call ‘cultural studies’. And it is important to note that Williams’s move from literary into cultural studies was occasioned, in part, by an aversion to prescriptive criticism of the literary-humanist variety. Hence, his insistence that ‘we need not criticism but analysis . . . the complex seeing of analysis rather than . . . the abstractions of critical classification’ (Williams, 1989: 239). The general argument for cultural materialism is elaborated in *Marxism and Literature*, a book Williams described as ‘almost wholly theoretical’ in form, with nothing to say about SF nor anything very much about any other substantive areas of inquiry. But, as he also insisted, ‘every position in it was developed from . . . detailed practical work . . . I have previously undertaken, and from the consequent interaction with other . . . modes of theoretical assumption and argument’ (Williams, 1977: 6). Some of this detailed practical work had in fact been concerned with SF.

I have argued elsewhere that there are three main ‘phases’ in Williams’s thought, which I term respectively ‘left culturalist’, ‘cultural materialist’ and ‘postmodernist’, in each of which he had formulated a relatively distinct understanding of the relationship between SF, utopia and dystopia (Milner, 2003). The first was characterized by a polemical rejection of utopianism and dystopianism, represented paradigmatically by Morris’s *News from Nowhere* and Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, in favour of the kind of ‘space anthropology’ which uses ‘the SF formula’ to find ‘what are essentially new tribes, and new patterns of living’ (Williams, 1988: 359). The second is best represented by *The Country and the City*, where Williams traced the history of the SF city from Huxley and Orwell through to Aberthney and Blish (Williams, 1973: 274–7). Here, the intent of the analysis was not so much to take sides – or at least not immediately so – as to chart and explain the more general movement. The third and final phase entailed a positive re-evaluation of utopianism, especially of Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed*, and also eventually a more developed reading of Orwell’s dystopia. In 30 years of writing about SF, Williams thus slowly learnt to substitute his own ‘complex seeing’ for moralistic criticism; and to situate texts in their material and intellectual contexts. This led to an understanding of the kind of honourable personal motives and socially effective ‘structures of feeling’
that underpinned the utopian and dystopian forms he had initially disliked.
In the process, he also came to realize that neither was inherently antithetical to the space anthropology he admired in writers like Blish and Le Guin.

Williams’s major theoretical statement on SF, first published in 1978 in Science Fiction Studies, was concerned above all with the relationship between utopia and SF. Here, he expanded on a notion originally broached in The Country and the City that SF represents a distinctly modern form of utopia and dystopia. There are four characteristic types of each, he argued: the paradise or hell, the positively or negatively externally-altered world, the positive or negative willed transformation and the positive or negative technological transformation. The latter two are the more characteristically utopian/dystopian modes, he concluded, especially in SF, because transformation is normally more important than mere otherness (Williams, 1980b: 196–9).

This emphasis on the connection between SF and utopia is by no means exclusive to Williams. It was shared with Suvin, who in Metamorphoses defined utopia as ‘the socio-political subgenre of science fiction’, that is, as social-science-fiction (Suvin, 1979: 61). Neither Williams nor Suvin accepted the equation of utopia with radical perfection. For the latter, a fictive utopia was an ‘imaginary community . . . in which human relations are organized more perfectly than in the author’s community’ (Suvin, 1979: 45). For Williams, utopia and dystopia dealt respectively with ‘a happier life’ and ‘a more wretched kind of life’ (Williams, 1980b: 196). This insistence on the comparative – ‘more perfectly’ or ‘happier’, rather than ‘perfect’ – allowed Suvin to accommodate Saint-Simon, Wells and Morris as well as Bacon and Fénelon; and Williams to find in Le Guin a utopian ‘realism’ which strengthened and renewed an older utopian impulse (Williams, 1980b: 212). Perfect utopias are thus only a limit case, a sub-class of the much wider species of merely more perfect worlds. Moreover, as we move from utopia to dystopia, there are only ever comparatives, since absolute imperfection beggars both description and articulation.

We should also note the special significance for Williams of the city in dystopian SF. If The Country and the City is concerned primarily with the pastoral and the counter-pastoral, Williams found examples of each in SF’s future cities. The central novelty of his procedure here was to compare literary representations with ‘questions of historical fact’ (Williams, 1973: 12), so as to test his texts for the extent to which they misrepresented their contexts. In the treatment of SF, he stressed the importance of the city as a site of utopian and dystopian imaginings, emphasizing both the historical recency and the historical reality of the social experience of the megalopolis. The science-fictional ‘experience of the future’ came out of an ‘experience of the cities’, he wrote:

At a crisis of metropolitan experience, stories of the future went through a qualitative change . . . traditional models . . . were eventually transformed.
Man did not go to his destiny, or discover his fortunate place; he saw, in pride or error, his own capacity for collective transformation of himself and his world. (Williams, 1973: 272)

Williams traced this ‘deep transformation’ in the first instance to late 19th-century London, citing as key examples News from Nowhere and Wells’s A Story of the Days to Come. But he is clear that the argument applies to film as well as to the novel – indeed he traces a line of descent from Wells to Fritz Lang’s Metropolis (Williams, 1973: 274). This, then, will be my own understanding of the connections between utopia, dystopia and the city as we proceed to a preliminary sketch of some of the key differences between modern and postmodern urban dystopias.

From the modern to the postmodern: class and gender in three dark cities

Whatever else it might be, The Country and the City is in no sense ‘postmodern’: both its SF and its cities are clearly modern. But the hyperurban experience that so interested Williams has in fact become characteristic of postmodern hyperreality, as understood by writers like Jameson and Baudrillard, both of whom have also written interestingly on SF. In my view, modernism and postmodernism are best analysed as examples of what Williams meant by a ‘structure of feeling’, that is ‘a particular community of experience hardly needing expression, through which the characteristics of our way of life . . . are in some way passed, giving them a particular and characteristic colour’ (Williams, 1965: 63–4). Structure of feeling is ‘as firm and definite as “structure” suggests,’ he continued, ‘yet it operates in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity’ (Williams, 1965: 64). ‘In one sense’, he wrote:

structure of feeling is the culture of a period: it is the particular living result of all the elements in the general organization. And it is in this respect that the arts . . . are of major importance. For here, if anywhere, this characteristic is likely to be expressed; often not consciously, but by the fact that here . . . the actual living sense, the deep community that makes the communication possible, is naturally drawn upon. (Williams, 1965: 64–5)

Jameson has toyed with the notion that postmodernism might be a structure of feeling, only to reject it finally as ‘very odd’ (Jameson, 1991: xiv, xix). Here, he seems to me mistaken, not least because of his own subsequent insistence – deliberately echoing Williams – that the postmodern is ‘the force field in which very different kinds of cultural impulses – . . . “residual” and “emergent” forms of cultural production – must make their way’ (Jameson, 1991: 6). This is a minor methodological point,
however, which need not detract from the power of Jameson’s substantive analyses.

Let me gesture here towards a few key ideas in Jameson and in Baudrillard: that in the late 20th-century Western culture and society entered into a third ‘post-industrial’ or ‘multinational’ stage, founded on electronics rather than electricity, information and ‘hyperreality’ rather than production and productivism (Jameson, 1991: 35; Baudrillard, 1994: 121); that these transformations were themselves the effect of mutations in the nature of capital (Jameson, 1991: 35–6; Baudrillard, 1993: 8); that this ‘late capitalism’ is increasingly mass-mediated, asocial and transnational rather than national in scope (Jameson, 1991: 49; Baudrillard, 1983: 19); that postmodern media culture becomes so ‘imprinted on human subjectivity and existential experience’ (Jameson, 1992: 131) that identity itself is increasingly understood as constructed and hence indeterminate; that referentiality becomes so attenuated that the ‘signifier becomes its own referent’, the ‘sign no longer designates anything at all’, the real is superseded by the hyperreal, and intertextuality per se becomes the characteristically postmodern aesthetic effect (Baudrillard, 1975: 127–8; 1993: 3; Jameson, 1991: 20). To this we should add the further proposition, central to neither Jameson nor Baudrillard, but much canvassed elsewhere, from Haraway to Hayles to Fukuyama, that the posthuman as against the human has become a characteristically postmodern thematic (Haraway, 1991; Hayles, 1999; Fukuyama, 2002). I want to use this set of propositions as a way into a cultural-materialist reading of three dystopian SF films, a reading intended both to chart the shift from a modern to a postmodern structure of feeling and that from modern to postmodern systems of cultural production. I have selected two quasi-‘canonical’ films for analysis and a third that might reasonably be expected to become so: Metropolis, Blade Runner and Dark City.

Metropolis was nearly two years in the making, had its first theatre release in January 1927, and is still, by some counts, one of the most expensive films ever made in Germany. It was directed by the Austrian film-maker Fritz Lang, who had earlier made Dr Mabuse, Der Spieler (1922), a quasi-SF film about an evil criminal genius, which triggered a series of sequels and the 6-hour fantasy Die Niebelungen (1923–4). Metropolis featured Bridgegette Helm as Maria, a kind of childcare worker for working-class children and would-be social reformer and ‘moderate’ agitator to their parents. Alfred Abel played Joh Fredersen, the tyrannical master of Metropolis, Gustav Froelich his son, Freder, who falls in love with Maria. Rudolph Klein-Rogge played Rotwang, the mad scientist/sorcerer, who designs and builds the first ever screen robot and, on Fredersen’s instructions, turns it into a duplicate Maria.1 This was a black and white silent film, a mechanically reproducible marketable commodity, sold to distributors to be consumed collectively and, in Walter Benjamin’s phrase ‘in a state of distraction’, in the darkness of the cinema theatre (Benjamin, 1973: 242).2 Like
much filmically ambitious SF, it was prohibitively expensive, costing some DM 5 million, which nearly bankrupted the state-sponsored Universum Film Aktiengesellschaft. It was very obviously the product of a still recognizably national German cinema, but acquired speedy distribution in Britain, the US and Australia (the Australian premiere was in Melbourne in April 1928), in part thanks to the absence of sound, since the translation of intertitles was a much cheaper process than either subtitling or dubbing. The initial 3-hour version no longer exists: it was cut to 128 minutes for the 1927 UK print, 75 minutes for the 1927 US print and 90 minutes for the 1928 German re-release. A near-complete restoration, including a soundtrack based on the score for the 1927 Berlin premiere, was released by the Murnau Foundation in 2002, however, and this is the version I have used here.

*Blade Runner* was first released in 1982, a second *Director's Cut* in 1992. It was directed by the English film-maker Ridley Scott, who had earlier made *Alien* (1979), and was loosely based on Philip K. Dick’s 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* It starred Harrison Ford as Rick Deckard, the ‘blade runner’ of the title, whose job is to ‘retire’ escaped ‘replicants’ or androids. Rutger Hauer played Roy Batty, the leader of a group of fugitive replicants, Sean Young played Rachael, the replicant with whom Deckard eventually falls in love, and Joe Turkell played Eldon Tyrell, the head of the Tyrell Corporation which manufactures the replicants. By comparison with *Metropolis*, *Blade Runner* is the product of much more highly developed corporate relations of production: it is a full-colour, sound film; a marketable commodity to be consumed initially in the cinema theatre, but subsequently recycled as TV and (in the case of the *Director's Cut*) as video, its music by Vangelis on tape and later CD. The film was produced for Warner Brothers by the ‘Blade Runner Partnership’ at a reported cost of $US 27 million. For all its cult reputation, Scott had clearly aimed at commercial as much as critical success. Initially, however, it achieved only the latter: it won two 1982 Academy Awards, but turned out to be a box office disaster, losing $US 12 million. Despite its English director, the film is recognizably American: set in an American future, starring American actors, addressed primarily to an American audience, and based on an American novel.

*Dark City* was first released in 1998. It was directed by the Australian Alex Proyas, who had earlier made *Spirits of the Air, Gremlins of the Clouds* (1988) and *The Crow* (1994). It featured Rufus Sewell as John Murdoch, the amnesiac protagonist, who may or may not be a serial killer. Kiefer Sutherland played Dr Schreber, the only human who actively collaborates with the alien ‘Strangers’ running the ‘dark city’ as an experiment to discover how the human ‘soul’ works. Jennifer Connelly played Murdoch’s apparent ‘wife’, Emma, who eventually becomes Anna; William Hurt, Detective Bumstead, who is leading an investigation into the serial murders;
Ian Richardson, Mr Book, the chief Stranger; and Richard O’Brien, his assistant, Mr Hand. Like *Blade Runner*, *Dark City* is a product of highly developed corporate relations of production, a marketable commodity to be consumed in the cinema theatre and subsequently recycled as video and CD (the music is by Trevor Jones). Unlike *Blade Runner*, it was launched with its own website: www.darkcity.com. It was produced by ‘Mystery Clock Cinema’ for New Line Cinema, part of what had now become Time-Warner, the old Warner Brothers expanded into a multimedia conglomerate through a merger with Time-Life Publishing (merger with AOL would come later). Unlike *Blade Runner*, it is clearly the product of a transnational rather than national industry: largely financed in the United States, its key ‘stars’ were American and British, but it was made at Fox’s Sydney Showground studios, with mainly Australian labour, including virtually all the actors playing minor roles.

In all three films, the architecture of the dystopian citiescape functions as a synecdoche for the wider catastrophe that has overcome their respective populations. In all three, the city is the dystopian novum, the shape of the prior catastrophe encoded deep within its social and architectural forms. In all three, this catastrophe is refracted through social relations of class and gender. Lang’s *Metropolis* is clearly an extrapolation from the early 20th-century German city, transformed both for the better and the worse, through both will and technology, into the city of 2026, a modern urban dystopia very much in the pattern described by Williams. Although not explicitly identified with Berlin or any other particular place, it is clearly organized around much the same conflict between capital and labour that had dominated the German cities of the 1920s. This is a class-divided city, vertically stratified between the darkest proletarian depths where the workers live, the intermediary levels where they work in conditions of extreme alienation – illustrated at length in one of the film’s best-known sequences – and the high city of light inhabited by the privileged classes. Gesturing towards the sunlit heights of this proto-modernist citiescape, Freder demands of his father:

> und wo sind die Menschen . . . deren Hände Deine Stadt erbauten –?
> [and where are the people . . . whose hands built your city –?]

The camera cuts to a shot of the next shift descending by lift to the subterranean factories, as Fredersen retorts:

> Wo sie hingehören . . . in die Tiefe.
> [Where they belong . . . in the depths.]

Interestingly, this vertical social stratification – which would become a standard trope in SF cinema – has no real equivalent in reality, where cities still tend to be stratified horizontally. The film’s strikes, crowds, riots and even the false Maria as female agitator all clearly echo something of the
reality of the German Revolution of 1918, in which Rosa Luxemburg had played such a key role. Importantly, there is still hope in this city, both the false hope of revolution, as Lang saw it, and the real hope of social reconciliation, finally attained in its closing scenes. The extraordinarily ambitious architecture of the high city, which much preoccupied Lang in its making, signifies this hope at least as much as it does Fredersen’s hubris.

*Blade Runner* is set in a post-catastrophic dystopia, the Los Angeles of November 2019, a city soaked in acid rain and choking on pollution, where most healthy humans have already moved ‘off-world’. Scott’s ‘retrofitted’ city has often been cited as the quintessentially postmodern urban landscape: for Giuliana Bruno, its postmodernity consisted in a combination of ‘postindustrial decay’ with ‘hybrid architectural design’ (Bruno, 1990: 186); for David Harvey, in that of ‘deindustrialization’ and, again, ‘post-industrial decay’ (Harvey, 1990: 310). Like Lang’s Metropolis, it is a city transformed by will and technology, but overwhelmingly for the worse: there is little hope here, other than that of escape. The cityscape itself is dominated by the Tyrell Corporation building, a gleaming glass and concrete pyramid reaching so far above street level as to be lit by natural sunlight: everything and everywhere else is dark and wet. Tyrell, Batty ironically observes, is ‘the God of bio-mechanics’ and bio-mechanics is the city’s ruling technology. Scott’s Los Angeles is thus vertically stratified along analogous lines to those in *Metropolis*, between high and low, light and dark (and here also dry and wet). But unlike in *Metropolis*, we see nothing of the production process, not even the process of producing replicants, apart from a brief glimpse of the outsourced eye manufacture conducted by Chew. Here class differences are both ethnicized – as between Caucasians, like Tyrell and Bryant, and Asians or Latinos, like Chew and Gaff – and also essentially matters of consumption rather than of production. In short, the city is a recognizable extrapolation from late 20th-century consumer capitalism and the great corporate towers that cluster at the heart of its metropoles. And its purpose is the same. As Tyrell explains to Deckard:

Commerce is our goal here at Tyrell. More human than human is our motto. The giant electronic advertisements for Coca-Cola, which Deckard and Gaff pass en route to and from the Tyrell building, serve to reinforce this motif: commerce is everybody’s goal here in Los Angeles. This is what has brought the city to its present impasse, in which both humans and replicants are already less human than human. As Deckard’s voice-over tells us in the theatre release version:

I’d quit because I’d had a belly full of killing. But then I’d rather be a killer than a victim. And that’s exactly what Bryant’s threat about little people meant.

In *Blade Runner*, as in *Alien*, the will to dystopia is thus overwhelmingly
the effect of corporate power and its extension into policing, but not, as in Zamiatyn or Orwell, that of the totalitarian state per se.

_Dark City_ is a very different matter, the product neither of willed nor of technological transformation, but rather, as it first appears, an externally-altered world – through the intervention of the Strangers; and, as we later learn, a hell existing elsewhere altogether – since we aren’t actually on Earth at all. ‘First came the Strangers . . .’, announces Schreber’s prologue:

They were a race as old as time itself. They had mastered the ultimate technology, the ability to alter physical reality by will alone. They called this ability ‘tuning’ . . . Their endless journey brought them to a small blue world at the farthest corner of the galaxy. Our world.

But if the Strangers have manufactured the city, then how has this been done? Mr Hand explains to Murdoch:

The city is ours, we made it . . . We fashioned this city on stolen memories: different eras, different pasts, all rolled into one. Each night we revise it, refine it . . .

The film’s own city had been made in much the same way, as a series of stolen memories, borrowings from other films, especially from 1940s Hollywood detective movies, but also, of course, from _Blade Runner_. If it looks quite literally fantastic, then this is because that is what it is: a phantasm, an impossible city made from different pasts rolled into one, including even a small slice of Sydney beachfront. The city has a human class structure – witness the transformation of the sleeping couple from poverty to riches – but this is both radically arbitrary (it can be changed overnight) and immaterial. Its real rulers are the Strangers, hidden deep within, rather than elevated high above, the cityscape. This city has no fixity, but rather changes shape, grows and shrinks like an organic lifeform, thanks to computer graphics simply unavailable to Scott, let alone Lang.

All three cities exhibit an essentially masculinist view of gender, in which the ‘otherness of woman’ is represented, to borrow Huyssen’s description of _Metropolis_, by ‘two traditional images of femininity – the virgin and the vamp, . . . both focused on sexuality’ (Huyssen, 1986: 72). In Lang, these roles are played, respectively, by the human Maria and the robot Maria; in Scott, by Rachael and Zhora or Pris; in Proyas by Anna and Emma. All three cities use the nightclub, the female performer and the prostitute as signifiers of urban life. The false Maria in _Metropolis_, Zhora in _Blade Runner_, Emma in _Dark City_, all perform simultaneously before their respective nightclub audiences and for the voyeurism of what Laura Mulvey termed the ‘cinematic gaze’. Mulvey, it will be recalled, insisted that the general structure of conventional narrative cinema positions the male as active, the female as passive, quite apart from the particular contents of particular films. As she summarized her case: ‘WOMAN AS IMAGE, MAN
AS BEARER OF THE LOOK’ (Mulvey, 1989: 19). The spectator position itself is thus masculinized, she argued, the patterns of pleasure and identification encoded within narrative cinema in effect prescribing a masculine point of view for the audience. So the film-goer comes to occupy a position of voyeuristic dominance over woman as the sexualized object of the cinematic gaze. This has become a distinctly unfashionable view in cinema studies and one Mulvey herself had occasion to question (Mulvey, 1989: 29–37). But all three of these films function exactly as her account suggests. Interestingly, Metropolis self-reflexively draws attention to the process – by placing a montage of gazing male eyes into the frame – and thereby undermines it. As Huyssen observed: ‘by thematizing male gaze and vision . . . the film lays open a fundamental filmic convention usually covered up by narrative cinema’ (Huyssen, 1986: 75).

Nonetheless, all three films proceed to punish their respective ‘women’ for inviting this gaze. In Metropolis the false Maria, a flesh-covered robot found raucously celebrating amidst the bourgeois revellers at Yoshiwara’s nightclub, is seized by the angry working-class insurrectionists, here led by Grot, Freder sen’s foreman and also on occasion his company spy. Played by Heinrich George, Grot urges the mob on to vengeance against ‘die Hexe’, the ubiquitous ‘witch’ of misogynist fantasy:

Verbrennt die Hexe. – Auf den Scheiterhaufen mit ihr!!!
[Burn the witch. – To the stake with her!!!]

And this, indeed, will be her fate, even if the sudden exposure of a metallic body beneath her burning flesh somehow absolves all concerned – Freder included – of the medieval barbarism entailed in this summary justice. In Blade Runner Zhora is a replicant – as are all the other female characters – and, like Batty’s lover, Pris, she is shot to death by Deckard. Zhora has disguised herself as Madame Salome, a stripper/exotic dancer (the equivalent character in the novel is Luba Luft, an opera singer); Pris is a ‘foreskin job’, a ‘standard pleasure model’, according to Bryant. In Dark City Emma survives, but only after she has lost all memory of her nightclub singing days and become Anna; and, if she is spared, the hooker we meet shortly after her performance, and six others before, have all been brutally murdered and mutilated. Do male film directors dream of electric women?, Marleen Barr asked of Scott (Barr, 1991). Apparently they do, and almost as much in German Expressionist or transnational ‘Australian’ cinema as in Hollywood itself. This reproduction of stereotypically patriarchal gender relations stands in interesting contrast to the written form’s comparative openness to feminism during the last three decades of the 20th century (cf. Le Guin, 1969; Piercy, 1976; Russ, 1985; Atwood, 1986; Merrick and Williams, 1999). Here, as elsewhere, the cinematic medium accords a priority to (sexualized) effect over idea.
Text and intertext, human and posthuman

No doubt art has always made extensive use of intertextuality. For Jameson, however, this has become peculiarly characteristic of postmodernism: ‘we are now . . . in “intertextuality”’, he writes, ‘as a deliberate, built-in feature of the aesthetic effect’ (Jameson, 1991: 20). In this respect, Metropolis is clearly modern rather than postmodern, original in precisely an older modernist avant-garde sense. The Expressionist sets, by Otto Hunte, Eric Kettelhut and Karl Vollbrecht, bespeak the style of a very particular time and place. Whilst the film has functioned as an intertext for much subsequent SF cinema, its own central effect is nonetheless that of novelty, rather than of intertextuality. In Blade Runner, by contrast, the deliberate intertextuality is characteristically postmodern: the references to Metropolis – high/low, light/dark, the cityscape itself, even the closing curtains in Tyrell’s office, as compared to those in Fredersen’s – are clearly deliberate; those to the 1940s detective movie – the clothes, the voice-over, the liquor and the tobacco – constitute a crucial component in its cinematic pleasure. The Director’s Cut even ends, in the characteristically postmodern move of intertextuality for its own sake, with a knowing gesture toward film noir. Dark City borrows from a very similar range of intertextual reference, much of it refracted through Blade Runner. The obvious addition is Tim Burton’s Gotham City in Batman and Batman Returns, a dark city if ever there was one.

If intertextuality is the characteristically postmodern aesthetic effect, then the posthuman is arguably its characteristic thematic. It has, of course, become a commonplace that late 20th and early 21st century postmoderns have become in some significant sense ‘posthuman’. Where for classical humanism the self had been a fixed centre of conscious meaning, in much late 20th-century thought – structuralism, psychoanalysis, post-structuralism – it came to be understood as decentred and multiple. Moreover, the decentred self of post-structuralist theory tends to replicate the multiple postmodern self of late-capitalist consumer society. In this respect too, Metropolis is clearly a modern rather than postmodern text. For there is little uncertainty here as to the nature of individual identity. True, the film invokes the threat of the robot Maria as a man-made substitute for woman, but we are never in doubt that Freder will be able to distinguish the true from the false. Almost at a glance, he sees that:

Du bist nicht Maria - !!!
[‘You are not Maria - !!!’]

The line is repeated:

DU BIST NICHT MARIA - ! Maria redet zum Frieden, nicht zum Mord - !
Das ist nicht Maria - !!'
‘Du bist nicht Maria’, Freder insists, and he is right. But this is precisely what is thrown into doubt in *Blade Runner* and even more radically so in *Dark City*. In Scott’s film, we know only that replicants have implanted memories and humans don’t; what we don’t know, however, is who is and who isn’t human. Crucially, we don’t even know whether Deckard himself is a replicant: his memories are supported only by photographs, the same kind of flimsy material evidence provided the replicants; in the Director’s Cut, he dreams of a unicorn, Gaff’s symbol for the replicant. ‘Are you for real?’, Zhora asks Deckard. In truth, neither he nor we can be sure of the answer. Scott himself thought that ‘having Deckard be a replicant is the only reasonable solution’ (Kolb, 1991: 177n). In *Dark City* the argument is moved a step further, so that no-one possesses both memory and individual identity: the Strangers share memory and a group mind, devoid of individual identity; the humans exist as individuals, but with false memories changed nightly at midnight. So Murdoch is and is not a murderer, he has and has not been married to Emma, and so on. Here, identity is constructed and multiple in the strongest of senses.

If the ‘human’ is becoming progressively ‘decentred’, then this is an effect not only of post-structuralist and postmodern theory, but also of such new technologies for re-embodiment and dis-embodiment as genetic engineering and prosthetics, artificial intelligence and virtual reality. If the ‘human’ is by ‘nature’ not genetically-engineered, not augmented by prosthetics, not extended either by AI or into VR, then the obvious question arises as to what exactly we are becoming or going to be replaced by. This is an old question in SF, at least as old as *Frankenstein*, but it acquired a new urgency in the last decades of the 20th century. All three films acknowledged the prospect, *Metropolis* in distinctly modern fashion, however, *Blade Runner* and *Dark City* in distinctly postmodern, a difference most apparent in their respective resolutions. *Metropolis* recognizes the danger of the robot Maria as man-made substitute for woman, especially in the ‘Hel’ narrative omitted from many later versions. However, the robot’s destruction by fire provides a classically humanist resolution to the problem of the posthuman, reminiscent of that in *Frankenstein* itself. The true Maria then inspires Freder to unite capital and labour, Fredersen and Grot, in a movement that simultaneously endorses the division of labour both by class and by gender, assuring him that:

Hirn und Hände wollen zusammenkommen
[Head and hands want to join together.]

As the film concludes, Maria continues:

aber es fehlt ihnen das Herz dazu . . . Mittler Du, zeige ihnen, den Weg
[but they don’t have the heart to do it . . . Oh mediator, show them the way to each other . . . THE MEDIATOR BETWEEN HEAD AND HANDS MUST BE THE HEART!]

Apparently, a good man needs a good supportive woman at his side, rather than a spitefully subversive ‘Mensch-Maschine’. This denouement, argues Huyssen, is ‘but a lingering residue of expressionism, . . . which covers up the persisting domination of labor by capital and high technology, the persisting domination of woman by the male gaze and the reestablished repression of . . . sexuality’ (Huyssen, 1986: 81). It can be read as either nicely social-democratic or horribly fascist, and is quite possibly both, not simply because all signs are polysemic, but also because the screenplay was co-written by Lang and his then wife, Thea von Harbou. She joined the Nazi Party in 1932, he fled into exile in the USA. In 1926, the contradiction between readings hadn’t yet become so apparent.

*Blade Runner* is very different, if only because all of Tyrell’s creations are more impressive than their creator, a thematic signalled in the film’s prologue:

The NEXUS 6 Replicants were superior in strength and agility, and at least equal in intelligence, to the genetic engineers who created them.

They are also morally superior, we eventually realize, since Batty will show mercy to Deckard, the blade runner who has shown none to the other escaped replicants. The film’s conclusion, explicit in the theatre release, implied in the *Director’s Cut*, where Deckard and Rachael escape from Los Angeles, decisively relocates audience sympathy from the human to the replicant. In both versions, Gaff tells Deckard, ‘It’s too bad she won’t live. But then again, who does?’ In both, the line is later repeated. In both, Deckard asks for and receives from Rachael the promise of love and of trust. A good male replicant apparently needs a supportive female replicant to trust him. In both, Deckard and Rachael discover an origami unicorn and thus realize that Gaff has previously found but nonetheless not killed her. The *Director’s Cut* ends with a lift door closing on the ambiguous possibility of their escape from Los Angeles. The theatre release version is much more explicit, concluding with a subsequent sequence of their flight over an improbably pastoral countryside, as Deckard’s voice-over explains, not only that Gaff has let Rachael go, but also that:

Tyrell had told me Rachael was special: no termination date. I didn’t know how long we’d have together. Who does?

Scott disliked this ending and deleted it from the *Director’s Cut*. But Leonard Heldreth has argued that, although it ‘may seem intellectually
contrived and out of tone with the rest of the film, . . . it’s the emotional ending we want’ (Heldreth, 1991: 51). In the most literal of senses, he is surely right: the studio chose this ending precisely because it was preferred by their pre-release sample audiences. But Heldreth himself prefers it for reasons that are quite explicitly humanist in ideology: ‘At the end of the film,’ he writes, ‘Deckard [is] . . . no longer trying to remain a human being while he kills the very emotional responses that define his humanity . . . Deckard, i.e., man, is presented as a human being who makes his escape into the new Eden with a new Eve’. There is indeed a sense in which Deckard and Rachael can be read as a new Adam and Eve escaping into a new Eden. But Rachael is certainly not a woman and, if Scott is to be believed, nor is Deckard a man: these are replicants. If that is the ending postmodern humans want, then this is so for reasons precisely the obverse of Heldreth’s, not only because we like our men to be men, and our women women, but because we’re also no longer very concerned whether either is still actually human, no longer entirely persuaded of our evolutionary superiority as a species. As Boozer says of Blade Runner: ‘This near-future tech noir edition of . . . the postmodern city . . . is . . . in an advanced state of decay. Rather than reharmonizing itself with nature through knowledge, the world of Tyrell is further removed than ever’ (Boozer, 1991: 219). This is surely how ‘we’ have increasingly come to see ‘our’ cities, as the mounting wreckage of a civilization nearly beyond repair. In 1982 Blade Runner’s solution seemed quite staggeringly audacious: to give up on humanity in a wager on the prospects for a posthuman future. The Director’s Cut spells out this replicant solution much more explicitly in almost every respect except its ending, the closing gesture toward film noir thus detracting from the originality of its posthuman narrative resolution.

In Dark City the equivalent anxieties revolve around the alien abduction of an entire city and invasive alien scientific experimentation on its citizens, a theme curiously reminiscent of The X-Files, the most popular 1990s SF television series both in the United States and in Australia. Superficially, the film can be read as providing an essentially humanist narrative solution, when Murdoch finally defeats Mr Book in mind-to-mind combat. ‘You wanted to know what it was about us that made us human. Well you’re not going to find it in here . . .’, he tells the Stranger, pointing towards his own forehead: ‘You went looking in the wrong place.’ We are thus prepared for a traditional appeal to the heart, much like that at the end of Metropolis. But this isn’t what happens: rather, Murdoch turns away, he sighs, his eyes light up in conventional signification of the alien, as he begins to re-tune the city into light. He can do this only because he too has mastered the ultimate technology, the ability to alter physical reality by will alone, in short, because he has already mutated into something posthuman. By conventionally humanist standards, this makes him a deeply dangerous man. And yet we are reassured that he is a good (posthuman) man, with a
nicely supportive good woman, Anna, waiting for him at the end of the pier, with a good view of Shell Beach. In this respect, *Dark City* is a more dangerous film than *The Matrix* trilogy, made at the same studios, reworking the same Sydney cityscape into similarly fantastic form (though as a city of light rather than of darkness), premised on similarly posthuman possibilities, and drawing on a similarly postmodern range of intertextual effect (including the famously knowing reference to *Simulacra and Simulation*). But where *The Matrix* would opt for a conventionally humanist narrative in which Neo, as Christ-like human, strives to save humanity from its own posthuman progeny, *Dark City* pursued the more disturbing hypothesis that it might be possible to save the species only by its mutating into the posthuman.

To say that the film is more dangerous and more disturbing is not, of course, to say that it is ‘right’. It is better to think with, that is all, better to disagree with, as we try to find ways from the dominant to the emergent, from the postmodern to whatever better possibilities it still precludes and prevents. For what *Dark City* represents, even more powerfully than *Blade Runner*, is a near-complete retreat from the possibility of humanly-willed transformation, whether for better or for worse. In this respect, it bespeaks the truth of a wider culture, in which, as Jameson has it, time can be imagined only as ‘an eternal present and, much further away, an inevitable catastrophe’ (Jameson, 1994: 70). Revisiting his earlier accounts of Morris and Orwell in 1978, Williams borrowed from Abensour the distinction between ‘systematic’ and ‘heuristic’ utopias, meaning those focussed respectively on organizational models and on values (Abensour, 1973). *News from Nowhere*, he concluded, was a ‘generous but sentimental heuristic transformation’. Morris’s heuristic had become distinctly unsentimental at one point, however, through ‘the crucial insertion of the transition to utopia’ as something to be ‘fought for’ (Williams, 1980b: 204). Orwell’s 1984 is neither more nor less plausible than Morris’s 2003, Williams observed, but the latter’s fictional revolution of 1952 is more plausible than either ‘because its energy flows both ways, forward and back, . . . its issue . . . can go either way’. For Williams, this kind of openness – when the ‘subjunctive is a true subjunctive, rather than a displaced indicative’ – powerfully called into question the then still dominant mode of dystopia represented paradigmatically by *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Williams, 1980b: 208). Moreover, he found a parallel openness at work in Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* (Williams, 1980b: 212). At an important stage in certain kinds of future story, Williams wrote, ‘a writer sits and *thinks*; assembles and deploys variables . . . when even the factors are only partly known . . . and when their interaction . . . is quite radically uncertain.’ *The Dispossessed*, he continued, is characterized by ‘deliberate and sustained thought about possible futures’ (Williams, 1984: 266). In short, Le Guin’s thinking is deliberate and sustained, rather than ‘sentimental’, and thus directed toward the possible
rather than the ideal. This kind of openness, when the subjunctive is a true subjunctive, is surely missing from both Scott’s Los Angeles and Proyas’s dark city.

In The County and the City, Williams had observed of written SF dystopias that:

everything about the city – from the magnificent to the apocalyptic – can be believed at once. One source of this unevenness is the complexity of the pressures and problems. But another . . . is the abstraction of the city, as a huge isolated problem . . . (Williams, 1973: 278)

Part of what it might mean to move beyond the postmodern would surely be to move beyond the apocalyptic (and the magnificent), to apprehend the city both in itself and in its relations with the country as real, active and concrete. To judge by SF cinema, we still have a long way to go.

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Notes

1 Interestingly, Lang uses ‘Mensch-Maschine’ or, in the plural, ‘Maschinen-Menschen’, rather than ‘robot’, even though the latter had already been coined – from the Czech ‘robota’ – by Josef Capek for his brother Karel’s 1920 play R.U.R., which was available in both German and English translations by the time Metropolis went into production.

2 Film theorists often rightly insist that cinema is consumed less ‘distractedly’ than television. Benjamin’s implicit comparison is with the printed book, however, rather than television, with which he was unfamiliar, or radio. And here he was surely right: film’s mode of reception is much less distracted than that of radio or television, but nonetheless much more so than that of the printed book.

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