

# Urban Dystopia on Screen: The City, Architecture and Power in the Contemporary Science Fiction Film

By Marko Kiessel\* & Jonathan Stubbs<sup>‡</sup>

*This paper investigates the urban, architectural and spatial mise-en-scène of major western 21<sup>st</sup>-century science fiction film dystopias portraying urban societies under totalitarian rule. While extensive scholarship exists on architecture, the city and power and similarly on architecture, the city and film, the triad of architecture/city, film and power remains under-researched. This paper therefore concentrates on how power is mediated through built form on screen. It also investigates whether recurring visualizations and meaning(s) of built form concerning power can be observed. Considering key works about the built environment and its relation to power, this study also uses a semiological approach in order to assess the symbolic-metaphorical use of urban, architectural and spatial form. We assume that producers, directors, set-designers, screenwriters on one side and the film audience on the other ‘speak a similar language’ and share cultural codes and symbols. The frequent recurrence of specific urban, architectural and spatial visualizations in science fiction films which mediate specific meanings of power may be proof of a widespread, conscious or subconscious reading of these visualizations and understanding of their meaning(s) with regards to power – meanings which may therefore be deeply rooted in the culture of western societies.*

## Introduction

This paper investigates the urban, architectural and spatial mise-en-scène of several major western science fiction film dystopias of the 21<sup>st</sup> century which portray urban societies under oppressive totalitarian rule, including intensive surveillance. The urban science fiction dystopia genre has been interpreted by many scholars as a reflection of, and a means to comment on, contemporary social aspirations and fears. These dystopias mirror discourses which emerge from their respective times concerning society, politics, the economy and changing values, as well as developments in the built environment and technology. Scholars have generally agreed that science fiction film dystopias comment critically on modern urbanism and architecture. For example, Janet Staiger states that future noir dystopias include criticism of utopian modernist architecture and cityscapes through a semiotic transformation of the “signifiers of modern life” so that they turn into “signs of a troubled society”. Similarly, Kevin McNamara points out that “the *Blade Runner* cityscape, especially its ironic treatment of elements that once expressed architecture’s utopian aspirations... will be recognized as a commentary

---

\*Professor, Faculty of Arts, Arkin University of Creative Arts & Design, Cyprus.

<sup>‡</sup>Professor, Faculty of Communication, Cyprus International University, Cyprus.

on the failure of modernist architecture and planning's utopian aspirations."<sup>1</sup> However, although scholarly work on architecture, the city and power is exhaustive and while work examining architecture, the city and film is similarly well developed, the triad of architecture/city, film and power remains under-researched.

This paper therefore concentrates on the ways in which power is "mediated"<sup>2</sup> on screen through built form. It also aims to examine whether recurring patterns may be observed in the visualizations and meaning(s) of the built environment with regards to *power*. And it seeks to answer whether those meaning(s) conveyed on screen are generalizable for the interpretation of meaning(s) in the existing built environment.

This research is based on several observations, namely that "buildings are, whether architects intend it or not, carriers of meanings, even in those cases in which they are meant to be meaningless",<sup>3</sup> that "language is at the core of making, using and understanding buildings", that this language "cannot be innocent", and that the values and intentions of its authors are present directly and indirectly in form of a "silent discourse."<sup>4</sup> Therefore, we assume that the "visual rhetoric"<sup>5</sup> of films may likewise be regarded as a non-innocent language that directly and indirectly informs the meaning(s) of the city and its architecture which we seek to understand.

We consider several key works about the built environment and its relation to power, such as Thomas A. Markus (1993), Kim Dovey (1999), and Thomas A. Markus and Deborah Cameron, who assert that there are no "power-free spaces".<sup>6</sup> Our current study refers especially to the terminology, definitions of power and forms of mediation in Kim Dovey's *Framing Places: Mediating Power in Built Form* (1999). Dovey subdivides power into two basic forms, the primary *power to* do, act upon, realize, conduct things, and more relevant for our scope, the *power over* others. Forms of *power over* emerge from institutional authorities of the society such as the state, corporations and the family. They are defined by Dovey as *force* (for example spatial exclusion) and *coercion* (a latent kind of force), the latter including *domination/ intimidation* (for example through scale), *manipulation* (a form of power which is invisible to the subject, often being exercised with the support of control and/or [disciplining] surveillance) and *seduction* (manipulation of interests/desires).<sup>7</sup> These forms of power are mediated through urban, architectural and spatial features in reality. Dovey also states that forms of mediation of power often work as antithetical pairs<sup>8</sup>, such as "segregation vs.

---

1. Sobchak, "Cities," 124; Staiger, "Future Noir," 99, 112, 120; Gold, "Darkened Skies," 338-39; McNamara, "Los Angeles 2019," 123-24, 127; Mennel, *Cities and Cinema*, 131-32, 140; Babish, "Concrete Futures," 136, 164, 168, 184.

2. A term borrowed from Dovey, *Framing Places*, in the sense of "expressed" or "communicated."

3. Klotz, *Moderne und Postmoderne*, 14, transl. from the German by M. Kiessel.

4. Markus, *Buildings and Power*, 4.

5. Fortin, *Architecture*, 132.

6. Markus and Cameron, *Words*, 60.

7. Dovey, *Framing Places*, 10-12.

8. Dovey, *Framing Places*, 15-16.

access”, “stability vs. change” (“stability” meaning the impression or illusion of permanence and stable order, for example through size<sup>9</sup>), and “dominant vs. docile” (“dominant” through relative size).

While investigating built environment and power Dovey, Markus and Cameron, and Martin Hofmann also refer to Michel Foucault’s notion of the disciplinary character of (modern) architecture and space. Catherine Chaput provides a summary of Foucault’s theoretical work and links it to the narratives of a few science fiction films. Drawing from this work<sup>10</sup>, the relevant aspects of Foucault’s theories for our study can be summarized as follows: Disciplinary power works through social and spatial practices. Foucault’s study of spaces like prisons, factories and hospitals demonstrates how this power acts through norms and the control of deviations from the norms. It is a bio-power which works on bodies and disciplines them into compliance and docility through constant surveillance. It includes the partitioning of space according to rank, class, grade and function, coupled with the regulation of routine. In other words, disciplined bodies result from forceful and/or coercive (using Dovey’s terminology) spatial partitioning, surveillance of activities and the organization and the co-ordination of groups of individuals.

Scholarly work investigating architecture in (science fiction) film occasionally discusses the above introduced aspects of power in addition to this, but it does so rather unsystematically. Relevant work includes: Dietrich Neumann, Vivian Sobchak, Janet Staiger, John R. Gold, Kevin McNamara, Barbara Mennel, David Fortin, and Stephen Babish. A detailed discussion of these authors falls outside the scope of this chapter; for this reason we refer to their relevant observations about architecture and power in science fiction film where meaningful. However, Kiessel and Stubbs (2022) is worth outlining in brief here because it focuses on the subject more systematically. The chapter concentrates on vertical and horizontal urban, architectural and spatial “segregation” and “boundaries” in SF films of the 20<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, segregation and boundaries being forms of the mediation of power, not forms of power as such. The chapter also discusses how architectural style may contribute to the visualization of urban, architectural and spatial forms of segregation and boundaries.

In contrast, the current study concentrates on film examples from the 21<sup>st</sup> century and approaches the subject differently, starting from a theoretical definition of power, based on the various forms of *power over* as defined by Dovey in *Framing Places*, and proceeding to investigate how these forms of *power over* are expressed through visualizations of urban, architectural and spatial mis-en-scène. It also introduces new analyses of science fiction films not previously discussed in depth.

This paper also takes a semiological approach, drawing on all elements of the filmic mis-en-scène, of the visual rhetoric, as symbols and codes of meaning. More precisely, our study is related to cultural semiotics which discusses symbolic

---

9. See on “permanence” also Klotz, *Moderne und Postmoderne*, 71.

10. Dovey, *Framing Places*, 19-20, 23; Markus and Cameron, *Words*, 60; Hofmann, “Macht und Raum”, 6, 12-13; Chaput, “Regimes of truth”, 92, 97.

meanings in relation to culture.<sup>11</sup> Because the understanding of the meaning(s) of the urban, architectural and spatial mis-en-scène of films is dependent on the cultural socialization which both have experienced, the professionals involved in film-producing and the audience. This is what Markus effectively means when mentioning that understanding the meaning of language requires speakers and listeners to belong to the “same language-using community.” Likewise, a subject (observer, user, reader) understands meaning when it experiences a building (the object), and both subject and object are “embedded in their historical societies.”<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, Markus and Cameron emphasize that architectural form functions symbolically in conveying power, for example through the metaphorical equation of height with importance, but only in case a community shares the validity of this equation.<sup>13</sup> And finally, Motamed states while investigating the meaning of colour in architecture that “colour meanings need to be considered in their cultural context and never alone.”<sup>14</sup>

We may assume therefore that the visual rhetoric of films is, consciously or unconsciously, designed to be widely readable within a given (in our case the western) culture, or in other words that professionals involved in film-producing and the audience must share basic cultural codes if a film is to resonate successfully with the audience. Even more so, genre films are economic enterprises and thus require a certain degree of shared codes in order to become marketable products, a circumstance which becomes critical when addressing international, transcultural audiences.

The films investigated may be regarded as a specific sub-genre of the science fiction film, centered on future societies in (future) urban environments. Science fiction films with narratives of space exploration and alien invasion, zombie apocalypse, prehistoric monster and natural disaster in urban environments of the present are not included. In addition, our sample centers on films produced since 2000. The films included are:

- Blade Runner 2049 (2017). Directed by Denis Villeneuve. Warner Bros.
- High Rise (2015). Directed by Ben Wheatley. StudioCanal.
- Divergent series: Divergent, Insurgent, Allegiant (2014-2016). Directed by Neil Burger, Robert Schwentke. Lionsgate.
- The Giver (2014). Directed by Phillip Noyce. Weinstein Company.
- Elysium (2013). Directed by Neil Blomkamp. Sony Pictures.
- The Hunger Games series: The Hunger Games, Catching Fire, Mockingjay 1, Mockingjay 2 (2012-2015). Directed by Gary Ross, Francis Lawrence. Lionsgate.
- Total Recall (2012). Directed by Len Wiseman. Columbia Pictures.
- Children of Men (2006). Directed by Alfonso Cuarón. Universal Pictures.
- Aeon Flux (2005). Directed by Karyn Kusama. Paramount Pictures Studios.
- Code 46 (2003). Directed by Michael Winterbottom. MGM.
- Minority Report (2002). Directed by Steven Spielberg. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox.
- Equilibrium (2002). Directed by Kurt Wimmer. Miramax Films.

---

11. Motamed, “Colourful Language”, 42.

12. Markus, *Buildings and Power*, 5.

13. Markus and Cameron, *Words*, 59.

14. Motamed, “Colourful Language”, 57.

Star Wars: Attack of the Clones (2002). Directed by George Lucas. Lucasfilm Ltd.

The following films from the 20<sup>th</sup> century are referred to for comparative purposes:

Metropolis (1927). Directed by Fritz Lang. UFA

Things to Come (1936). Directed by William Cameron Menzies. London Films.

Alphaville (1965). Directed by Jean-Luc Godard. Athos Films.

Fahrenheit 451 (1966). Directed by François Truffaut. Universal Pictures.

THX 1138 (1971). Directed by George Lucas. Warner Bros.

Soylent Green (1973). Directed by Richard Fleischer. MGM.

Logan's Run (1976). Directed by Michael Anderson. MGM.

Blade Runner (1982). Directed by Ridley Scott. Warner Bros.

Brazil (1985). Directed by Terry Gilliam. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox.

We investigate the mediation of forms of power in those 21<sup>st</sup>-century western films by focusing in the following four sections on spatial partitioning according to class; size; disciplining space and spatial partitioning according to societal function/ position; and on architectural style.

### ***Force, Coercion and the Spatialization of Class Relations***

Force and coercion are forms of *power over*. When linked to space and class they are visually expressed through the *mise-en-scène* of (extra-) urban and architectural space, specifically through scenes with a horizontal center-periphery/ inside-outside dialectic, and scenes of boundaries/thresholds, segregation and depth of spatial access.<sup>15</sup>

The first *Blade Runner* (1982) directed by Ridley Scott and Denis Villeneuve's sequel *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) visualize a dystopian, dark vision of future urbanity (Figures 1-2), a "future noir".<sup>16</sup> As with many science fiction cities, the urban setting uses a "spider web" scheme with a high-rise center expressing power and control.<sup>17</sup> There is no forced segregation but both films suggest the existence of a coercive segregation based on economic/social status, as Chaput has argued of the original film from 1982.<sup>18</sup> Their centers are immediately readable as places of (economic) power (see more about size and place in the next section). The web also refers to modern urban planning, such as Le Corbusier's utopian concept of the *Ville Contemporaine* (Figure 3). As Staiger notes, its high-rise center was reserved for individuals of higher social rank while workers were accommodated "further out" in the periphery in a conjunction of architectural and social pyramid.<sup>19</sup> As such, these future noirs use the international high-rise or the nostalgic pyramid-

---

15. Kiessel and Stubbs, "The Present in the Future," 98-105. On space syntax and depth of spatial access see Dovey, *Framing Places*, 20-23.

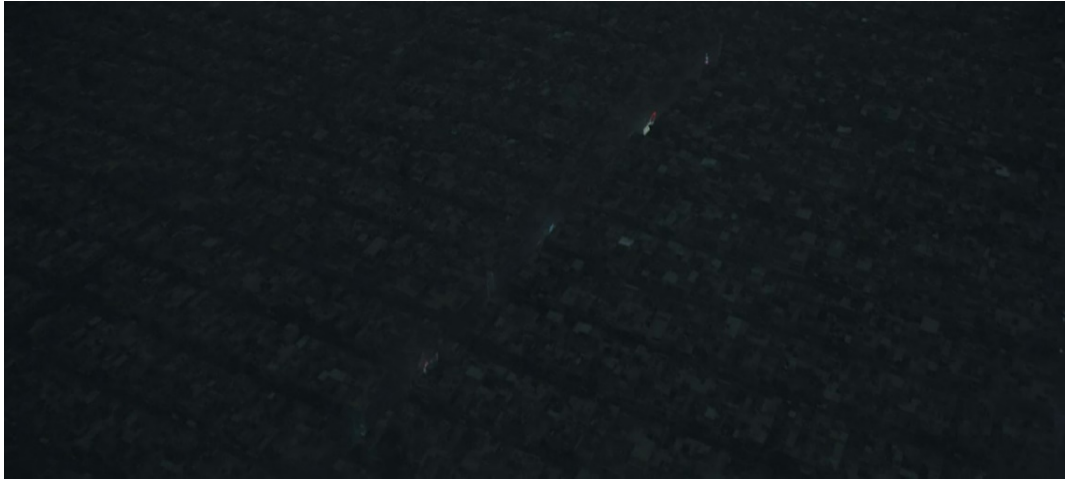
16. Staiger, "Future Noir". On future noir see also Bruno, "Ramble City".

17. Gold, "Darkened Skies," 340.

18. Chaput, "Regimes of truth," 98.

19. Staiger, "Future Noir," 108

peaked skyscraper in order to address the hierarchies and elitism of the late capitalist class system.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, such visualizations of polluted, decayed and segregated megacities “will be recognized as a commentary on the failure of modernist architecture and planning’s utopian aspirations,” as McNamara suggests of the original *Blade Runner*.<sup>21</sup>



**Figure 1.** *The Endless Urban Sprawl of Los Angeles in 2049, Scene from Blade Runner 2049 (2017)*

*Directed by Denis Villeneuve. Warner Bros.*



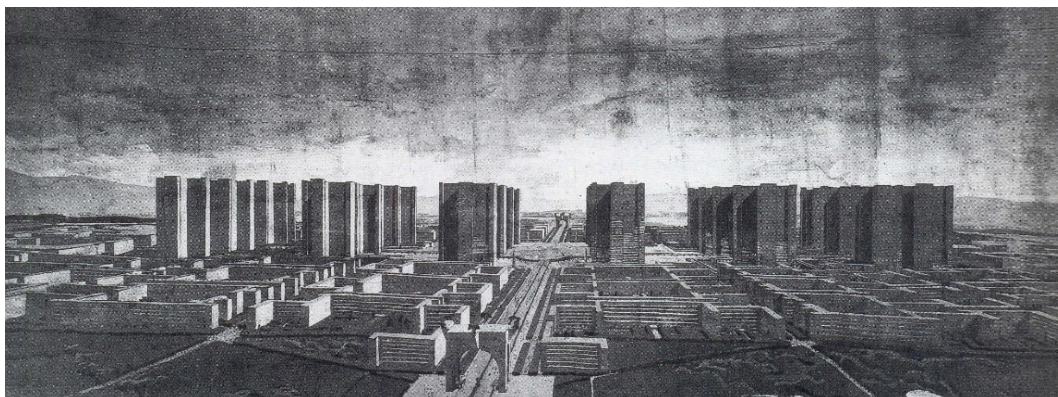
**Figure 2.** *The High-Rise of the Police Headquarter, Scene from Blade Runner 2049 (2017)*

*Directed by Denis Villeneuve. Warner Bros.*

---

20. Staiger, “Future Noir,” 114.

21. McNamara, “Los Angeles 2019,” 123-24.



**Figure 3.** *Le Corbusier, Ville Contemporaine (after Moos, “Le Corbusier,” 176)*

The decayed, polluted and darkened urban web seen in the two *Blade Runner* films refers back to Richard Fleischer’s *Soylent Green* (1973)<sup>22</sup> and is revived similarly in Terry Gilliam’s *Brazil* (1985), and in Len Wiseman’s *Total Recall* (2012), in which the decayed housing of the masses are rendered in a Japanese metabolist modernism. On a regional level beyond the urban boundaries, the same socio-economic web is rendered in the relation between the Capitol city and its 13 districts in Gary Ross and Francis Lawrence’s *The Hunger Games* series, although the future noir imagery of decay is omitted.<sup>23</sup>

In Alfonso Cuarón’s future-noir(ish) *Children of Men* (2006) a decayed Britain is portrayed as the destination of the world’s refugees (Figures 4-6). In contrast to the previous examples, this film renders forceful horizontal segregation through guarded boundaries/thresholds: between the center of governmental power, filmed at London’s monumental Battersea Power Station (Figure 4), the inner city zone which recalls a gated community and which is accessed through a guarded Roman-style triumphal arch (Figure 5), another zone which seemingly consists of middle class housing and refugee housing in maintained or decayed Brutalist high-rises (Figure 6), and finally the distant Bexhill-on-Sea that has been turned into a prison-camp for refugees.<sup>24</sup>

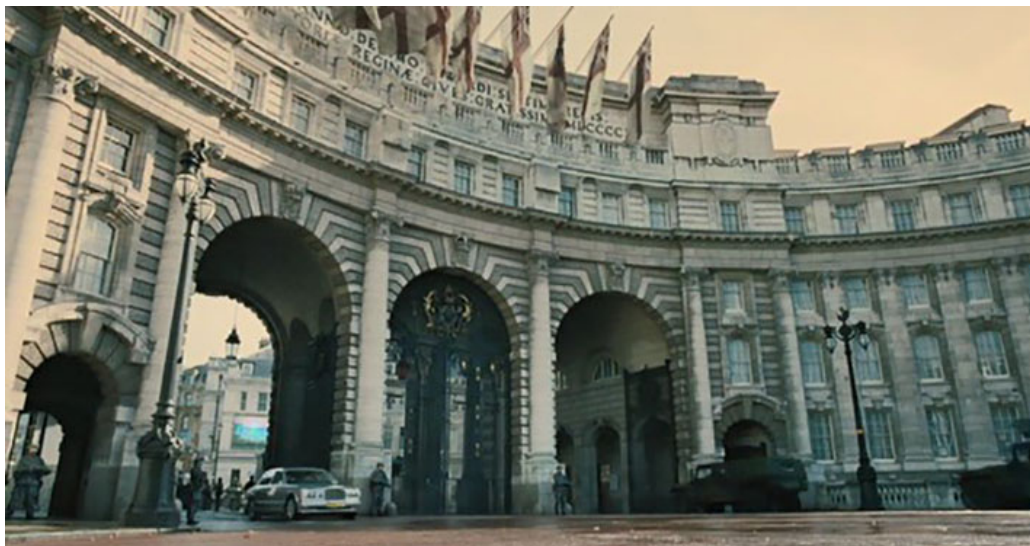
22. Gold, “Darkened Skies,” 340.

23. Kiessel and Stubbs, “The Present in the Future,” 104.

24. Kiessel and Stubbs, “The Present in the Future,” 103.



**Figure 4.** *Central Government Building (Battersea Power Station) in the Inner Zone of London, Scene from Children of Men (2006)*  
Directed by Alfonso Cuarón. Universal Pictures.



**Figure 5.** *Roman-Style Triumphal Arch as Guarded Gateway to the Inner Zone of London, Scene from Children of Men (2006)*  
Directed by Alfonso Cuarón. Universal Pictures.





**Figure 6.** *Outer Zone of London, Refugee Housing, Scene from Children of Men (2006)*

*Directed by Alfonso Cuarón. Universal Pictures.*

The forced horizontal spatialization of class is similarly visualized in Michael Winterbottom's *Code 46* (2003) in which the class-based society is segregated into outer and inner zones and access-controlled by check-points (Figures 7-9), CCTV and genetic surveillance. In Neil Blomkamp's *Elysium* (2013), which like *Children of Men* strongly thematizes once more the issue of migration, forced segregation is most apparent: an exploited labor force in decayed mega-cities on earth, the slums of which appear to be indebted to the visualization of the urban scenes in *Soylent Green*, is contrasted with a privileged population on a gated-community-like space habitat (Figures 10-11). This is the kind of "off-world" colony mentioned but not seen in the original *Blade Runner*.<sup>25</sup> Although *Code 46* and *Elysium* lack some of the typical future noir features, notably the dark/polluted or decayed imagery, both films play like other future noir dystopias with features of utopian designs such as "symmetry, order, [and] clarity".<sup>26</sup>

25. Kiessel and Stubbs, "The Present in the Future," 102.

26. Staiger, "Future Noir," 102.



**Figure 7.** *Periphery Vernacular, Scene from Code 46 (2003)*  
Directed by Michael Winterbottom. MGM



**Figure 8.** *Access Control to Central City, Scene from Code 46 (2003)*  
Directed by Michael Winterbottom. MGM

All of these films visualize an inside-outside dialectic, with more or less clearly defined boundaries and thresholds, and with coercive or forceful spatialization. This dialectic is also related to the construction of identity, as well as the perception of the self and the other, as perceived by the film audience from the perspective of the protagonist(s).<sup>27</sup> Additionally, the films emphasize asymmetric concentrations of power where, as in the Baroque palace of Versailles, the powerful occupy the deepest cells and where the degree of depth of access to the cells/spaces indicates the level of power of individuals or groups.<sup>28</sup>

27. See Dovey, *Framing Places*, 43 on identity and space.

28. Markus, *Buildings and Power*, 14-16, 23; Dovey, *Framing Places*, 20-23.



**Figure 9.** *High-Rises of Central City (Filmed in Shanghai), Scene from Code 46 (2003)*

*Directed by Michael Winterbottom. MGM.*



**Figure 10.** *A High-Rise Center of a Deteriorated Mega-City on Earth, Scene from Elysium (2013)*

*Directed by Neil Blomkamp. Sony Pictures.*

Ben Wheatley’s future noir(ish) *High Rise* (2015) was shot mainly in monotonously colored and dimly lit interiors (Figures 12-13). Throughout the film, the coercive spatialization of class – based on the socio-economic status of the tenants, the depth of access and possibly also the construction of identity – is linked to a vertical organization of space.<sup>29</sup> Although Royal, the architect of the fictional Brutalist residential towers, “describes his design as being a ‘crucible for change’, the upper classes still occupy the top levels. The architect himself resides in the penthouse – just as Ernő Goldfinger took an apartment at the top of his Brutalist Balfon Tower – [...]”<sup>30</sup> Royal’s wife openly points out that the “the high rise has already developed a strict hierarchy based on how close to the top a

29. Kiessel and Stubbs, “The Present in the Future,” 99.

30. Winston, “High Rise.” The quote ‘crucible for change’ recalls the alleged missionary attitude of the architect being the redeemer of societal problems, see Blake, *Form Follows Fiasco*, 149.

given resident lives”.<sup>31</sup> Ironically, the access-restricted deepest cell of the tower is a vernacular timber-frame building within the roof garden where Royal designs the vertical hierarchical spaces of a miniature societal pyramid. The vertical spatialization of class relations goes back ultimately to Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927), with its (forceful) division of the population between an underground city for laborers and an above-ground high-rise city for office employees and the upper classes.



**Figure 11.** *Space Habitat Elysium, Scene from Elysium (2013)*

*Directed by Neil Blomkamp. Sony Pictures.*



**Figure 12.** *Roof-Garden and Vernacular Cottage with Atelier of Architect Royal, Scene from High Rise (2015)*

*Directed by Ben Wheatley. StudioCanal.*

---

31. Robinson, “High Rise.”



**Figure 13.** *The Residential High-Rises, Scene from High Rise (2015)*  
Directed by Ben Wheatley. StudioCanal.

### ***Power to, Coercion, Height and Size***

The *power to* build and plan, together with the coercive forms of *power over*, namely domination/intimidation and manipulation/seduction, are visually expressed typically through the *mise-en scène* of urban space and architecture which emphasize height and size.

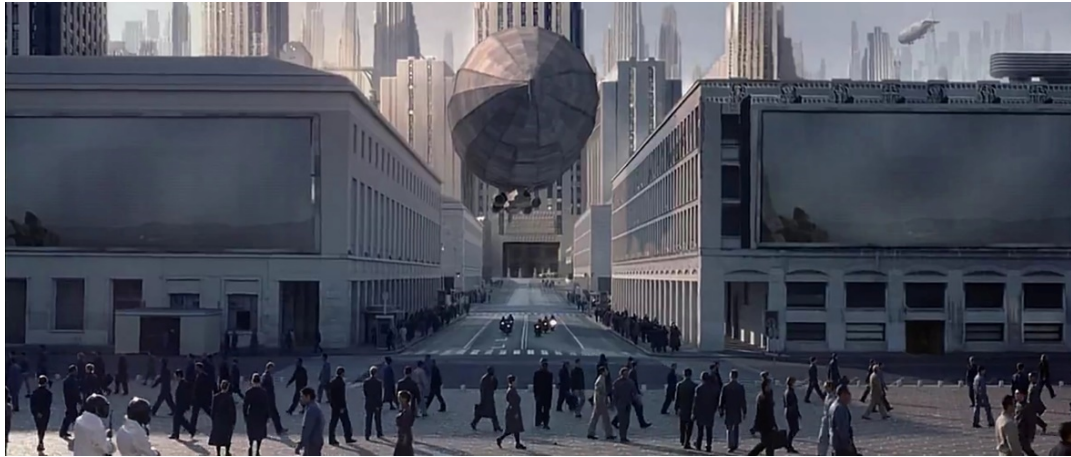
As Dovey puts it, “vertical symbolism permeates the language of power”, carrying “metaphors of force”, “male fertility”, “masculine violence” and being of “phallic character”.<sup>32</sup> Monumental verticality on screen is often linked to urban symmetries and axially, for example in the cases of the cities Libria in Kurt Wimmer’s future noir *Equilibrium* (Figure 14) and the Capitol in *The Hunger Games* series (Figures 15-16). The verticality, height, size and the symmetries of their cityscapes clearly express their totalitarian authority’s *power to* build such architectural structures. The first director of *The Hunger Games* series, Gary Ross, explains the choice of the film’s set in this way: “If you look at any seat of power – from the Brandenburg Gate to Red Square – it’s open space punctuated by buildings of tremendous mass. That was our idea behind it. To Katniss [the protagonist], it all evokes a sense of might and power”.<sup>33</sup> If verticality, height and size are linked to a classicizing language, either abstract/stripped or more figurative, as in these two films, they also may express what Dovey calls the “history of empire”<sup>34</sup>, that is the permanence of power, order and authority based on the impression (or illusion?) of timelessness, history and authenticity.<sup>35</sup>

32. Dovey, *Framing Places*, 41, 109.

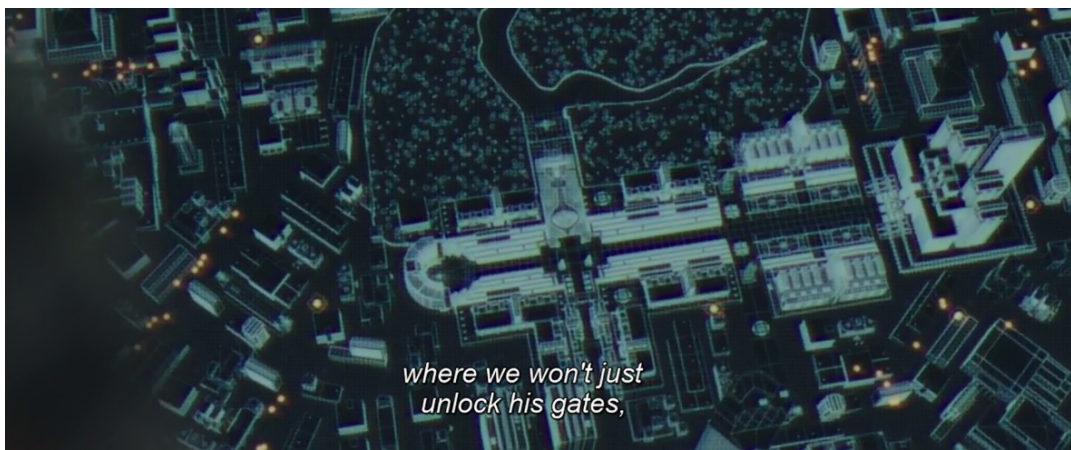
33. Ross in Lionsgate, *Hunger Games* Production notes.

34. Dovey, *Framing Places*, 16, 68-70.

35. See also Ward, “Totalitarianism,” 36-37 on the link between monumentality, classicism, permanence – and totalitarianism.



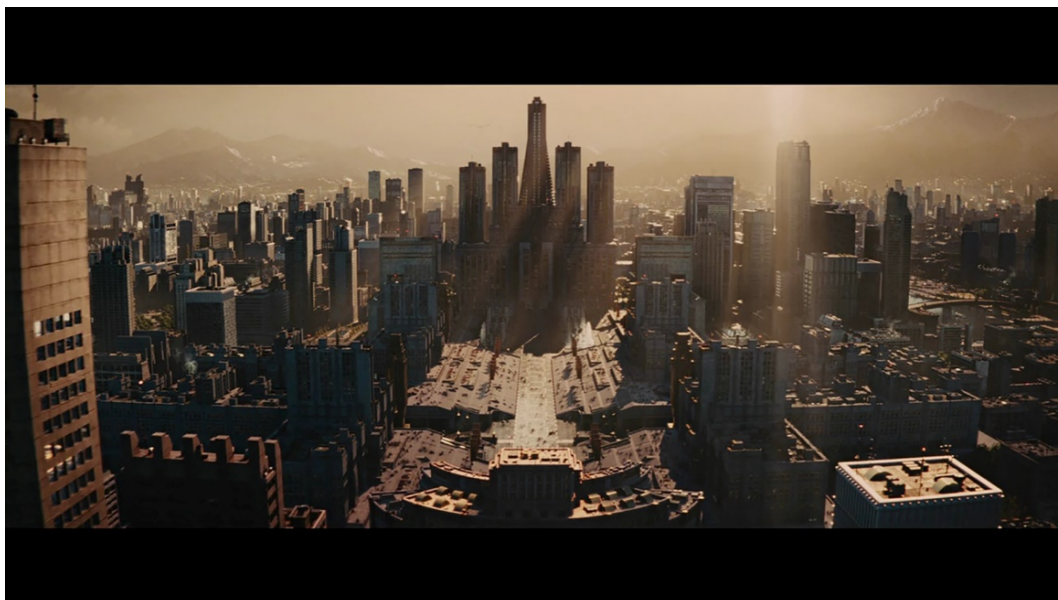
**Figure 14.** *Postapocalyptic City Libria with the Equilibrium Building at the End of the Central Axis, Scene from Equilibrium (2002)*  
Directed by Kurt Wimmer. Miramax Films.



**Figure 15.** *Center of the Capitol with Presidential Palace 'North' of the Circus Promenade, Scene from The Hunger Games Series (2012-2015)*  
Directed by Gary Ross, Francis Lawrence. Lionsgate.

Monumentality and permanence may also be addressed through the visualization of architecture together with landscape. Stuart Cohen suggests that Hugh Ferriss' drawing "The Four Stages" presents skyscrapers as natural phenomena that resemble a mountain range in the background of the drawing while the mountain is interpreted as the metaphorical link between earth and heaven.<sup>36</sup> In the same way, the vertical cityscape of the Capitol in *The Hunger Games* series may be understood as an extension of the mountainous landscape that rises up behind the city (Figure 16).

36. Cohen, "Skyscraper," 16 explains the Art Déco "setback"-skyscraper as Ferriss's interpretation of the mountain shape.



**Figure 16.** *Center of the Capitol with Circus Promenade (Mountain Range in the Background), Scene from The Hunger Games Series (2012-2015)*  
 Directed by Gary Ross, Francis Lawrence. Lionsgate.

The cityscapes of Libria and the Capitol may, at the same time, mediate the related coercive forms of *power over*, namely domination/intimidation. As Heinrich Klotz suggests, “monumental architecture is the architecture of power and of the powerful. It surpasses proportionally the crowd of the common people. Therefore, it is also able to intimidate, to belittle, to suppress”.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, his general, possibly debatable claim that “forms of symmetry and of axiality do not really fit to a democratic state system”<sup>38</sup> does support the interpretation of both *mis-enscène*.

However, the boundaries between being dominating/intimidating and being manipulative/seductive are fluid: the size of these film architectures and spaces may trigger sensations of being belittled/threatened, as well as of awe. One may also consider that events held in the Roman-style circus in *The Hunger Games* series (Figures 15-16), such as “ritual displays of force, discipline and community”<sup>39</sup>, could create an overwhelming sensation of community and of belonging, a psychological trick which authoritarian regimes, past and present, have successfully applied. Naturally, this manipulation targets the film audience, which is meant to perceive the architectures and spaces and to read the visual rhetoric from the perspective of the fictional film characters. The feature of monumental vertical scale in film goes back as far as to the skyscraper city of *Metropolis* (1927).

Phillip Noyce’s *The Giver* (2014), a narrative about a postapocalyptic egalitarian society subdivided into factions, takes a different approach to size. The low-rise city extends horizontally on a vast scale while being strictly axial and symmetrical. It consists of structuralist clusters of white, standardized International

37. Klotz, *Moderne und Postmoderne*, 71; transl. from the German by M. Kiessel.

38. Klotz, *Moderne und Postmoderne*, 52; transl. from the German by M. Kiessel.

39. Dovey, *Framing Places*, 70.

Style-like residential buildings of the same height, mirrored along a central axis that contains public and communal buildings (Figure 17). The cityscape is a demonstration of *power to* concerning planning: through the display of order it suggests a powerful authority behind the utopian planning. The same is also true for the almost Baroque-style mix of landscape, water and architecture in Karyn Kusama's *Aeon Flux* (2005). As with vertical size, size in horizontal form is used to evoke feelings of awe in the viewer, that is to manipulate/seduce, and by so doing to make the audience perceive/ experience architecture and space through the perspective of the films' protagonists. In both films there is a strong and presumably intentional contrast between dystopian narrative and utopian mise-en-scène, which does not include the future noir elements of decay, pollution and darkness. Nevertheless, as with future noir dystopias, both films play with features of utopian designs like "symmetry, order, [and] clarity".<sup>40</sup>

However, the general low-rise horizontality of *The Giver* is not able to express *power over* in the sense of domination/intimidation. Horizontality in modern architecture has been associated with the "break of the modern movement with conventional representation of power as the concept of democracy of the 1920s brought about an egalitarian ideal also architecturally".<sup>41</sup> Urban axiality and symmetries without verticality may nevertheless emphasize places of power. Being strikingly similar to Lucio Costa's urban design of Brasilia with its central axis of public and governmental buildings<sup>42</sup>, the city layout seen in *The Giver* suggests that power and authority are concentrated on a linear central axis.



**Figure 17.** *The Postapocalyptic City, Scene from The Giver (2014)*

*Directed by Phillip Noyce. Weinstein Company.*

40. Staiger, "Future Noir," 102.

41. Klotz, *Moderne und Postmoderne*, 159, transl. from the German by M. Kiessel.

42. Frampton, *Modern Architecture*, 256-57 fig. 257; Kostof, *The City Shaped*, 178-79 fig. 178.



Individual buildings that are part of a vertical symbolism are usually the headquarters of governments or their institutions (Figures 2, 4, 14), or of powerful corporations that have partially replaced governmental power, as with the Tyrell pyramid in the original *Blade Runner*. In Neil Burger and Robert Schwentke's *Divergent* series, a post-apocalyptic society is subdivided into factions. The headquarters of the "Erudite" faction of scientists (Figure 18) is a tall white skyscraper with a tripartite façade design, a modernized version of an Art Deco skyscraper based on the design of Richard Meier's 1980s High Museum of Art in Atlanta.<sup>43</sup> It is surely not coincidental that the structure is colored white, as are costumes of the scientist faction – a color which is commonly associated with modernist architecture and its societal, spatial, technological and *scientific* ideology.<sup>44</sup> The greyish, Brutalist skyscrapers in *High Rise* are residential (Figure 13), but all of these individual high rises express the *power to* build such structures and places of power that literally stand out. Additionally, some may be perceived being more dominating and intimidating, whereas others may appear to be more manipulating and/or seducing.

The size of interiors also mediates power effectively and is visualized in the rendering of the foyer of the "Erudite" skyscraper in the *Divergent* series. The *mise-en-scène* makes use of the particular "symbolic importance of the foyer" through its "ubiquity", "spatial grandeur", and surface spectacle as reflection of power<sup>45</sup>, meaning that it is manipulative-seductive. The scene recalls the classicizing Art Deco foyer of the Ministry of Information in *Brazil*, although this space expresses domination/ intimidation and the "history of empire" and highlights a specific power-related feature of foyers: the power to grant or refuse access, meaning the aspect of the depth of access to the deeper cells.<sup>46</sup> Another interior that plays on size and expresses power of a dominating-intimidating kind is the council hall in *Aeon Flux*, filmed at Axel Schultes and Charlotte Frank's Brutalist Crematorium Baumschulenweg in Berlin<sup>47</sup>, a space which mediates once more a "history of empire" through the classical quality of its abstract monumental columns.

---

43. See for the museum Jodidio, *Richard Meier*, 47-49.

44. Klotz, *Moderne und Postmoderne*, 19, 25, 39; Herrel, "Farbe," 99, 112-13. Herrel demonstrates that colour was originally a common element in the modern architecture of the 1920s.

45. Dovey, *Framing Places*, 114-15.

46. Markus, *Buildings and Power*, 14-16, 23; Dovey, *Framing Places*, 20-23; Kiessel and Stubbs, "The Present in the Future," 98-99, 105-06.

47. Schultes and Frank, "Crematorium."



**Figure 18.** *Headquarter of the Erudite Faction, Scene from the Divergent Series (2014-2016)*

*Directed by Neil Burger, Robert Schwentke. Lionsgate.*

### ***Manipulation, Disciplined Bodies and the Foucauldian Spatialization of Societal Relations***

Much like the spatialization of class relations discussed previously, the coercive-manipulative spatialization of societal relations according to rank and function discussed in this section are expressed typically through the *mise-en-scène* of urban and architectural space, which visualizes spatial partitioning. However, it is not so much the affiliation to *class* in a capitalist socio-economic sense which motivates the spatial partitioning, but rather the rank and/or functional position of groups within a society, in a Foucauldian sense. At the same time, the latter feature cannot always be separated from the *class* aspect.<sup>48</sup>

The rank and functional purposes of societal groups are thematized in the *Divergent* series, set in a postapocalyptic Chicago, where a theoretically egalitarian society is divided into five factions to which citizens elect to join as teenagers. The factions are only theoretically of equal rank and are spatially separated from each other in terms of places of accommodation and work, forming sub-communities with their own distinct identities within the society. Examples of accommodation spaces for three factions are rendered more in detail. Social division, which is one aspect of the dystopian narrative, is also visually emphasized in the procedure through which teenagers select their faction. The procedure begins with the visualization of five separate entrances to the society's central community building known as "The Hub", shot at the Willis tower (formerly Sears tower) in Chicago,

---

48. See on Foucault Dovey, *Framing Places*, 19-20, Chaput, "Regimes of truth," 97, and especially Hofmann, "Macht und Raum," 6.

where the teenagers line-up (Figure 19).<sup>49</sup> The coercive manipulation lies in the fact that having to select a faction does not amount to real freedom of choice. This specific spatialization therefore evokes the functional-hierarchical organization of a society portrayed in *THX 1138* (1971) rather than the (forceful) vertical division of underground city for laborers and above-ground high-rise city for office employees and the upper classes seen in *Metropolis*.<sup>50</sup>

The *Divergent* series' orderly lay-out of grey, standardized cubic dwellings in an International Style-like housing settlement (Figure 20) may be regarded as an expression of the egalitarian character and identity of one of the five societal factions, meaningfully named "Abnegation" and nicknamed "the Stiffs". But this visual rhetoric also suggests that the displayed repetitive standardized architecture coerces/disciplines the minds and bodies of the factions' members in a Foucauldian sense into the same way of living and into the same patterns of behavior. In other words, like every house, the standardized dwellings of the Abnegation faction convey and construct the social identity of its inhabitants.<sup>51</sup> This notion is supported by the standardized dresscode as part of the faction's identity.



**Figure 19.** *Teenagers Choosing Their Future Faction, Scene from the Divergent Series (2014-2016)*

*Directed by Neil Burger, Robert Schwentke. Lionsgate.*

49. "Sears Tower," Divergent Fandom, accessed November 22, 2022, [https://divergent.fandom.com/wiki/Sears\\_Tower\\_\(Willis\\_Tower\)](https://divergent.fandom.com/wiki/Sears_Tower_(Willis_Tower)).

50. On *THX 1138* see Kiessel and Stubbs, "The Present in the Future," 100.

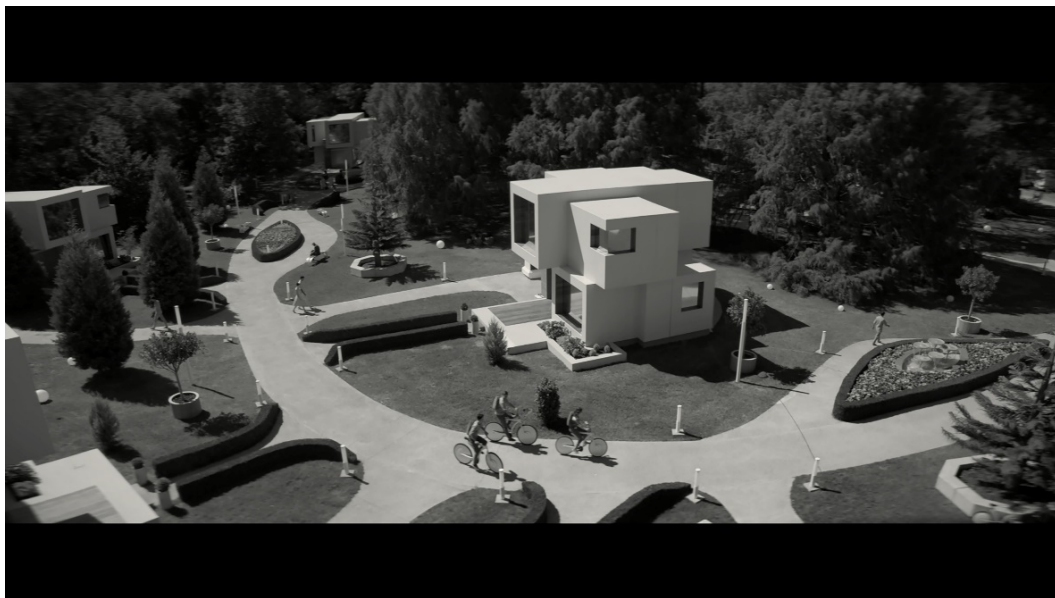
51. Dovey, *Framing Places*, 140 on the house and identity.



**Figure 20.** *Standardized Modernist Residences, Abnegation Faction, Scene from the Divergent Series (2014-2016)*

*Directed by Neil Burger, Robert Schwentke. Lionsgate.*

Similarly, the orderly planning of urban clusters in *The Giver*, and their white, standardized cubic dwellings (Figures 17, 21), suggest that inhabitants are manipulated/disciplined into the same lifestyle and behavioural patterns while reflecting the egalitarian identity of the portrayed society. But the aspect of disciplining is taken a step further in *The Giver* as control of the minds and bodies is also achieved through the mandatory use of medication, a narrative feature indebted to *THX 1138*, and through thorough surveillance techniques.<sup>52</sup>



**Figure 21.** *Standardized Modernist Residences, Scene from The Giver (2014)*

*Directed by Phillip Noyce. Weinstein Company.*

<sup>52</sup>. See once again Dovey, *Framing Places*, 19-20, 23 on the Foucauldian disciplinary bio-power, surveillance, and partitioned space.

Disciplining through architecture and space was not only a theme for Jeremy Bentham in relation to his design for the panopticon, the ideal prison,<sup>53</sup> and for other disciplinary institutions but also for Le Corbusier in relation to the design of housing settlements. According to him, a “well-mapped out scheme, constructed on a mass-production basis, can give a feeling of calm, order and neatness, and inevitably imposes discipline on the inhabitants.”<sup>54</sup> Scholars have also suggested that the use of right angles in Le Corbusier’s earlier work of the 1920s/30s may be interpreted as a metaphor for the order which he sought to achieve.<sup>55</sup>

What shines through here – in reality and on screen – is the supposed ambition of modern architects and planners to coerce people to change for the better, to build a better society through (modern) architecture – an ambition that is the essence of all utopian architectural and urban concepts.<sup>56</sup> Due to its rather austere character, modernist architecture in form of a monochrome white or grey International Style or Brutalism may serve the expression of the coercive-disciplinary characteristics of architecture better than any other style. This is perhaps what the philosopher Ernst Bloch had in mind when he claimed that functionalist architecture was a product of the “ice-cold world of robots”.<sup>57</sup> And the boundary between order and discipline on one side and totalitarianism on the other is thin, as Tony Ward points out, for example, when he states that the “totalitarianism of ‘Democratic [i.e. modern] Architecture’ is there”.<sup>58</sup>

In the *Divergent* series and *The Giver*, modernist architecture – through its austerity, standardization and lack of ornament – emphasizes the “sameness” of individuals within the depicted societies. The term “sameness” is introduced by the Giver (played by Jeff Bridges), one of the main characters in the film, and is initially meant in a utopian sense, as a feature in an egalitarian, better society. However, as “sameness” is suggested to be equivalent to a lack of individuality, this feature later takes a dystopian turn.<sup>59</sup> Standardization in modern architecture, clothing and headgear featured in science fiction dystopias about egalitarianism-gone-wrong can be traced back to the underground workers’ city of *Metropolis* in 1927 and, after a long hiatus, to *THX 1138* (1971). Of the utopian science fiction texts that use this feature to truly stress the utopian character of an egalitarian society, the earliest example is the underground block-of-flats in William Cameron Menzies’ *Things to Come* (1936).

The modernist idiom is also used in interiors to emphasize “sameness” and “disciplined bodies” in *Divergent*. The lack of privacy for female and male novices of the Dauntless faction in bare modernist-Brutalist sleeping and washing spaces visualizes the intended disciplining of young people into a specific group

---

53. Markus, *Buildings and Power*, 123-27.

54. Hofmann 2003, “Macht und Raum,” 10, referring to Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, 224-25.

55. Hofmann, “Macht und Raum,” 9-10. See also Blake, *Form Follows Fiasco*, 123-25 on order and control related to housing settlements.

56. See on utopia and architecture for example Markus and Cameron, *Words*, 77-78.

57. Krufft, *Architectural Theory*, 440.

58. Ward, “Totalitarianism,” 46-47. See also Fortin, *Architecture*, 127 on the authoritarian character of brutalist architecture.

59. Director Phillip Noyce on “sameness”: Frei, “The Giver.”

identity which transgresses conventional gender boundaries (Figure 22).<sup>60</sup> The small flat occupied by Maria in a run-down block-of-flats in *Code 46* is spatially compartmentalized into functional zones that are part of an open-plan interior, separated by (sliding) glass panels. This compartmentalization, together with the visualization of the squares and rectangles of the flat's ceramic and glass tiling, create the impression of being enclosed or imprisoned in daily routines and by life in general. The square and rectangle motifs seen in Sam's flat in *Brazil* (1985) and of THX 1138's flat in *THX 1138* may be interpreted in the same way.<sup>61</sup>

In *Equilibrium*, as with in *The Giver* and *THX1138*, the mandatory self-disciplining suppression of human emotions by medication, enforced by surveillance, is reflected through orderly, austere, white or greyish colored modernist private interiors, apart from the standardization of cloths and their color, and by an austere stripped classicism of public exteriors (Figure 14). *Equilibrium* was shot in the Esposizione Universale Roma (EUR), built in the 1930s during the Fascist regime under Mussolini.<sup>62</sup> Taken in its entirety, this reflects the order of a totalitarian system in which people are reduced to a powerless and anonymous mass.



**Figure 22.** *Novices's Accommodation, Dauntless-Faction, Scene from the Divergent Series (2014-2016)*

*Directed by Neil Burger, Robert Schwentke. Lionsgate.*

### ***Power Over and Architectural Style***

As already argued above, architectural style contributes to the mediation of meaning(s) of power on screen. One of the most consistent features in the rendering of architecture in science fiction dystopias is the recurring juxtaposition of both classicism and modernism, which highlights power relations and the previously discussed spatial partitioning of class. Repeatedly (decayed) modern

60. Kiessel and Stubbs, "The Present in the Future," 101.

61. Kiessel and Stubbs, "The Present in the Future," 101. See on this motif also Wheeler, "Brazil," 98, and Telotte, "THX 1138," 48.

62. Ingram, "Berlin," 369. On the EUR see also Stern, *Moderner Klassizismus*, 46; Frampton, *Modern Architecture*, 207.

architecture, in the form of a monochrome greyish International Style or Brutalism, is associated with the politically and economically powerless and the possibly oppressed, whereas classicism reflects the powerful and wealthy.<sup>63</sup> Once again, this form of visualization can be traced back as far as *Metropolis*, where the labourers' underground city is rendered in a bare, austere modernism and the rich and powerful are shown in classical and classicizing Art Déco environments. This contrast can also be observed in *Equilibrium*, *Children of Men* (Figures 4-6), *Total Recall*, *Elysium* (Figures 10-11, 23), and *The Hunger Games* series. More specifically, classicism in these texts may express domination/intimidation, as in the previously discussed mise-en-scène of architectures, spaces and places of (governmental) power, such as the Baroque-style “father’s” office (Figure 24). This colour-loaded space is the deepest, most strictly access-restricted cell within *Equilibrium*'s city of Libria from which the “father” exercises absolute power, recalling the French kings in Versailles during the era of Absolutism of the 17<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>64</sup> A similarly dominating/intimidating classicism also features in the triumphal arch in *Children of Men* (Figure 5) and the “reaping” stages or “halls of justice” in *The Hunger Games* series, the architectural setting for the forceful selection of the participants for the Hunger Games (Figure 25).<sup>65</sup>



**Figure 23.** *Classicist Mansion on Elite Space-Habitat, Scene from Elysium (2013)*  
Directed by Neil Blomkamp. Sony Pictures.

In contrast to modernist styles, classicism is also able to convey the “history of empire”, that is the permanence of power, order and authority emerging from the impression (or illusion?) of timelessness, history and authenticity, regardless of whether this power is perceived positively or negatively.<sup>66</sup> It is suitable because the “classical is an architecture of regularity, symmetry, harmony and hierarchy.”

63. Kiessel and Stubbs, “The Present in the Future,” 105.

64. Kiessel and Stubbs, “The Present in the Future,” 101, 106.

65. Kiessel and Stubbs, “The Present in the Future,” 105-06.

66. See on the aspect of “history of empire” also Stubbs and Kiessel, “Futures past and present”.

It is therefore possible to “read such architecture as a metaphor for similar qualities in the political order.” The sense of permanence so often associated with classicism is something that modern architecture is unable to provide.<sup>67</sup> The fact that classicism plays a prominent role in (US) science fiction dystopias may be linked to deep-seated cultural values and it being the enduring public language of western institutions.<sup>68</sup> It is the “art of authority and authoritative art”, an “assertion of authority, of power under whatever form”.<sup>69</sup> And specifically in relation to the US of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, its meaning is related to the democratic and republican forms of government of ancient Greece and Rome.<sup>70</sup>



**Figure 24.** *Deepest Cell* (“Father’s” Office), Scene from *Equilibrium* (2002)  
Directed by Kurt Wimmer. Miramax Films.

The mediation of the permanence of (governmental) authority and of the “history of empire” through classicism in science fiction dystopias can be observed in the mise-en-scène of the Roman-style triumphal arch gateway in *Children of Men* (Figure 5), the presidential palace filmed at the 1920s Neo-Baroque Swan house in Atlanta in *The Hunger Games* series<sup>71</sup>, and the “reaping” stages from the same films. The building material of the latter, ashlar stone, contributes to the sense of permanence (Figures 25-26).<sup>72</sup> Despite the overall modern appearance of the city seen in *The Giver*, based on its visualization of housing areas, permanence can also be observed in a building with a classical temple façade which is situated within the city’s central axis and which is obviously the seat of government and authority. The motif of the classical Greek or Roman temple is one of the most frequent in the world of architecture, especially in the US, and even today the motif may signify “reliability”, a “secure

67. Dovey, *Framing Places*, 68-70.

68. Stern, “What the classical can do,” 31.

69. Zerner, “Classicism,” 36.

70. Greenberg, “Architecture and Democracy,” 71.

71. Lionsgate, *Catching Fire* Production Notes.

72. See on totalitarianism, permanence (and stone): Ward, “Totalitarianism,” 36-37; Dovey, *Framing Places*, 112.



future”<sup>73</sup>, trustworthiness, authenticity, and justice. Therefore, it is probably the strongest motif to convey permanence.

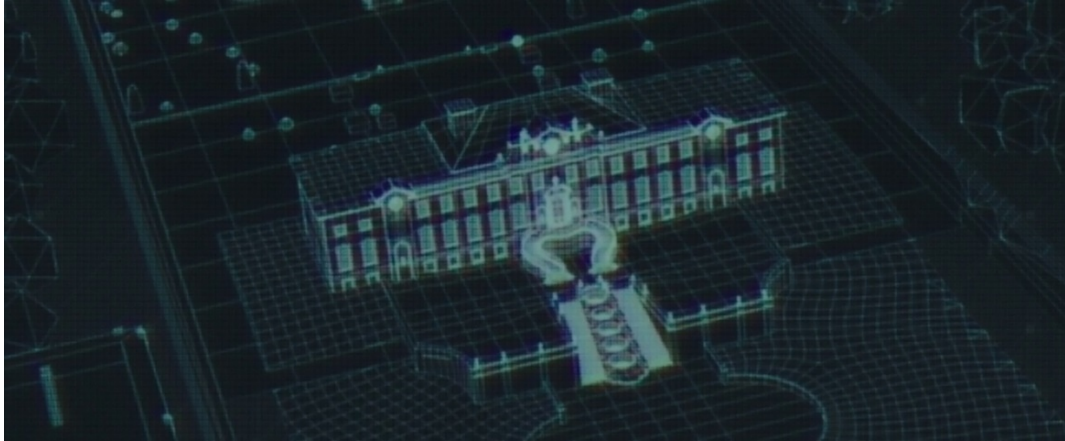


**Figure 25.** *Reaping Tribune, Scene from The Hunger Games Series (2012-2015)*  
Directed by Gary Ross, Francis Lawrence. Lionsgate.

In George Lucas’s *Attack of the Clones* (2002) from the Star Wars prequel trilogy, Theed, the capital of the peaceful and democratic people of Naboo, is rendered by architectural pastiche, mixing the Baroque (shot partially in the palace of Caserta, close to Naples) with the historicist 19<sup>th</sup>-century Haussmann-Paris through scenes that evoke the Champs Elysée boulevard with its Arc de Triomphe, and with domed buildings that recall Byzantine-type church architecture. However, the use of classicism and historicism in this film are unusual among contemporary science fiction dystopias due to their mediation of a democratic and hence positively connoted power/authority. They are contrasted with the high-tech modernism of the mega-cityscape of Coruscant, representing the negatively connoted authority of the Republic’s power-center which is in the process of turning into a totalitarian Empire. The invasion of Theed by the Republic’s android army and the army’s triumphal march on Theed’s representative monumental axis evoke the triumphal march of Nazi German troops in Paris after the capitulation of France in 1940.

---

73. Klotz, *Moderne und Postmoderne*, 49.



**Figure 26.** *Presidential Palace (Swan house, 1920s, Atlanta), Scene from The Hunger Games Series (2012-2015)*

*Directed by Gary Ross, Francis Lawrence. Lionsgate.*

Beyond these aspects of class and/or governmental power, classicism may also express seduction in several narratives, especially in scenes that emphasize inequalities of status and wealth, for example in *Elysium* (Figures 10-11, 23), in *Total Recall*, through the contrast of Quaid's modernist-metabolist and Hauser's classicist accommodations, and in *The Hunger Games* series, through the classicizing houses occupied by the victors of the gladiatorial games.<sup>74</sup> The latter, with their symmetrical façade, central entrance and interior classicist detailing, are trophies of granted status and wealth, possible seductive attractions for the lower classes of the exploited districts, living in standardized dwellings of a vernacular character as in District 12, filmed at an abandoned 1920s mill town in Henry River, North Carolina.<sup>75</sup>

The rare case of restriction of knowledge as a means to exercise *power over*<sup>76</sup> is rendered in *The Giver* where the house of the Giver, the keeper of all forbidden pre-catastrophe knowledge, is a classicizing temple-like building (Figure 27). The structure is made off-limits to common inhabitants not through forceful exclusion but through coercive manipulation: orally transmitted rules and a location at the distant boundary of the city. The classical language emphasizes the authority and power that emerges from holding knowledge and the power of restricting knowledge, and it is linked to the expression of the "history of empire" at the same time. This feature in science fiction dystopias goes back at least to Norman Jewison's *Rollerball* (1975), for which the 1930s League of Nations building in Geneva<sup>77</sup>, designed in a stripped classicism, was chosen – unsurprisingly – to serve as the location of forcefully shielded-off and forbidden/hidden knowledge. Earlier science fiction visualizations of hidden power/knowledge regimes are the

74. Kiessel and Stubbs, "The Present in the Future," 106.

75. On the mill town: Ross in Lionsgate, *Hunger Games* Production Notes.

76. See Markus and Cameron, *Words*, 61 on Foucauldian regimes of power/knowledge and authoritative knowledge.

77. Geneva International 2022.

supercomputers in Jean-Luc Godard's *Alphaville* (1965) and in Michael Anderson's *Logan's Run* (1976) albeit not rendered by means of a classical vocabulary.



**Figure 27.** *House of the Giver, Keeper of Memories, Scene from The Giver (2014)*  
Directed by Phillip Noyce. Weinstein Company.

Many science fiction films also emphasize the motif of escape from urban authoritarian regimes to a rural sanctuary, with the countryside standing for an “existence rooted in the virtues of family and community life”.<sup>78</sup> The science fiction city as place of oppressive dystopia is therefore often juxtaposed with a romanticised countryside,<sup>79</sup> as in François Truffaut's *Fahrenheit 451* (1966) and Michael Anderson's *Logan's Run* (1976). Accordingly, the vernacular architecture of the countryside often expresses freedom from or opposition to totalitarianism, as in *Fahrenheit 451* where knowledge, forbidden by the totalitarian government, is hidden and protected from its reach by the resistance in a vernacular residence and, as the final scenes show, in the freedom of anti-urban nature. In effect this narrative contains a reversal of the Foucauldian power/knowledge regime because the power of knowledge lies with the (supposedly) powerless. Steven Spielberg's *Minority Report* (2002) expresses on the one hand the existence of “home”, family and positive emotions by “traditional notions of domesticity”<sup>80</sup> through an idyllic lake-side vernacular and the presence of a female character.<sup>81</sup> But while the vernacular log-house (Figure 28) in the final scenes of the film conveys similar “traditional notions of domesticity”, it also represents freedom from forceful imprisonment and abusive exploitation, as previously experienced by the now liberated three seers. Similarly, the symbolism of the vernacular-in-nature in *The Giver* is encountered once again in the final scenes during the escape from the modernist city and its totalitarianism, expressing the absence of force and

78. Gold, “Darkened Skies,” 341. See also Kellner, Leibowitz and Ryan, “Blade Runner”, and Dovey, *Framing Places*, 150 who states that a nostalgic “pseudo-vernacular” is linked to the myth of harmonious village life.

79. Gold, “Darkened Skies,” 341.

80. Fortin, *Architecture*, 151.

81. See Fortin, *Architecture*, 145 on the contrasting main protagonist's modern urban condominium.

manipulation and instead the presence of a home, which hosts a real family and where genuine emotions can be found.



**Figure 28.** *Vernacular Countryside Refuge, Scene from Minority Report (2002)*  
Directed by Steven Spielberg, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox.

However, the vernacular also may occur instead of a decayed modernism, as in the poor Shangrila housing settlement in *Brazil*, namely in the mise-en-scène of the peripheries mediating the lack of power as in *Code 46's* vernacular of a rather Arabic-oriental appearance (Figure 7), and in *The Hunger Games* series' standardized houses of vernacular character in District 12. In the case of *High Rise*, the meaning of the idyllic vernacular cottage on the rooftop, the atelier of architect Royal and deepest cell of the residential tower, is possibly ironic (Figure 12). It is as if the mastermind of the hierarchical Brutalist spaces wished to escape from their totalitarian reality, albeit only from time to time. If it was not intended to be ironic, however, the traditional meaning of the vernacular in science fiction film, as outlined before, would have been reversed in *High Rise*, as if to express that the vernacular style is now occupied by the powerful and wealthy and has ceased to function as a symbol of resistance to, or refuge from, totalitarianism and oppression.

### Conclusion

In the western, 21<sup>st</sup>-century urban science fiction films we have analyzed, dystopian narratives of totalitarianism, class segregation, egalitarianism, and surveillance are given visual form. The films contain multiple cases of mediation of power through urban, architectural and spatial form.

Recurring expressions of *power to* and of forms of *power over* have been observed, such as force, coercion, domination/intimidation, manipulation/seduction, being frequently coupled with surveillance. These forms of power are mediated through recurring specific urban, architectural and spatial settings, such as the dialectic of center-periphery/inside-outside, vertical and horizontal size, partitioning of space, depth of spatial access, urban, architectural and spatial order

achieved by symmetry, axuality and standardization, and finally through classicist, modernist and vernacular architecture. The following combinations of specific forms of power and specific urban, architectural and spatial visualizations recur on screen:

Power relations between classes that are linked to the mediation of force and coercion are visualized repeatedly through architectural and urban spatialization, namely by an inside-outside/center-periphery dialectic, coupled with scenes of depth of spatial access and of thresholds/boundaries. Such power relations are frequently highlighted by juxtaposing classicist and (decayed) modernist International-Style or Brutalist architecture, which represent the powerful/wealthy and the powerless/poor, respectively. Coercive-manipulating power in a Foucauldian sense is expressed through spatial partitioning on the basis of rank and of the functional role of individuals and groups within a society or community, although this cannot always be separated from the aspect of *class*.

Dominating/intimidating or manipulating/seducing urban and/or architectural size expresses, not surprisingly, concentrated administrative, political and/or economic power. Size is a code which is the most likely among the investigated urban, architectural and spatial features to resonate cross-culturally. It is frequently displayed in combination with an either more figurative or more abstract classicism. Both mediate an imagery of permanence; size and classicism therefore express the “history of empire” (Dovey), that is the permanence of power, order and authority based on the impression (or illusion?) of timelessness, history and authenticity. In rare cases classicism is also used to express authoritative knowledge, meaning knowledge as source and means of *power over*, and to express restricted access to knowledge.

Order, when conveyed through standardized monochrome International-Style or Brutalist architecture and space, often in conjunction with urban symmetry and axuality, is connected with the Foucauldian manipulation and disciplining of minds and bodies. It is linked to narratives of “sameness”, a sense of egalitarianism-gone-wrong. A romanticized countryside vernacular, especially when being juxtaposed with the modern (mega-) city, expresses the absence of *power over*, in other words the freedom opposite to totalitarianism. In rarer cases, however, the vernacular mediates the lack of power of the non-privileged.

The repeated use of specific urban, architectural and spatial visualizations, and the fact that they can be traced back to the beginning of the postmodern era, and in part even to film production in the 1920s, may be proof of a widespread conscious or subconscious reading of these visualizations and understanding of their meaning(s) with regards to power – meanings which therefore may be deeply rooted in the culture of western societies. In contrast, it is debatable whether certain visualizations, for example of modernist architecture, are read by audiences of non-western cultures in the same way. Based on the results of this paper, this question has got the potential to evolve into a new study.

The ongoing use of urban, architectural and spatial features from earlier dystopian science fiction films, such as the modernist spaces in *THX 1138* from the early postmodern age, poses also a certain danger. The fact that the modernist vocabulary, for example, is so often used to express either a totalitarian disciplining

of people's minds and bodies or the forceful or coercive spatialization of class may lead to or may have already led to stereotypes on screen, namely that modernism is usually negatively connoted. This is to say that the reflection of specific meanings through recurring specific urban, architectural and spatial settings may risk the artificial augmentation and self-replication of these very meanings. This issue may also be worth investigating further.

### Acknowledgments

This paper is a written and extended version of a presentation, held by Marko Kiessel at the 12th Annual International Conference on Urban Studies & Planning, 30-31 May & 1-2 June 2022, Athens, Greece, organized by the Athens Institute for Education and Research. We would like to thank to Clara Germana Gonçalves and Maria João Soares for their kind invitation to contribute to the present volume.

### Bibliography

- Babish, Stephen. *Concrete Futures: Science Fiction Cinema and Modernist Architecture at the Dawn of Postmodernity*. PhD Dissertation. Northwestern University, 2016.
- Blake, Peter. *Form follows Fiasco. Why Modern Architecture hasn't worked*. Boston/Toronto: Atlantic-Little/Brown Books, 1977.
- Bruno, Giuliana. "Ramble City: Postmodernism and *Blade Runner*." *October* 41 (1987): 61-74.
- Chaput, Catherine. "Regimes of truth, disciplined bodies, secured populations. An overview of Michel Foucault." *Science Fiction Film and Television* 2, no. 1 (2009): 91-104.
- Cohen, Stuart. "The Skyscraper as Symbolic Form." *Design Quarterly* 118/119 (1982): 12-17.
- Dovey, Kim. *Framing Places. Mediating Power in Built Form*. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Fortin, David T. *Architecture and Science-Fiction Film. Philip K. Dick and the Spectacle of Home*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2011.
- Frampton, Kenneth. *Modern Architecture. A Critical History*. 4<sup>th</sup> Edition. London: Thames and Hudson, 2007.
- Frei, Vincent. *The Giver: Mark Breakspear – VFX Supervisor – Method Studios*. Retrieved from: <http://www.artofvfx.com/the-giver-mark-breakspear-vfx-supervisor-method-studios/>. [Accessed 29 November 2022.]
- Geneve International. *The Palace of Nations: A Monument to Peace*. Retrieved from: <https://www.geneve-int.ch/node/4155>. [Accessed 22 November 2022.]
- Gold, John R. "Under Darkened Skies: The city in Science-fiction Film." *Geography* 86, no. 4 (2001): 337-45.
- Greenberg, Alan. "The Architecture of Democracy." In *New Classicism. Omnibus Volume*, edited by Andreas Papadakis and Harriet Watson, 68-72. London: Academy Editions, 1990.
- Herrel, Eckhardt. "Farbe in der Architektur der Moderne." [Color in Modern Architecture.] In *Moderne Architektur in Deutschland 1900 bis 1950. Expressionismus und Neue*

- Sachlichkeit*, edited by Vittorio M. Lampugnani and Romana Schneider, 99-115. Stuttgart: Gerd Hatje, 1994.
- Hofmann, Martin L. *Macht und Raum. Eine Besichtigung moderner Architektur mit Michel Foucault. Vortrag vor dem Architektursalon Kassel, 7. November 2003.* [Power and Space. A Tour of Modern Architecture with Michel Foucault. Lecture at the Kassel Architecture Salon, November 7, 2003.] Retrieved from: [http://www.architektursalon-kassel.de/Martin\\_Hofmann.pdf](http://www.architektursalon-kassel.de/Martin_Hofmann.pdf). [Accessed 21 November 2022.]
- Ingram, Susan. "Berlin. A Spectacularly Gendered Cinematic Landscape of Dystopian Devastation." *Space and Culture* 17, no. 4 (2014): 366-78.
- Jodidio, Philip. *Richard Meier and Partners. White is the Light*. Köln: Taschen, 2010.
- Kellner, Douglas, Leibowitz, Flo and Michael Ryan. "Blade Runner. A diagnostic critique." *Jump Cut* 29 (1984). Retrieved from: <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC29folder/BladeRunner.html>. [Accessed 29 November 2022.]
- Kiessel, Marko, and Jonathan Stubbs. "The Present in the Future: Segregation and Boundaries in the Urban Science Fiction Film." In *Boundaries and Restricted Places. The Immured Space*, edited by Balkiz Yapıcıoğlu and Kostas Lalenis, 96-110. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2022.
- Klotz, Heinrich. *Moderne und Postmoderne. Architektur der Gegenwart 1960-1980.* [Modernism and Postmodernism. Contemporary Architecture 1960-1980.] 2nd Edition. Braunschweig/ Wiesbaden: Vieweg, 1985.
- Kostof, Spiro. *The City Shaped. Urban Patterns and Meanings Through History*. Repr. London: Thames and Hudson, 1991/2009.
- Kruft, Hanno-Walter. *A History of Architectural Theory. From Vitruvius to the Present*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1994.
- Le Corbusier (1922/1927). *Towards a New Architecture*. Translated from the French by Frederick Etchells. London: The Architectural Press.
- Lionsgate. *The Hunger Games*. Preliminary Production Notes, 2012.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Hunger Games Catching Fire*. Production Notes, 2014.
- Markus, Thomas A. *Buildings and Power: Freedom and Control in the Origin of Modern Building Types*. London: Routledge, 1993.
- Markus, Thomas A., and Deborah Cameron. *The Words between the Spaces. Buildings and Language*. London/New York: Routledge, 2002.
- McNamara, Kevin R. "Los Angeles, 2019: Two Tales of a City." In *Productive Postmodernism. Consuming Histories and Cultural Studies*, edited by John N. Duvall, 123-36. New York: University of New York Press, 2002.
- Mennel, Barbara. *Cities and Cinema*. London/New York: Routledge, 2008.
- Moos, Stanislaus von. "Der Fall Le Corbusier. Kreuzbestäubungen, Allergien, Infektionen." [The Case of Le Corbusier. Cross Pollination, Allergies, Infections.] In *Moderne Architektur in Deutschland 1900 bis 1950. Expressionismus und Neue Sachlichkeit*, edited by Vittorio M. Lampugnani and Romana Schneider, 160-83. Stuttgart: Gerd Hatje, 1994.
- Motamed, Bahareh. *Colourful Language. An Inquiry into Colour Space and Architectural Choices*. PhD Dissertation. Deakin University, 2017.
- Neumann, Dietrich. *Film Architecture. From Metropolis to Blade Runner*. Munich/New York: Prestel, 1996
- Robinson, Tasha. In *J.G. Ballard's High-Rise, the metaphor eats the story and Tom Hiddleston eats the metaphor*. Retrieved from: <https://www.theverge.com/2016/4/28/11518494/high-rise-movie-review-tom-hiddleston-jeremy-irons>. [Accessed 29 November 2022.]

- Schultes, Axel, and Charlotte Frank. *Crematorium Baumschulenweg*. Retrieved from: [www.schultesfrank.de/en/portfolio\\_page/crematorium-baumschulenweg](http://www.schultesfrank.de/en/portfolio_page/crematorium-baumschulenweg). [Accessed 27 November 2022.]
- Sobchak, Vivian. "Cities on the Edge of time: The Urban Science-Fiction Film." In *Alien Zone 2: The Spaces of Science-Fiction Cinema*, edited by Annette Kuhn, 123-143. London: Verso, 1999.
- Staiger, Janet. "Future Noir: Contemporary Representations of Visionary Cities." In *Alien Zone 2: The Spaces of Science-Fiction Cinema*, edited by Annette Kuhn, 97-122. London: Verso, 1999.
- Stern, Robert M. *Moderner Klassizismus. Entwicklung und Verarbeitung der klassischen Tradition von der Renaissance bis zur Gegenwart*. [Modern Classicism. Development and Processing of the Classical Tradition from the Renaissance to the Present.] Stuttgart: DVA, 1990.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "What the Classical can do for the Modern." In *New Classicism. Omnibus Volume*, edited by Andreas Papadakis and Harriet Watson, 31-32. London: Academy Editions, 1990.
- Stubbs, Jonathan, and Marko Kiessel. "Futures Past and Present: History, Architecture and Dystopia in *Brazil* (1985) and the *Hunger Games* series (2012-15)." *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 2023 (forthcoming).
- Telotte, J. P. "The Problem of the Real and THX 1138." *Film Criticism* 24, no. 3 (2000): 45-60.
- Ward, Tony. "Totalitarianism, Architecture and Conscience." *Journal of Architectural Education* 24, no. 4 (1970): 35-49.
- Wheeler, Ben. "Reality is What You Can Get Away With: Fantastic Imaginings, Rebellion and Control in Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*." *Critical Survey* 17, no. 1 (2005): 95-108.
- Winston, Anna. *High Rise is "Not a Criticism of Post-War Architecture", Says Director Ben Wheatley*. Retrieved from: <https://www.dezeen.com/2016/03/25/high-rise-movie-not-a-criticism-of-post-war-architecture-interview-director-ben-wheatley/>. [Accessed 29 November 2022.]
- Zerner, Henri. "Classicism as Power." *Art Journal* 47, no. 1 (1988): 35-36.