

# Mass Media and the postmodern urban experience. From *Metropolis* to *Blade Runner*; from cinema to virtual reality

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**ABSTRACT:** Since their inception in the XIX Century, mass media have been crucial in shaping the image of the urban environment on our collective subconscious. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, newspapers and magazines bustled with exacerbated but fascinating images of the city of the future, which appeared as hyperbolic portrayals of the perception that the contemporary citizen had of his own effervescent modern environment. Cinema soon joined this process, as a privileged, mechanical eye that could record, analyse and reinvent the accelerated modern city and its evolution. Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1926) epitomized the powers of the new medium, providing the viewers with a window that allowed them to see this Lacanian *Other* come alive, somehow encapsulating their own experience of the new urban reality. Over half a century later films such as *Alien* (1979) and *Blade Runner* (1982) took the torch as fictional future representations of postmodern space that provided the postmodern citizen with a suitably hyper-real substitute of reality. Three decades after that, the videogames and virtual reality experiences based on those very films promise to break the final barrier, allowing us to cross to the other side of the membrane, and freely move through that which is, literally, an *augmented* reality.

**KEYWORDS:** Videogames; Cyberpunk; Science Fiction; Alien; Simulation; Schizophrenia.

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**RESUMEN:** Los medios de comunicación y la experiencia urbana posmoderna. De *Metrópolis* a *Blade Runner*; del cine a la realidad virtual.- Desde su creación en el siglo XIX, los medios de comunicación han sido cruciales en la configuración de la imagen del entorno urbano en nuestro subconsciente colectivo. A principios del siglo XX, periódicos y revistas bullían con imágenes de una exacerbada pero fascinante ciudad futura, que aparecían como representaciones hiperbólicas de la percepción que el ciudadano contemporáneo tenía de su propia, efervescente realidad moderna. El cine pronto se sumaría a este proceso, como ojo privilegiado y mecánico capaz de registrar, analizar, pero también reinventar la acelerada ciudad moderna y su evolución. *Metrópolis*, de Fritz Lang (1926), epitomizaría las posibilidades del nuevo medio, ofreciendo a los espectadores una ventana que les permitía ver a este *Otro* Lacaniano cobrar vida, y encapsulando en cierta forma su propia experiencia de la nueva realidad urbana. Más de medio siglo después, *Alien* (1979) o *Blade Runner* (1982) recogían el testigo, como representaciones ficticias de un espacio postmoderno futuro que proporcionaban al ciudadano de la postmodernidad un sustituto convenientemente hiperreal de la realidad. Tres décadas más tarde, los videojuegos y las nuevas experiencias de realidad virtual basadas en estos mismos filmes permiten vislumbrar la ruptura de esta última frontera, que nos permita cruzar la membrana y movernos libremente a través de lo que es, literalmente, una realidad *aumentada*.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Videojuegos; Ciberpunk; Ciencia Ficción; Alien; Simulación; Esquizofrenia.

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## OF WINDOWS AND MEMBRANES

According to the traditional historiography on the medium, Auguste and Louis Lumière's *L'Arrivée d'un Train à la Ciotat* marked, in 1885, one of the first and most dramatic affirmations of the dramatic change in perception that cinema would install in modern culture. As Tom Gunning recounts, "spectators reared back in their seats, or screamed, or got up and ran from the auditorium (or all three in succession)" (Gunning, 1989: 114) during the first projection of the film at the *Salon Indien* of the Grand Café in Paris. Even if the veracity of the scene, as it frequently happens with other 'myths of origin'<sup>1</sup> has been contested, it retains its value as an effective parable of the revolution that the new medium brought about. Decades earlier, photography had revolutionized the *representation* of reality, replacing it by its *capture* through technological means. Now cinema, by introducing time within the picture, substituted memory for the *recording* of the past. Photography had opened a window to frozen instants of the past, which could be beheld in its static perfection. Cinema opened a window to the past itself, preserved alive for the viewing pleasure of the spectator.

The Lumières also made sure that the awe caused by the insertion of movement was augmented by the very physical qualities of the exhibition. Unlike in Edison's *kinetoscopic* projections, the scale in which the moving pictures were shown reinforced the illusion of the screen as a window to another time and place. Peeping from behind the textile membrane, in the darkness of the movie theatre, the spectator was turned by cinema into a *voyeur*, and soon, as Susan Sontag suggested, a *flâneur de intérieur*<sup>2</sup>. As Gunning notes, films such as Edison's *The Railroad Smash-Up* (1904), which showed two trains colliding, offered a taste of the thrill of attractions such as Stern's *Duplex Railway* (also known as the *Leap Frog Railway*), in Coney Island, where "two electric cars... were set towards each other at great speed on a collision course. Just before impact one car was lifted up on curved rails and skimmed over the top of the other."<sup>3</sup> Cinema set, in this sense, the first stone in the path that would ultimately lead to the full experience of fictional worlds with the advent of *virtual reality*.

Simulation and illusion being an integral part of cinema's DNA, soon, recording reality led to the creation of new realities for the camera. Besides a technological achievement, cinema was also heir to the *vaudevillesque* culture of optical illusions and trick shows that had entertained the masses in the XIX century. Soon, the possibilities of the new medium offered were embraced by artists coming from the world of the *magic theatre* such as Robert W. Paul, Walter R. Booth, Edwin Porter, or, very especially, Georges Méliès<sup>4</sup>, who would take cinematographic depictions beyond the limits of the possible, confronting the audience with visions of fantastic worlds, or impossible situations, but always imbued with a vivid feeling of reality.

## Cinema and the (proto)modern city: Recordings and speculations, speculation as recording

This very evolution can be outlined in cinema's relationship with the city. Not very surprisingly, the city, particularly the contemporary city, had been one of the main objects of desire of the printed media, which grew and developed observing, depicting, commenting, and criticizing the modern city, with its fast growth, multiplicity, accelerated pace and increasingly inapprehensible scale. The movie camera, a mechanical eye capable of recording *time*, naturally appeared as a privileged mean to capture this complex and frantic reality. Soon a proliferation of short films such as *At the Foot of the Flatiron* (American Mutoscope & Biograph Company, 1903) started capturing frescoes of the emerging metropolis, depicted through its newest and more modern sectors. Other films, such as *Panorama from Times Building, New York* (1905), set their focus on the architectural icon spawned by the American city: the skyscraper, or took advantage of the new viewpoints it offered, recording street life either through worm's eye or spectacular bird's eye views. By the 1920s this fetishist relationship had evolve into a cinematographic genre of its own: the 'city symphonies'. Starting with *Manhattan* (Paul Strand and Charles Scheeler, 1921), the genre would produce landmarks of the medium such as Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt* (1927), or Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), complex montages that revelled in the urban cacophony of proto-modernity<sup>5</sup>.

The introduction of fiction took this flirtation to the next level, and the recording of the existent city gave way to its reconstruction, for the benefit of the camera, in film studios. A vivid illustration of this shift was the genre of the *strassenfilm* (literally *street films*), which characterized much of the cinema produced in the Republic of Weimar<sup>6</sup>, producing films such as the eponymous *Die Strasse* (Karl Grune, 1923), or Joe May's *Asphalt* (1929). In those, fictional streets appeared as facsimile reproductions of their real counterparts, with their uttermost example represented by the entirely fictional city built by Rochus Gliese for F.W. Murnau's *Sunrise* (1927). The city was not only recreated, but also *reimagined* for the camera, becoming a distorted *doppelgänger* of ours located in *another* reality. Paradoxically, this distortion, be it by alteration or exaggeration, endowed the city of cinema with the ability to offer a more accurate portrayal of some aspects inherent to the contemporary metropolis. It celebrated, as Anton Kaes notes, the mobile, ever-changing urban scene of modernity, both the real one and the one perceived by the man in the street<sup>7</sup>, but also "[t]he dynamic chaos of the densely populated, shifting-angled street that bespeaks both George Grosz's *dada* *Metropolis* (1917) and Fernand Léger's *cubist* *City* (1919)<sup>8</sup>." Films often offered a figuration of the modern urban scene in a *superlative* state bred in that 'intensification of nervous stimulation' that Georg Simmel, qualified, in his seminal *The Me-*

*tropolis and Mental Life* as ‘the psychological basis of the metropolitan type of individuality’: an intensity that cinema was particularly apt at capturing<sup>9</sup>.

### The other, myself

The contemporary city was not the only subject to boost cinema’s architectural productiveness, or to spark the architectural imagination of its set designers, who were in many cases professionals with an architectural background. Period pieces offered them the opportunity to produce inductive design exercises that toyed with the past, in film such as *Cabiria* (Giovanni Pastrone, 1914) and *Intolerance* (D.W. Griffith, 1916). Expressionist architecture found the ground for architectural experimentation in films such as *Das kabinett des doktor Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1920), or *Der Golem* (Paul Wegener, 1920), whose medieval streets were designed by leading architect Hans Poelzig. Meanwhile, in France, Marcel L’Herbier’s films cinema became the refuge for early modernists, such as Pierre Chareau, Robert Mallet-Stevens, and André Lurçat, and, in the same years that some modern housing icons were being built, films such as René Clair’s *A nous la Liberté* (1931), or Sergei Eisenstein’s *Staroye i novoye* (1929) offered the general public with impressive portrayals of modernist factories and farms<sup>10</sup>. It is not surprising that in 1927, Luis Buñuel declared: “Now and forever the architect will replace the set designer. Film will be the faithful translator of the architect’s boldest dreams<sup>11</sup>.”

Architecture notwithstanding, the modern city still was, nevertheless, cinema’s first and foremost object of desire, and the development of science fiction provided new ways in which this fetishism could be practiced. Sci-fi provided new scenarios for flanerist voyeuristic *flânerie*, be it by exploring a deserted Paris in René Clair’s *Paris qui Dort* (1924), or by witnessing its destruction. August Blom’s *Verdens Undergang* (1916), and the better known disaster films of the 1920s and 1930s were early manifestations of Susan Sontag’s ‘imagination of disaster’, which updated the romantic nostalgia for ruins for the new, predominantly urban century<sup>12</sup>. However, it was the *construction*, rather than the destruction of the city, that prompted the architectural imagination of early science fiction cinema. Visions of the future had always been a keen topic in popular culture, and the speculations on the future of the city had produced an enormous amount of accumulated imagery in newspapers and magazines from the second half of the XIX century onwards. Inevitably, this predilection soon transmigrated into cinema, producing throughout the 1920s and early 1930s a short-lived but increasingly sophisticated series of filmic speculations on the city of the future. The beginning and end of this particular branch of urban science fiction are most possibly *Aelita* (Iakov Protazanov, 1924), a Russian film set in a fictional Mars stylistically located somewhere between Constructivism and Cubo-Futurism<sup>13</sup> and H. G. Well’s *Things to Come* (William Cameron Menzies, 1936), whose fictional *Everytown* marked the end of sci-

ence fiction’s idyll with the city of the future and announced the shift towards the sleek, simple, aerodynamic aesthetics of the Space Age. Some other films worked as a coda to this period, such as Maurice Elvey’s slightly futuristic *Transatlantic Tunnel* (1935) (Figure 1.4), and Vasili Zhuravlov’s similar *Cosmic Voyage (Kosmicheskii reys: Fantasticheskaya novella, 1936)*, with Aleksandr Medvedkin’s never released *New Moscow (Новая Москва, 1938)* (Figure 1.1), a film where the viewers had glimpses of a near-future ‘*Moscow into a city of fairytale beauty*’, as the last entry in this group.

In between those, a few films had constructed visions of the future that appeared as more direct translations of the dreams presented both in printed media and in architects’ drafting tables. A few years before *Transatlantic Tunnel*, Maurice Elvey had provided such a vision in *High Treason* (Gaumont British Picture Corporation, 1929), a film designed within a ‘low-intensity futurism’ that presented the viewers with a taste of a ‘strange’ London of 1940/50<sup>14</sup> “with... double-decker streets, aeroplanes, airships and helicopters which rise from and land on the roofs of buildings<sup>15</sup>”, all operating “in the heart of [a] City” consisting of “many-storied buildings overshadowing the dome of St. Paul’s<sup>16</sup>”. Elvey’s charmingly modest vision echoed that of Gaston Quiribet’s *The Fugitive Futurist* (1924) (Figure 1.2), which showed landing decks on top of the Houses of Parliament, or an aerial railway crossing the Tower Bridge. A much more decided take on the future was presented by the American *Just Imagine* (Richard Butler, 1930) (Figure 2.1), a science fiction musical that certainly appeared, paraphrasing Buñuel, as ‘a faithful translation’ of the visions that architects had been producing in the two preceding decades. The film presented a city where “[g]leaming white towers formed broad avenues laid out with ribbons of garden. Bridges arched gracefully between the ranks of buildings, carrying trains and speeding lines of automobiles<sup>17</sup>.” Set designers Stephen Gooson and Ralph Hammeras had built an impressive model of London the year before for John G. Blystone’s *The Sky Hawk* (1929), and a similar effort was put in the recreation of the future New York of 1980. Constructed as an enormous miniature in a former Army balloon hangar that “took 205 engineers and craftsmen five months to build<sup>18</sup>”, this fictional, filmic New York certainly felt like built rendition of the drawings that Hugh Ferriss had just collected in his seminal *The Metropolis of Tomorrow* (1929): a giganticized version of Manhattan as it had appeared in the renderings of the architects who were developing the New York Plan, and in the fantastic visions of newspaper illustrators since the 1880s.

### METROPOLIS AND DEMENTIAL LIFE. LIFE AND THE MENTAL CITY

Appearing at the very beginning of the 1930s, *Just Imagine* built on several decades of construction of the future, representing the epitome of the visions of vertical growth built on the American architectural icon par

excellence, the skyscraper. The city presented by the film was, in this sense, a compilation and a distillation of the architectural dreams designed and illustrated by architects such as Harvey Willey Corbett, Hugh Ferriss (a draughtsman with an architecture degree), Raymond Hood, Francisco Mújica, and many others: a vertical city with stepped buildings, climbing spires and overlapping streets, but a universal order. Architects envisioned the future as a gigantic, über-New York built on an up scaled version of the Manhattan grid, a city that was massive in its built form, and complex in its circulatory system, but with the overall sense of order that only a city created *ex novo* could display. As such, it was presented in magnificent aerial shots, typical of the demiur- gic position of the all-controlling architect. The city of the architects was a total design, with the coherence, but also with the limitations, of the designs produced by a single mind.

However, this was not the image that the media had been promoting since the last decades of the XIX century, and subsequently (albeit arguably), it did not correspond with the perception that the citizens of the turn of the century had of their present and, by extension, their future urban reality. As scholars such as Carol Willis and Joseph J. Corn have pointed out, in the first decades of the 20th century the image of the future was produced as much by architects as by cartoonists and journal illustrations<sup>19</sup>. Working for the media, these professionals used the future as a way to comment, criticize and satirize the present, creating the process hyperbolic portrayals of the city that showed an ability to capture contemporary urban experience through visions of an improbable, absurd, but visually arresting future. The illustrations produced by Albert Robed in France, but also those by Harry Grant Dart, Albert Levering, Richard Rummell, Louis Biedermann, or Harry M. Petit in the US, pictured a future of aerial traffic and overlapping pathways, towering blocks made of a patchwork of different styles, -mostly Art Decó and Beaux arts- and an overall cacophonous mixture of different activities, people, traffics and communication spaces. The city depicted by the media appeared, in this sense, as a most accurate portrayal of that ‘sensorially intensified space’, that oversaturation of *stimuli* that the citizen of the early XX century perceived developing around him, only recreated through hyperbole. However, even if *Just Imagine* did not fit within this lineage, there was an earlier film that shared this ability to render the present of proto-modernity through the delirious depiction of its future.

The film in question was Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (UFA, 1927). Based on a script by his then wife, Thea von Harbou, it was in its surface, a fable on the relationships between the capital and the working class with a rather simplistic social message. The impact of the film was due, however, to its portrayal of the eponymous Metropolis, a city of the then distant year 2000. As Lang would later acknowledge, the origins of the film date back to his first visit of Manhattan in 1924, where he became fascinated with the modern city<sup>20</sup>. A

man with a technical education, Lang was ‘very interested in the cities and the machines’<sup>21</sup>, and *Metropolis* became the perfect vehicle to channel them, as Buñuel’s remark certified. However, as H.G. Wells angrily pointed out in his own review, there was nothing particularly novel or futuristic in *Metropolis*<sup>22</sup>. Its strengths lay elsewhere, namely in fulfilling the promises that the media had installed in the collective eye-mind of society. *Metropolis* showed the street finally turning into an infinitely vertical space designed to be travelled through at its different heights, a space that the viewer could be experience for the first time in all its photographic and cinematic glory. It also reproduced, via vast models, the experience of the cacophony of proto-modern urban space of printed media. With his usual dictatorial ways, Lang instructed his set designers, Erich Kettelhut, Karl Vollbrecht, and Otto Hunte to produce a cityscape that was a mishmash of different architectural elements and trends imported from past and present. From Art Decó, the recently defunct Art Nouveau, or the “Stahlende Romantik” advocated by Goebbels, to Mies Van der Rohe’s and the Glasserne Kette’s glass skyscrapers, or the austere volumes of the Chicago School, the street scene of *Metropolis* put an “*accent on the disparate*” that, as Jacobsen and Sudendorf put it, was what made “*the overall architectonic design so amazingly valid*”<sup>23</sup>.

Thus, the film echoed at once both the real city, as well as its many hyperbolic reflections, portraying not a preconceived design for the future, but rather an image of what could happen if an existing city kept growing vertically through time. It presented urban growth as a physical-historical collapse, where new structures are superimposed on the old, and new roads bridge over the existing ones, crossing diagonally, sloping up, as necessity dictates, not as part of a preconceived plan. It portrayed, in a certain way, not a future, rebuilt, amplified New York, but rather a European City that had grown organically towards its own far future (Figure 2.2). But even more fascinatingly, this collage mentality extended to the whole film, where the city was depicted in different, alternative, divergent, and often contradictory ways: as a compound of massive ziggurats in the opening, in an aerial shot showing the streets converging diagonally in the centre, through images of mega-blocks and constructivist towers tilting on each other... (Figure 3) If Vivian Sobchack argued that the city in Clifford Simak’s eponymous 1952 novel was ‘a hypnogogic place’, *Metropolis* was rather a *mental space*, a heterogeneous reality made of a compound of perceptions that only found their articulation into a cohesive *totum* in the retina-mind of the viewer, somehow paralleling the collective perception of reality at the time. The screen became here a window and also a magnifying glass, a distorting mirror that returned images of a Lacanian *Other*; an augmented, *hyperreal* version of our urban reality. Lit by the brightness of the screen, our world appeared as a Platonic reverberation, a pale reflection engendered in the darkened room. Arguably, it would be this ability to reproduce the *ethos* of reality, rather than

any attempt at prediction that would make it stand the test of time as the paradigmatic visualization of the future for more than fifty years<sup>24</sup>.

### **BLADE RUNNER AND THE POSTMODERN CITY: THE WORLD OUTSIDE THE WINDOW**

All these aspects were touched upon and amplified it drastically in a film that, half a century later, took *Metropolis*' torch as the über-portrayal of the future. Progressively turned into a favourite text of post-modernity by academic and popular literature alike, *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) renewed, after many years of space fiction and a few less of urban disaster cinema, the symbiotic relationship between cinema and the contemporary city. Moreover, it did so through a portrayal of the future, which, to a certain extent, took this symbiosis at the point where *Metropolis* had left it<sup>25</sup>. In 1927, the critic of *Life* magazine stated in his review of the film: 'there is altogether too much of *Metropolis*... too much scenery, too many people, too much plot, and too many platitudinous ideas'<sup>26</sup>. There was, indeed, a lot of everything in *Metropolis*, and Scott's film took this saturation and updated it for the postmodern era, exponentially increasing it in the process, and making a portrayal of the (eminently urban) space of postmodernity that appeared in a striking contiguity with the space of proto-modernity depicted by *Metropolis*. It could not be otherwise: Scott's future was built taking as the neon-lit metropolis of the Asian-American reality of the 1980s, in the end, a 50 year older version of the reality that Lang had used as a trigger and a template.

Adding to this, the genealogy of *Blade Runner*'s approach to the design and construction of space -one would be tempted to qualify it as 'production'- also has precedents within Scott's own cinematographic production. Three years before the film hit the screen, Scott had already revolutionized science fiction with another film: *Alien* (1979). Created amidst the 'mega-structural' trend that took hold of science fiction in the 1970s (with *Silent Running*, 1972), and particularly in the second half of the decade (*Star Wars*, 1977; *Space: 1999*, 1975-7; *Battlestar Galactica*, 1978; *The Black Hole*, 1979), *Alien* was the first instalment in what we could qualify as Ridley Scott's *cyberpunk trilogy*, which started in outer space, and in the far future of 2122, followed through with the earthly L.A. of 2019, and ended in a contemporary, but dark, oppressive and post-industrial Japan in *Black Rain* (1989). All three unrelated films had in common the perception of reality as a superimposed, multi-layered environment, where decay combined with a superlative preferentiality that obfuscated the senses, creating a very specific depiction of postmodern space.

*Alien* already featured Ridley Scott's trademark 'layering' method: his first film, the period piece *The Duelists* (1977), had garnered critical acclaim for its lush visuals, where Scott masked his limited budget by "building up a dense, kaleidoscopic accretion of detail within every frame and set"<sup>27</sup>. *Alien* translated this method to the de-

sign of a renewed science fiction where George Lucas's *Star Wars* had already introduced the concept of 'used future'<sup>28</sup>. Thus, unable to design everything from scratch, sets were constructed by creating a basic plywood structure on top of which an array of different elements was applied. Roger Christian, the set designer scavenged through aircraft scrap yards all around the UK<sup>29</sup>, buying and dismantling old planes, and rearranging their parts on top of the flat surfaces. Thus, the design showed an inner logic, provided by the common origin of its parts, while also portraying the desired complexity of a structure that was both futuristic in nature, but also old, in the context of the story: "I think the audience accepted that we'd gone out and found a spaceship, rented it and filmed inside it, and that it was old and battered and used"<sup>30</sup>. (Figure 4).

By gradually adding layers and layers of detail, *Alien* evoked the complexity of reality, rarely present in classic science fiction, and also added a layer of plausibility: as in *Metropolis*, the innards of the *Nostramo*, with their industrial look, didn't appear to the viewer as "a *spacetime to come*, but a *space-time that will have been*"<sup>31</sup>. It did not look like a set whose life started at the moment that cameras started rolling, but rather an old, heavily retrofitted structure, where new elements had been added as new requirements appeared, and rust, dust and the texture of time had left their mark. Like Lang, Scott did not refrain from including a mishmash of elements from multiple sources: golden columns looking like technological translations of Bernini's Solomonic columns in his Baldachino for Saint Peter, white walls padded with cushions in psychiatric-cell style, corridors covered with different arrays of piping... Only the density of elements and the common patina of time made all of them look like part of the same universe.

All these strategies can also be identified in the construction of *Blade Runner*'s urban space, only dramatically amped up, and scaled up to urban proportions. *Blade Runner* took from *Metropolis* the referential amplitude and the stratified approach to the urban landscape, with an upper cityscape of disparate, mega-structural skyscrapers that stood over a congested street scene of overlapping levels. In between them, the film updated Lang's trip through the vertical metropolis, where cars and aeroplanes merging into flying 'spinners' that moved with an expanded freedom in a perpetual night punctuated by myriads of individual lights and facades turned into screens. On an iconographic level, many connections can be made between both films: the *New Tower of Babel*, which occupies a central position in Lang's film, is split in two different characters in L.A. 2019. If in *Alien*, one of the most notable architectural designs was a space refinery with strong Gothic Cathedral undertones, here Lang's skyscraper found an echo in two structures: both the urban and symbolic roles are taken over by the twin truncated pyramids of the Tyrell Corporation, which unleash a myriad of connections. They stand like cathedrals of economic power, linking with their shape the omnipotence of Egyptian pharaohs with the absolute power of capitalism as pictured in the dollar bill. At the same time,

they evoke a whole section of visionary architecture, from the many ziggurats by Henri Sauvage and the architects of the *Titan City* Hugh by Ferriss, Francisco Mújica<sup>32</sup>), Antonio Sant'Elia's futurism, and the mega-structural pyramids of the 1960s. In terms of its shape, Lang's 'blooming sunflower' Art Nouveau was mirrored by the subtle Art Nouveau of the Police Headquarters building, a round skyscraper also provided with a landing deck on its roof, which also doubles as a stand-in for the Chrysler Building in New York, a location considered by Scott before finally deciding on L.A.<sup>33</sup> (Figure 5).

All this underlined and amplified the 'mental' -in its different meanings- nature of the city, as referential omnivorousness was taken to the limit. 'Postmodern space recycles', says Giuliana Bruno, in his reading of the film, and L.A. 2019 is a paradigmatic exercise on iconographic recycling<sup>34</sup>. Nominally L.A., but also resembling 'New York, Hong Kong or Tokyo... [q]uoting from different real cities, postcards, advertising, movies', the postmodern metropolis of 2019/1982 appears as 'a polyvalent, interchangeable structure, the product of geographical displacements and condensations' quoting 'not only from different spatial structures but from temporal ones as well.' It a place where 'syntactic rules are broken down... and replaced by a parataxis, a regulated aesthetic of lists' that works through the logic of pastiche, fostering quotations of a synchronic and diachronic order<sup>35</sup>." As such, we find ties to many points of the History and the Geography of Architecture, but also of cinema and science fiction, and even some real L.A. locations: shots of Frank Lloyd Wright's *Ennis House*, the 2nd Street Tunnel that appears in so many films, the *Million Dollar Theatre* or the *Bradbury Building* are scattered throughout the film, but their topological relationships between them are never clear, disrupted, or even vary from one shot to the other. At one point in the film, The Bradbury seems to be in a position similar to its real one. However, when Deckard exits through a window later in the film, the shot shows us the building impossibly extending downwards, thus negating its connection to the real city. In a certain way, the window, which seems to link unrelated spaces, becomes a precursor of the 'hyper-linkage' of video-gaming space.

Like in *Metropolis*, the connective tissue between the different visions of the city *Blade Runner* offers is never made explicit: the city is subsequently presented as an industrial Hades, a rundown and congested street scene, a series of overlapping platforms, a magnificent landscape of skyscrapers... but the way in which all these elements converge in a cohesive geography is left to the viewer's imagination. Adding to this confusion, the recycling game also happens within the very movie, with the same elements appearing in different positions, playing different roles in different scenes, ultimately making *Blade Runner* a 'geography of de-localization', which creates in the viewer both a subliminal feeling of consistency, but also of *estrangement*. In her reading of postmodern science fiction, Vivian Sobchack notes that it is space rather than time which "dominates our conscience and main-

tains our experience". Time suffers from a *deflation* that causes the schizophrenia that Jameson, Deleuze and Guattari and others identify as the basic postmodern vital condition. According to Jameson, "[t]he schizophrenic does not have our experience of temporal continuity but is condemned to live a perpetual present", and as a consequence, "...as temporal continuity breaks down, the experience of the present becomes powerfully, overwhelmingly vivid and 'material'<sup>36</sup>."

The epitome of this vividness happened at the street level, a future version of the 'medievalized' street of film noir: a congested space full of activities, texture and people<sup>37</sup>. Like in *Alien*, this aspect stemmed from the conditions in which the film was produced, and in turn, reflected the socio-economic conditions portrayed by the film. Scott's was a world " ...in a state of overkill... where you can no longer remove a building because it costs far more than constructing one in its place. (...) Once a structure like the Empire State building goes up, it's probably going to be there for... you name it. (...) So it's a physical feeling you get about that society<sup>38</sup>." Again, budgetary constraints prevented from building sets from scratch, so it was decided to retrofit an existing set, the 'Old New York Street' in Warner Bros' Studios in Burbank where films such as John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) had been shot, physically constructing the future on top of the past. If, as Bruno says, "postmodernism recycles", *Blade Runner* did this to an exceptional degree: echoing the replicants' obsession with collecting photographs of a mostly fictional past, the same happens with their environment. *Blade Runner's* city is in this sense, a *chronopolis*, a 'city of time' which collects and displays, like rings in a tree trunk, all its subsequent pasts, kept in place, held together by parasitic structures that gain mega-structural status as we zoom out.

Thus, as Philip K. Dick himself admitted, the whole ended up looking and feeling like "a lived-in world. A world (...) where people live. And the cars use gas and are dirty and there is kind of a gritty rain falling and it's smoggy. It's just terribly convincing when you see it.<sup>39</sup>" It was a world, in the end, with the texture and complexity of reality itself. As with Lang's *Metropolis*, *Blade Runner's* success lay not so much in its innovations, its rupture with the past, but rather in its *continuation* and expansion on the present. In an early meeting for the film, Ridley Scott asked Hampton Fancher, author of the original screenplay: "Hampton, this world you've created -what's outside the window?" To a great extent, the world "outside the window" was the very reality of the 1980s<sup>40</sup>. LA 2019 was an agglutination and amplification of the world 1982, which caused an equally uncomfortable and fascinating feeling both of estrangement and familiarity in the viewer. As such, it rapidly found its way into academic literature as a favourite text of postmodern studies. Built as a cacophonic version of reality, made with thousands of fragments of it, *Blade Runner* gave us, as E.H. Gombrich would put it, new codes to conceptualize reality, a new way to look at it. But also, due to this symbiotic

relationship, it also crossed the screen, making reality itself look like the film<sup>41</sup>.

*Blade Runner* cast a shadow on many aspects of our physical reality, from fashion to architecture and graphic design, and also on the development of science fiction. Even if the film predated the official encoding of the genre, *Blade Runner*'s gritty, 'hi tech and low life' neo-noir style helped shape the image of cyberpunk, as well as establish it as the default mode of imagining the future. It also helped sci-fi cinema rediscover the city as the connatural ecosystem of post-modernity, renewing a relationship that had been on a hiatus from the 1930s to the 1970s, and introducing a post-industrial, dark and realistic approach that still remains today. *Blade Runner* became the standard upon which science fiction cinema would be measured, and many films tried to reproduce the same ability to capture the *ethos* of reality displayed by Scott's, creating in the process many different doppelgangers of the contemporary American city that worked as hyper-real reflections and texts to read it. *Blade Runner*'s portrayal would still remain unmatched, staying both as a model and an unattainable ideal.

#### AN INTERACTIVE WINDOW. VIDEO GAMES AND THE REPLICATION OF THE POSTMODERN EXPERIENCE

One of the most seminal modern influences, not just on videogames but on all forms of science fiction, is the film *Blade Runner*. (...) For the vision of neon-soaked streets at night in a skyscraper-studded, futuristic Tokyo [sic] was particularly amenable to videogames' limited powers of representation.<sup>42</sup>

Inevitably, the emerging video-game industry soon joined this pursue to capture what Barry Atkins has characterized as 'The *Blade Runner* Experience'. This is only nature, if we consider that video games appeared, in a way, as the ultimate window: a window to another world where the viewer also became an actor, interacting with the world on the other side. Adding to this, virtual reality and the cyberspace were soon popularized the cyberpunk genre, which *Blade Runner* was seminal in establishing, while issues such as replication and the interaction with sentient machinery were at the core both of Philip K. Dick's novel and Ridley Scott's film. However, the development of the medium had not reached the point where videogames could translate any of the complexity of the film, and *Blade Runner* had to wait some years until some timid attempts to capture some of its qualities started to appear in video gaming platforms. As with cinema, the late 1980s saw some games embracing the cyberpunk genre or at least some of its tropes, which also entailed touching upon some aspects of the *Blade Runner* Universe: replicants and androids, the tech-noir atmosphere and the dilapidation of the urban scene, along with the cyberspatial elements

that William Gibson and Bruce Sterling introduced with their novels.

One of the earliest entries was the still rudimentary *Snatcher* (1988), a point-and-click adventure designed by Hideo Kojima that drew heavily both from *Blade Runner* and from the Japanese developments of the genre in manga and anime after the publication of the influential *Akira* (Katsuhiro Otomo, 1982-90). A more dynamic approach was adopted in the cyberpunk-themed games *Syndicate* (1993), and its sequel, *Syndicate Wars* (1996). Here the link with *Blade Runner* became more tenuous, once the congested urban scene is abandoned in favour of open, hi-tech spaces. A more decided focus on world building was featured in the commercially unsuccessful but visually engaging *Beneath a Steel Sky* (1994) (Figure 7.1). Designed by British comic artist Dave Gibbons, the game was set in a fictional dystopian city in Australia that built on the imagery of the 'industrial Hades' presented in *Blade Runner*'s opening shots, zooming into its architecture and urban spaces. Industrial undertones and urban density notwithstanding, the atmosphere of the game drifted away from the congestion of *Blade Runner*, presenting a mostly deserted environment more in line with the sandy landscapes of Australian science fiction films such as *Hardware* (Richard Stanley, 1990), which followed the post-apocalyptic trend started in the late 1970s by George Miller's *Mad Max* (1979). The colour palette, rich in yellowish and orange tones, underlined this connection.

Environmental design aside, none of these examples came even close to replicating the intensity of the urban experience that the spectator had when watching the film, burdened by 'lateral scrolls' or 'top down' points of view that helped playability, but worked against the player's 'immersion', or the creation of an oppressive, suffocating atmosphere, not to mention a spatially complex urban scene. These aspects would be improved in subsequent sagas, such as the series *Shadowrun* (1993 - 2015) (Figure 7.3), which displayed an increasing atmospheric congestion in its different instalments, while progressively introducing many of *Blade Runner*'s styleme, such as the ubiquitous neon signs, and the general patina of dirt and decrepitude. The saga *Fallout* (1997-2001 / 2004-nowadays), set in a deserted post-apocalyptic world would also venture occasionally in dense derelict urban sceneries, particularly in the still under development *Project V13*, which takes the series into a role-playing video game environment. Possibly the game which, still within this gaming logic, where the player controls an avatar that moves in an environment presented typically from bird's eye view, comes closer to capturing the *Blade Runner* experience is the more recent *Satellite Reign* (2015) (Figure 7.4). Design-wise, the game is an ode to Scott's film, with its neon-lit streets, facades turn into advertising screens, pill-swallowing geishas, and steam clouds. Spatially it also echoes some aspects of the film, with the street scene splitting in different overlapping levels that climb downwards into the innards of the city, referencing some early concepts of the film, but also

some unused shots, which it reproduces almost literally, offering the player the feeling of being exploring the less privileged areas of L.A. 2019. The latter is achieved mostly thanks to a technique provided by the technical achievements that are now available to game developers: in this case, the introduction of a third (vertical) vanishing point that imbues the game with a further realism, while also introducing a sense of vertigo in the urban scene of which it greatly benefits.

Adding to its effect on this entire cyberpunk offspring, the game also spawned to video game adaptations. The first one, simply titled *Blade Runner* (CRL Group PLC, 1985) (Figure 7.6), was mostly an ‘in name only’ adaptation. The game was inspired by Vangelis’ soundtrack, rather than by the film itself, and presented a rather mundane ‘shoot ‘em up’ routine with a horizontal scroll, together with some scant references to the film’s design, drastically limited in their success by the technology available at the time. *Blade Runner* (Westwood Studios, 1997), usually referred to as *Blade Runner PC* was a vast improvement. Benefitting from the dramatic leap in video-gaming technology, but also from the sophistication of video game culture, and even if it might be a little rough by today’s standards, the game was the result of a considerable effort to mimic the visuals of the film, digitally replicating entire shots and expanding on its universe by creating new ‘sets’ that built on the design concepts shown in it. Moreover, it was conceived to all effects as a sequel to the film. Constructed as an elaborate point-and-click adventure, the story of the game was concurrent with that of the film, weaving it “into the existing film narrative allowed the players to immerse themselves in the film world without requiring them to replay events they have already seen<sup>43</sup>”. The game was a love tribute to the film and its creators full with references to Phillip K. Dick’s work, with the original actors recording voiceovers for the characters, and music faithful to the spirit of Vangelis’ soundtrack.

The accomplishments of *Blade Runner PC* are even more noticeable if we compare it to some of the better *Blade Runner* copycats of its period, such as the similarly themed *Nightlong: Union City Conspiracy* (1998), and flight simulators *G-Police* (Psygnosis, 1997) (Figure 7.2), or *Einhänder* (Square, 1997). “Above all the *Blade Runner* game is a simulation”, Castle explains, and to a certain extent, it allowed its users to enter a world which, as Norman Klein notes, had even entered the imagination of urban planners<sup>44</sup>. Still, when compared to the film it is based on, it still falls short of its goal. For all its accomplishments, the game could not match the congestion, scale and texture of the original. From a purely *experiential* point of view, it lacked the immersive quality of the film, where the viewer felt in many scenes as one more character following Deckard, with crowds passing by in the corners of vision. The game showed the player’s avatar as a third person, seen slightly from above, who walked through mostly empty spaces: “*Blade Runner PC* lacks many of the advantages of film, such as a controlled sense of pace and the

*shifts in shot whose absence is less obvious in more frantic game genres... [it] simply cannot compete with the visual polish of the film.*”<sup>45</sup>.

## THE EYE AND THE ‘I’: VIDEOGAMES, VIRTUAL REALITY AND THE EXPERIENCE OF SPACE

However, continuous developments in computer visualization are quickly changing this, at a point where these past visions of the future have become part of (post)modern culture’s mythology, helped by the increasingly self-referentiality of visual media. *Alien: Isolation*, completed by *Creative Assembly* in 2014 stands as a perfect example of the new ways in which the immediate future can change our relationship with these cultural icons, as well as the role that they can play as triggers to re-imagine our reality, present and future. Presented, following contemporary cinema trends, as a sequel/remake of the first film in the *Alien* series, *Isolation* presents the player with the possibility to experience the events of the film, both literally, and through a new story that parallels the original one. Set 15 years after the events of the film, the plot follows Amanda Ripley, only daughter of the main character of *Alien*, in a horror adventure through the *Sevastopol*, a space station that takes the role of the flying refinery of the 1979 film.

In this sense, *Alien: Isolation* is less of an adaptation than an extension of Scott’s film, which has been designed with the same attention to detail, and following the same design criteria (Figure 8). In order to do so, the design team studied the concept design produced for the film, as well as the miniatures and sets, and built from there. Thus, the design of the game was approached as a respectful, mannerist exercise of induction which, in a Viollet-le-Duc-esque genetic understanding of style, extrapolated a whole world from the existing material<sup>46</sup>. In order to achieve the maximum level of consistency, even the original techniques used by the FX team were reproduced digitally, and again, the original actors were hired to reprise their roles via voiceovers, an element that was crucial for the two *DLC* expansions of the game, ‘Crew Expendable’ and ‘Last Survivor’, which enabled the player to reenact two scenes from the film seen from the point of view of their character of choice, or even explore the alternative scenarios of some well-known *deleted scenes*. *Isolation* hints, in this sense, at the possible evolution of cinema towards *hyper-cinematography*, where the spectator can inhabit the film he is watching, and explore it at will, while video games can coexist as a medium to expand films. The latter is a possibility that is becoming more and more likely, in a context in which both production techniques, means, and also production budgets of both mediums are closer each day<sup>47</sup> (Figure 9).

Of course, the experience within the videogame will always differ from that of watching the film. First of all, it varies because of the position of the player within the space, but also because the very construction of space differs. As noted before, in film topological relationships be-



tween spaces, and within each space vary depending on the needs of the shot. The spaces of film are designed for the eye of the camera (a certain lighting, a specific lens), and as such, they may be redressed from one shot to the next multiple times, which is particularly true in the films of Ridley Scott, a director who will play fast and loose with continuity in order to get the perfect shot each time. Spaces are sometimes designed to work best when viewed from a different angle, and being able to move through them, examining them up close and from different perspectives might turn them uninteresting, or simply destroy the illusion. Finally, cinema works, except for rare occasions, with continuous ellipsis, and consequently, with a discontinuous, fragmentary space. This might make it sometimes difficult for the viewer to reconstruct spatial relationships or itineraries, but it also allows the filmmaker to play with the viewer's imagination, which will fill the voids with what he is given, and if he is provided with extraordinarily complex fragments, he will extrapolate an extraordinarily complex world linking them. As Jorge Luis Borges noted, "[t]he solution to the mystery is always inferior to the mystery itself"<sup>48</sup>. In many aspects, video games do not have this advantage: they present spaces that have to be continuous, at least at a local level, and maintain their features in all angles and at all scales.

### THE SOUNDS OF (HYPER)REALITY

However, there are other dimensions of cinematographic space that disappear in real life, which video games can keep<sup>49</sup>, and use to great effect. One of the key elements in the recreation of *Alien*'s authenticity lay in the creation of a soundtrack (by Joe Henson and Alexis Smith) which, following the same production logic, replicated and expanded on Jerry Goldsmith's themes for *Alien*. Sound and music are integral to the emotional experience of watching the film, particularly in horror films, which, as K.J. Donnelly explains, exemplify, due to their extremity, the way film music works<sup>50</sup>. This is particularly true of 'survival horror', a genre where the camera usually follows a single character's development, often from a first person's point of view, thus 'more self-consciously cinematic in its presentation'<sup>51</sup>. Here, film music can be translated more faithfully, even if with some fundamental differences: music in videogames has to adapt to an almost infinitely variation in the development of events, and has to be adaptive<sup>52</sup>. Still, music is one of the elements that make *Isolation*'s simulation of *Alien*'s experience so successful.

However, these comments could be extended to every genre and also to the perception, both cognitive and emotional, of space. When watching a film, the viewer loses some of the sensorial information attached to space in real life (odour, humidity, haptic qualities). Sound, and the information it carries, is preserved, but music also adds other complementary information that reality lacks. In *Alien*, Goldsmith's lush orchestrations help the

spectator feel the magnificence of the vast interiors of the *Nostramo*, but the howling sounds, or the four recurrent notes played by the horns as we explore its corridors, also characterize the space, endowing it with a disquieting, haunting quality. This interpenetration is even more prominent in *Blade Runner*, a film where sound is "baked into the DNA of the movie itself. All the audio that you hear, including score, sound design, and dialogue, it's tightly integrated. Each blurs into the others"<sup>53</sup>. In the same way that the designers applied a common patina that gave the architectural collage a cohesive look, the composer Vangelis used the reverb produced by synthesizers to blend all sounds together; "[folding] separate audio sources into one aural master track..." comprised both of diegetic (produced by the events of the film) and acousmatic (with no visible source) sounds<sup>54</sup>. Working with a rough cut of the film, Vangelis designed the entire soundtrack to blend with the images in what he called an 'organic' soundtrack, the result of an emotional, rather than cerebral, response to the narrative which works with mechanical precision.

Sound is, in *Blade Runner*, essential in building the atmosphere of the world it depicts, including its architecture and urban scene. As Andrew Stiller notes, "Heavy reverb—because it implies a huge, enclosed, hard-surfaced space—creates a mood of paranoia"<sup>55</sup>. It also helps confer an oppressive sense of scale and awe to the already asphyxiating architectural imagery, combined with the sounds of mitigating explosions, and adds to the many mechanical sounds that appear throughout the film (the movement of mechanical doors sliding, the buzz of neon tubes, the continuous humming), subconsciously informing the viewer of the artificial nature of the reality he is beholding. It ultimately underlines the post-human condition of *Blade Runner*'s world. Similarly, the multi-ethnic and multi-temporal origins of the music and sounds, extracted from different geographies, cultures, and time periods instils a *schizophonia*<sup>56</sup> that, contributes to the overall schizophrenic design. Sound was, in the end, one more layer -with many layers of its own- in Scott's 'layer cake' that contributed an atmospheric and textural quality fundamental in the film's experience<sup>57</sup>. The city of film offers, in this sense, an opportunity to create a *total design* in a way unavailable to the design of our built environment. Here, the designer controls the experience of the spectator in further ways, qualifying the perception of space in subliminal ways, and video-games, in their intersection with virtual reality, become the next natural step: an environment where reality itself becomes a *gesamtkunstwerk* apprehended with augmented perception: a true *augmented* reality.

### THE ULTIMATE WINDOW. FROM *BLADE RUNNER* TO VIRTUAL REALITY

It could be argued that the promise of this leap into virtual reality was in fact implicit in the film, in shots such as the one in which, in a nod to one of the *vaude-*

*villesque* tricks used by the Lumières<sup>58</sup>, a snapshot briefly came to life, activated by the viewers glance, the character of Rick Deckard. One of the most memorable moments, among many, was, however, the scene in which Deckard, using an ‘Esper’ machine, examines a photograph. Voicing out loud the instructions that a film director would give to his cameraman (“Pull out, track right”), Deckard makes the machine zoom in different zones of the image, in an enhanced revision of Antonioni’s ‘Blow Up’ (1969)<sup>59</sup>. At first, the viewer is tricked into thinking that he is just being presented with a simple exploration of a flat image, improved by robotic tools. However, as the process went on, he started feeling a cognitive dissonance, as the eye of the machine suddenly changed the point of view of the still, and looked behind corners, making it clear that the picture was actually a three-dimensional recording of the reality it had photographed. Thus, it introduced several relevant themes: one of them fits within the film’s exploration of memories. Typically, photographs are, to a great extent, fragments of the visual experience of the photographer, recording what he was looking at, through the camera’s eye, at a certain point in time. Here, the overlap disappears, since the recording goes much further, encompassing things the photographer hadn’t seen. Another thread has to do with the postmodern obsession with surfaces, and the ‘flatness’ of visual culture<sup>60</sup>. Finally, it introduced a very compelling visualization of the promises of virtual reality: the possibility of entering a space, walk through it and freely examine it.

*Alien: Isolation* does this to a limited, but still exceptionally effective extent. Of course, it benefits from its routine as a ‘first person shooter’, a genre where the player’s ability to “enter the space on the screen” before him and ‘negotiate’ what Henry Jenkins has called its ‘narrative architecture’ while giving little to no attention to the practice of manipulating the interface between player and game” is much higher<sup>61</sup>. Much of the footage of the film had the viewer peeping from Ripley’s back as she advanced through the Nostromo’s corridors, which had been introduced earlier in the film through extensive, morose tracking shots. Experiencing the space of the film (in digital simulation) through the eyes of the main character was just the next logical step, as well as the closest way to emulate the tension the viewer feels while watching it. On the verge of the year 2019 where *Blade Runner* was set, different multimedia projects are trying to capture, emulate, expand, or augment the sensorial experience of the architectural and urban atmospheres of the film. In some cases, it is the texture and feel of the original that is being searched for, in short films such as *XXIT* (Sam Nicholson/ Stargate Studios, 2011) (Figure 10.2), *Tears in the Rain* (Christopher Grant Harvey, 2017), or especially *Slice of Life* (Luka Hrgović, 2017--)(Figure 10.1). The latter goes as far as to adopt the filming and special effects techniques used in the 1980s, in order to capture that ‘physical feeling’ of the original that has been lost with the overuse of digital tools, a feeling that even the much awaited -and

feared- sequel, the beautifully shot, lyrical *Blade Runner 2049* (Denis Villeneuve, 2017) has failed to grasp<sup>62</sup>.

On the other hand, the will to inhabit the world of the original film has not ceased to be an object of desire of postmodern culture that virtual reality seems to be on the verge of making true, at least in its digital simulation. Such are cases as software engineer Quentin Lengelé’s *Project BR9732*<sup>63</sup> (Figure 11), an independent attempt that offers the viewer to emulate Deckard’s ES- PER experience, and instead explore a digital reconstruction of his apartment, as it was shown in the film. With the help of an *Oculus Virtual Reality* headset, the viewer “can walk around, look at details, pick some objects, play the piano, take a shower, start the Esper machine and enjoy the rain falling on the balcony<sup>64</sup>”. Other attempts, this time from an official source, were the two Virtual Reality games that Alcon films produced to accompany the opening of the film. *Blade Runner 2049: Replicant Pursuit*, and *Blade Runner 2049: Memory Lab* (Figure 12) were intended as complementary explorations into the world of the new film, which in the vein of *Isolation*, hired real actors to play the virtual characters, and painstakingly tried to build a virtual environment that recreated the ambiance of the original film<sup>65</sup>.

Still, the ability of these recent efforts to emulate the spatial, morphological, textural, and, in general, atmospheric, of the film experience is somewhat limited, but the ability of a total immersion in this world makes up for its shortcomings. At the same time, other non-directly related video game productions show that the possibility to replicate the filmic reality of *Blade Runner* is near. Cyberpunk games such as *Hard Reset* (2011/12), inspired by the literary works of Philip K. Dick and William Gibson, the last instalments of the *Deus X* series (particularly *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, 2011), or the more recent *Observer* (2017), which features Rutger Hauer, the main antagonist in Scott’s film, in an acting role, are vivid examples of how close current digital visualization techniques are to offering a facsimile experience of, at least, parts of the films world. Meanwhile, ‘open world’ platforms such as *Cyberpunk 2077* (2012-ongoing) offer a glimpse where the future of gaming is heading: experiences that leave behind traditional linear narratives, and develop *alter realities* that the player can explore at will. All of them testify to the ongoing -increasing, in fact- interest in revisiting these alternative futures that have become so entrenched in our collective imagination.

### Remediation and the future of design

When cinema first appeared, it presented a dramatic advance on primitive pictorial *trompe-l’oeils*, and on the small-scale magic theatre shows. Video games took it further, breaking the wall between the spectacle and a spectator who, even if still separated, could interact with the world on the other side of the screen. Virtual reality ultimately blows up this separation, creating a screen which, as in David Cronenberg’s *Videodrome* (1983), moves forward and envelops the viewer, transporting him to an alternate,

fully-functioning world. Moreover, video games, with their introduction of plotlines, music and sound effects, offer the opportunity not just to inhabit *the world depicted* in the film, but to inhabit the film itself, in an all-encompassing experience. Video games, in their intersection with virtual reality, are a perfect example of the possibilities that *remediation* processes (the translation of content from one medium to another<sup>66</sup>) can have when paired with what Robert Scholes defined as ‘structural fabulation’, in our current state of technological progress<sup>67</sup>. Video game environments can allow us to go beyond our role as spectators and penetrate alternative presents or alternative futures: divergent realities, distorted *doppelgangers* of our world designed at another point in our recent History that can work as cognitive maps to read our present or future reality.

Even more so, VR gaming and virtual reality open up a whole new professional field for architects and designers. Almost a century after Buñuel’s famous prediction, the design of fictional but functional environments appears as a true opportunity for designers to exercise their design muscles, in innocuous mannerist exercises which, nonetheless, still add to the *visual humus* the discipline feeds on. As video gaming culture and technology develop as a parallel entertainment industry *on par* with cinema, they also hold the promise to become an environment where the architect might substitute, or, perhaps, work together with the concept designer, as a testing field where alternative architectural and urban ideas might be tested, waiting for their eventual re-appropriation by the discipline.

## FIGURES



FIGURE 1: **Science Fiction Cinema and the Protomodern City of the Future.** [1.1] Aleksandr Medvedkin, *The New Moscow* (*Новая Москва*, Mosfilm, 1938) [1.2] Gaston Quiribet, *The Fugitive Futurist* (Hepworth, 1924) [1.3] Maurice Elvey, *High Treason* (Gaumont British Picture Corporation, 1929) [1.4] Maurice Elvey, *The Tunnel* (Gaumont British Picture Corporation, 1935).



FIGURE 2: **New York, Metropolis.** [2.1] Main avenue in the model the future New York in David Butler's *Just Imagine* (Fox Film Corporation, 1930) [2.2] Horst von Harbou: Main Commercial Street in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (UFA, 1927).



FIGURE 3: **Metropolis and the Mental City.** The many different depictions of the city in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (UFA, 1927).

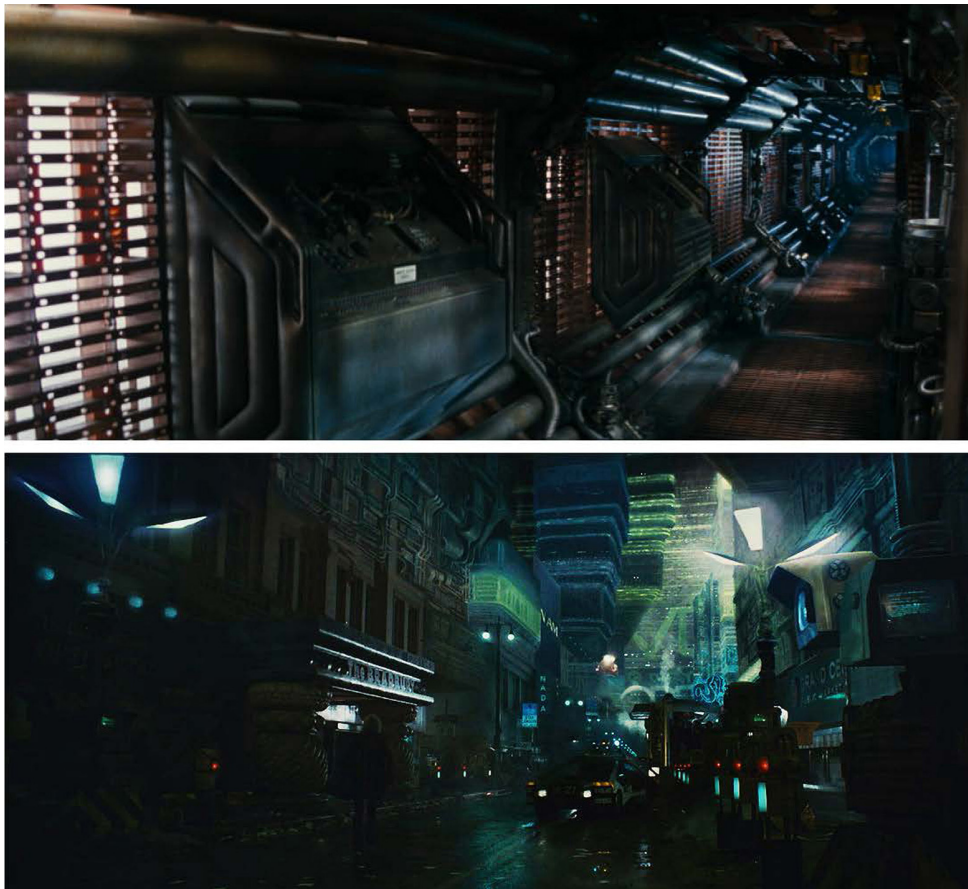


FIGURE 4: **A retrofitted future.** Comparison between [4.1] the corridors of the *Nostromo* in Ridley Scott's *Alien* (20th Century Fox, 1979) and [4.2] the street scene in *Blade Runner* (The Ladd Company, 1982).



FIGURE 5: **L.A. Metropolis:** Iconographic and conceptual overlaps between *Metropolis* and *Blade Runner*.

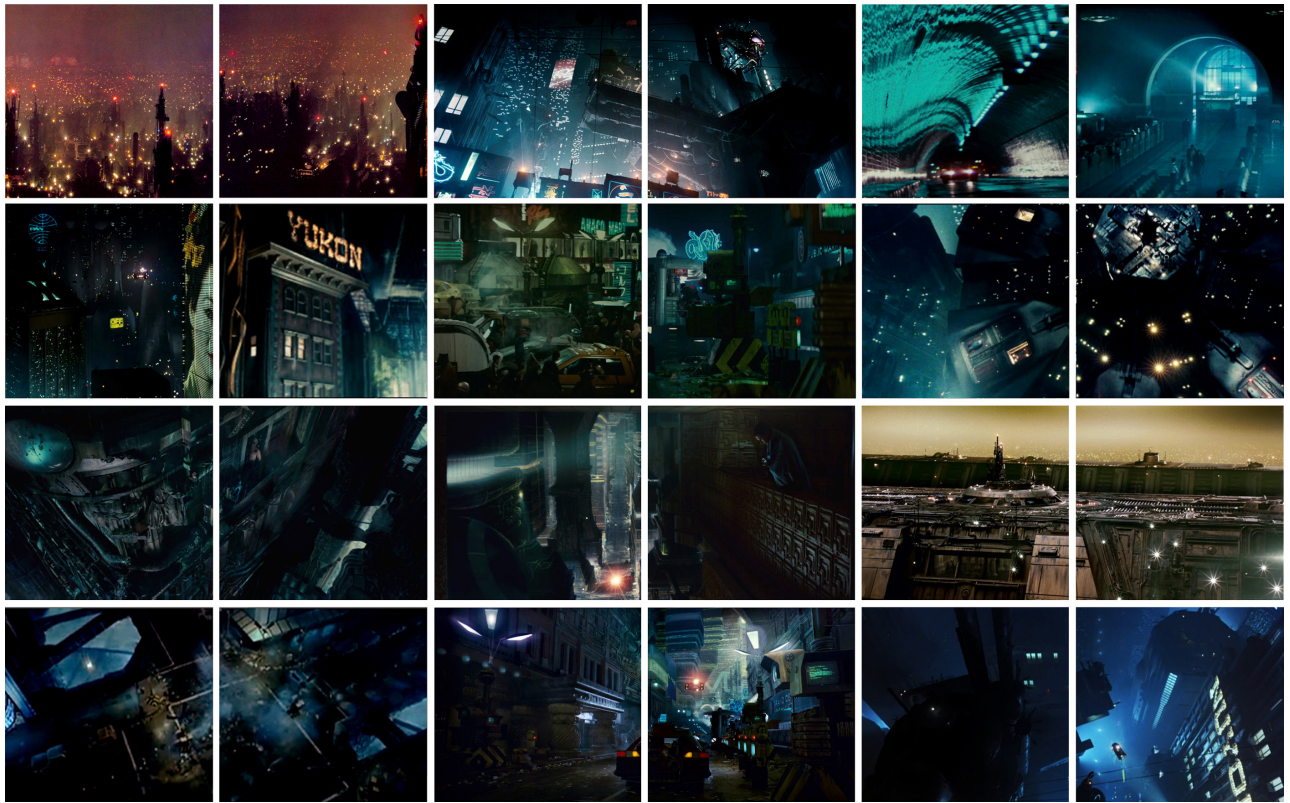


FIGURE 6: **Postmodernity and urban schizophrenia:** The many faces of the city as shown in *Blade Runner*.

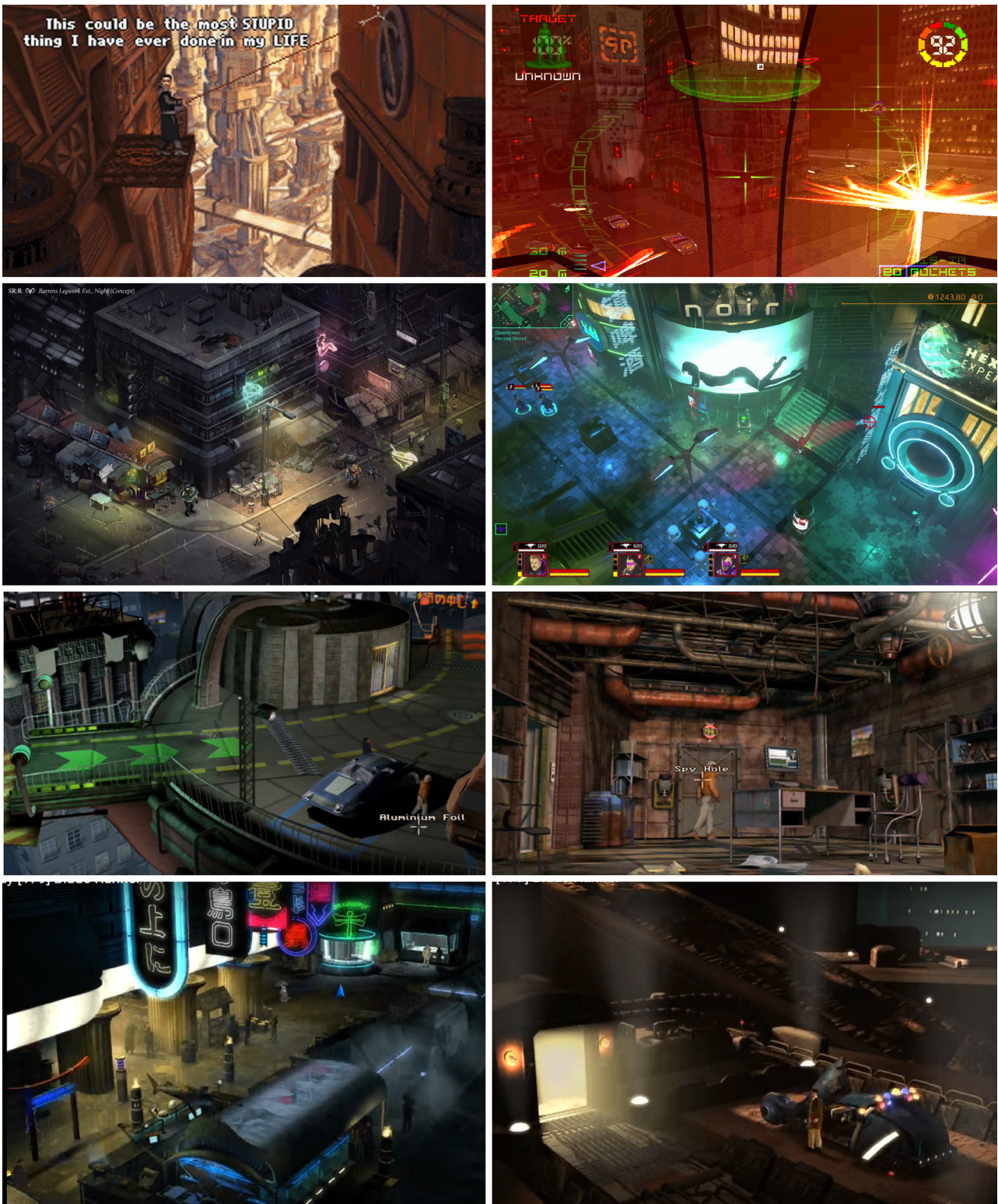


FIGURE 7: **Building the Cyberpunk City.** Screenshots of [7.1] *Beneath a Steel Sky* (Revolution Software, 1994) [7.2] *G-Police* (Psygnosis, 1997) [7.3] *Shadowrun Returns* (Harebrained Schemes, 1997) [7.4] *Satellite Reign* (5 Lives Studios, 2015) [7.5] *Nightlong: Union City Conspiracy* (Team 17, 1998) [7.6] *Blade Runner* (Westwood Studios, 1997).

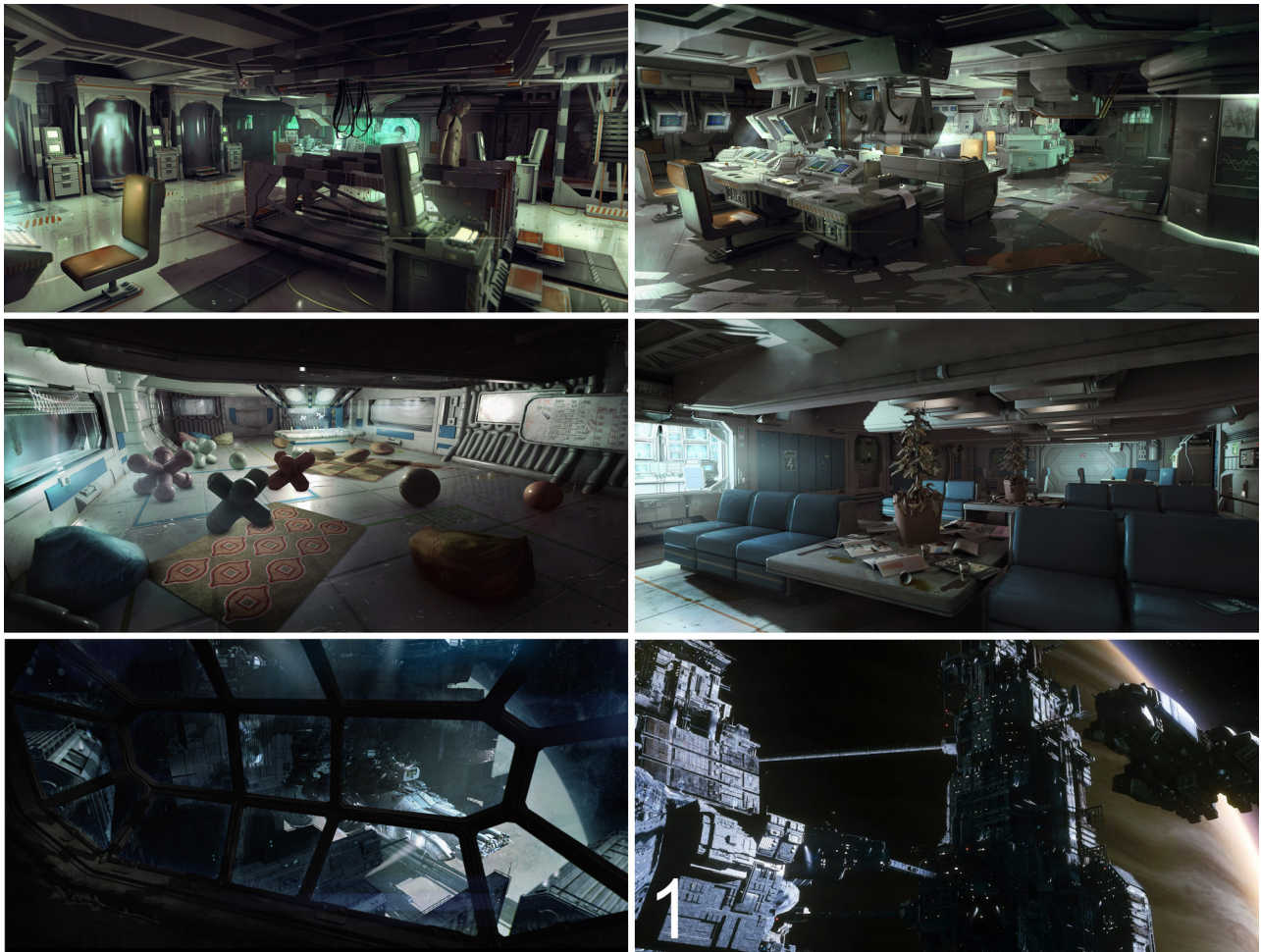


FIGURE 8: **Building a 1979's future.** The environment design of *Alien: Isolation* (Creative Assembly, 2014) appears as an extrapolation of the design parameters of the 1979 film.





FIGURE 9: **Alien Replicant.** Left: Stills from *Alien* (1979). Right: Similar spaces as recreated in *Alien: Isolation* (2014).



FIGURE 10: [10.1] Still from *Slice of Life* (Luka Hrgović, 2017-ongoing) [10.2] Still from *XXIT* (Sam Nicholson/ Stargate Studios, 2011).



FIGURE 11: Pursuing Blade Runner. Stills from a walkabout through Deckard's apartment in Quentin Lengel's *Project BR9732* (2014--).

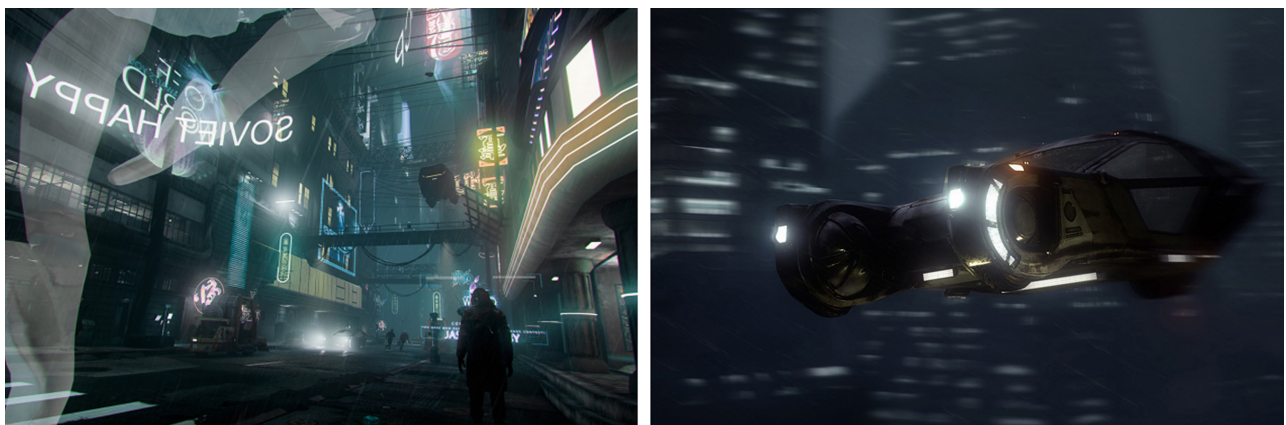


FIGURE 12: In pursuit of a past future. Screenshots from *Blade Runner 2049: Memory Lab* (Alcon Interactive Group, LLC, 2017)

NOTES

- 1 See, for instance, Martin Loiperdinger, Bernd Elzer, “*Lumiere’s Arrival of the Train: Cinema’s Founding Myth*” (In: *The Moving Image*, University of Minnesota Press Spring 2004, Volume 4, no. 1, pp. 89-118), where the authors offer an overview of the different sources (all of them secondary) that have contributed to forge the myth.
- 2 See Susan Sontag: *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, c1977).
- 3 Gunning (1995), Op. Cit. More information on this attraction can be found in John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Millions: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978), pp. 77-78.
- 4 In this respect, see: Tom Gunning, “Primitive Cinema: A Frame Up? or The Trick’s On Us,” in *Cinema Journal*, Winter 1988-89, no. 29/2.
- 5 For a discussion on the features of the genre, see: Alexander Graf: “Paris, Berlin, Moscow. On the Montage Aesthetic in the City Symphony Films of the 1920s”, in Alexander Graf, Dietrich Scheunemann (eds.), *Avant-garde film* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), pp. 77-91.
- 6 Kenneth Scott Calhoun, *Peripheral Visions: The Hidden Stages of Weimar Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, c2001)
- 7 Anton Kaes (1996) “Sites of Desire: The Weimar Street Film.” In: D. Neumann (ed.), *Film Architecture: Set Designs from Metropolis to Blade Runner* (Munich: Prestel, pp. 26–32).
- 8 “Celebratory Film Streets”, in Janet Ward, *Weimar Surfaces: Urban Visual Culture in 1920s Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, c2001): 160.
- 9 George Simmel: “The Metropolis and Mental Life” (1903).
- 10 See Oleg Gelikman, “Eisenstein’s Line: *The Old and the New* or Modernism as Meta-Politics”, in Robert McParland (ed.), *Film and Literary Modernism* (Cambridge Scholars Press, 2013).
- 11 Luis Buñuel, “*Metropolis*”. In: *Gaceta Literaria*, Madrid, 1927.
- 12 Susan Sontag, “The Imagination of Disaster”. In: *Commentary Magazine*. New York: Commentary Inc., pp. 42-48.
- 13 For a short overview of the Russian avant-garde in cinema, see: “What is and What Should Be: Soviet Constructivism on Film”, *Architectural Review Asia Pacific*. Architecture and the Arts, 2012, n° 125.
- 14 There are two versions of the film, a silent one and a talkie. The first version, which opened on September 9, 1929, set the story in 1940, but title cards in some copies push it to 1950. See: John T. Soister, Henry Nicolella, “High Treason: Men Must Fight”, en *Down from the Attic: Rare Thrillers of the Silent Era through the 1950s* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2016).
- 15 Taken from the film’s press book. Published in John T. Soister, *Up from the Vault: Rare Thrillers of the 1920s and 1930s* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2004).
- 16 Ernest Marshall, *The New York Times*, August 25, 1929. Quoted in J. P. Telotte, *A Distant Technology: Science Fiction Film and the Machine Age* (Hanover: University Press of New England, c1999).
- 17 James Chapman, Nicholas J. Cull, “Dry Future: Just Imagine (1930)”, in *Projecting Tomorrow: Science Fiction and Popular Cinema* (London; New York, NY: I.B. Tauris, 2013); 16.
- 18 Data from *Photoplay*, November 1930. Quoted in “Dry Future: Just Imagine (1930)”; 16. See also: Kreuger, Miles ed. *The Movie Musical from Vitaphone to 42nd Street as Reported in a Great Fan Magazine*. (New York: Dover Publications, 1974).
- 19 See Willis, Carol: “Skyscraper Utopias” (In CORN, Joseph J. (ed.). *Imagining Tomorrow: History, Technology and the American Future*. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, c1986. pp. 119-136), and Corn, Joseph J.; Horrigan, Brian: *Yesterday’s Tomorrows: Past visions of the American future*. (New York: Summit Books; Washington: Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, c1984).
- 20 “*Metropolis (...)* was born from my first sight of the skyscrapers of New York in October 1924... I spent an entire day walking the streets. The buildings seemed to be a vertical sail, scintillating and very light, a luxurious backdrop, suspended in the dark sky to dazzle, distract, and hypnotize. At night, the city... lived as illusions live. I knew I should make a film of all these impressions.” Fritz Lang (in Barry Keith Grant: *Fritz Lang: Interviews*. – Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, c2003); 68.
- 21 “The main thesis was Mrs. Von Harbou’s (...). ...I was very interested in machines.” Fritz Lang in Peter Bogdanovich, *Who The Devil Made It: Conversations with Legendary Film Directors* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997).
- 22 “I have recently seen the silliest film. I do not believe it would be possible to make one sillier. So far from being ‘a hundred years hence,’ *Metropolis*, in its forms and shapes, is already, as a possibility, a third of a century out of date.” H.G. Wells, “*Metropolis*”. *The New York Times*, April 17, 1927.
- 23 Wolfgang Jacobsen, Werner Suddendorf, *Metropolis: ein filmisches Laboratorium der modernen Architektur./ A Cinematic Laboratory for Modern Architecture* (Edition Axel Menges, 2000); 21.
- 24 In his review of the film for *The New York Times* (“Mr. Wells Reviews a Current Film, *Metropolis*”, April 17, 1927), H. G. Wells noted its lack of plausibility, calling it ‘the silliest film’. Wells’s later article “Rules of Thumbs for Things to Come” (*New York Times*, 12 April 1936, section IX, 4) reprinted a memo for the filming crew of ‘Things to Come’ where he stated that: ‘...[a]s a general rule you may take it that whatever Lang did in *Metropolis* is the exact contrary of what we want done here.’
- 25 Mike Davis notes that “...for all of *Blade Runner*’s glamour as the star of sci-fi dystopias, I find it strangely anachronistic and surprisingly un-prescient. Scott... really offers us an incoherent pastiche of imaginary landscapes. Peeling away the overlays... what remains is recognizably the same vista of urban gigantism that Fritz Lang celebrated in *Metropolis*.” Mike Davis, “Beyond *Blade Runner*: Urban Control – The Ecology of Fear”. *Open Magazine Pamphlet Series*, no. 23 (Westfield, NJ: Open Media, 1992).
- 26 Quoted in Anton Kaes, “*Metropolis*: City, Cinema, Modernity”, in: Timothy O. Benson, *Expressionist Utopias: paradise, metropolis, architectural fantasy*. (Los Angeles, California: Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Seattle, Washington: University of Washington Press, c1993).
- 27 “*Alien*’s ‘environment’ was the popular filmgoing public’s first exposure to “layering”, Scott’s self-described technique of building up a dense, kaleidoscopic accretion of detail within every frame and set of a film. ‘To me (Scott Said) a film is like a seven-hundred-layer layer cake.’ Paul M. Sammon, *Future Noir: The Making of Blade Runner* (New York: HarperPrism, 1996); 47.
- 28 “I was really influenced by three films. Not so much in terms of sets by *Star Wars*, but definitely from 2001 and *Dark Star* (John Carpenter and Dan O’Bannon, 1972). There was a sense of reality, odd enough, in *Dark Star*, especially of seedy living (...).” Ridley Scott interviewed by James Delson in “*Alien from the Inside Out*”. *Fantastic Films*, November 1979, pp 21-31, 58-59. Reprinted in Laurence F. Knapp and A. Kulas (eds.): *Ridley Scott Interviews – Conversations with filmmakers series*. (University Press of Mississippi, Jackson: 2005); 13.
- 29 *Directing Alien and Blade Runner: An Interview with Ridley Scott*, op. cit.; 40.
- 30 Roger Christian in Graham Edwards, “Roger Christian – Lightsabers and Space Tugs”, *Cinefex Blog*, March 14, 2014.
- 31 Marcus A. Doel and David B. Clarke: “From Ramble City to the screening of the eye. *Blade Runner*, death and symbolic exchange.” in *The Cinematic City*; op. cit.; 142.
- 32 See Carol Willis, “The titan city: forgotten episodes in American architecture” in *Skyline*, October 1982, pp. 26-27.

- 33 During the pre-production of the film, the setting changed several times: “We used that [New York] as a springboard. We drew a profile of a city taking the two World Trade Towers as the norm.” Syd Mead in Naha, Ed: “An Artist with Designs on the Future”. In: *Starlog Magazine*, May 1982, no. 58, pp. 36-39. Scott considered setting the film in San Angeles, a conurbation that would comprise the coastal area that runs from San Francisco to Los Angeles (see Don Shay, “Blade Runner. 2020 Foresight” in *Cinefex*, July 1982, no. 9: 7).
- 34 “And the street sets, the architecture. In my effort to create a jammed look to everything, I borrowed shape cues from Byzantine (...) deco, temporary scaffolding, and certainly the curious slanted sidewalls of Mayan architecture. It was all forced together to create the ‘look’ of the BLADE RUNNER world.” Syd Mead interviewed by Gerry Kissel for Blade Zone.
- 35 Bruno, Op. Cit., 65-6.
- 36 Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society”, in Hal Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic* (Port Townsend, Bay Press, 1983); 119. Quoted by Bruno.
- 37 Retaking Robert Stern’s consideration (see Robert A.M. Stern, Thomas Mellins, David Fishman: *New York 1960: architecture and urbanism between the Second World War and the Bicentennial* (New York: Monacelli Press, c1995), Edward Dimendberg talks about “the essential ruralism of the megalópolis”, describing the film noir street as “medieval, like Paris, in the sense that it is not thought for traffic, but for people. It is the real socialization place. You eat in the street, live in the street...” Edward Dimendberg: “*Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*” (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004); 115.
- 38 Ridley Scott in Harlan Kennedy, “Blade Runner: Ridley Scott Interviewed”. *Film Comment*, July-August 1982.
- 39 “Once the film begins, you are taken from this world into that world and you really are in that world. And I think the most exciting thing is that it is a lived-in world. A world where people actually live. It is not a hygienically pristine space colony which looks like a model seen at the Smithsonian Institute.” Bulluck, Vic: “Author Philip K. Dick (last interview before his death)”. In: Friedman, Ira (Ed.): *Blade Runner Souvenir Magazine*, Volume 1 (New York: Ira Friedman, Inc., 1982).
- 40 Sammon, op. cit.; 53
- 41 “With time... I started to take a certain delight in the way the film began to affect the way the world looked. Club fashions, at first, then rock videos (...). It has even played a part in influencing modern architecture in general. Of course it can be difficult to determine what is influence and what is prediction.” (William Gibson, excerpts from an interview by Lance Loud in an article on the 10th anniversary of “Blade Runner” for the magazine *Details* (October 1992), and from the prologue to the *Neuromancer* comic adaptation (Tom De Haven and Bruce Jensen, 1989).
- 42 Barry Atkins: “Replicating the Blade Runner” in Will Brooker: *The Blade Runner Experience: The Legacy of a Science Fiction Classic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 86.
- 43 Louis Castle, executive producer for *Blade Runner PC* in Peter Tieryas, “Blade Runner Inspired Two Very Different Video Games”, in *Kotaku.com*, Oct 10, 2017.
- 44 In 1991, Norman M. Klein described a particular ‘Stockholm Syndrome’: “(i)n February, 1990, at a public lecture series on art in Los Angeles, three out of five leading urban planners agreed that they hoped someday Los Angeles would look like the film *Blade Runner* ...It has become a paradigm for the future of cities, for artists across the disciplines.” (Norman M. Klein, “Building Blade Runner” in *Social Text*, 1990, no. 28; 147). This testifies to the film’s endless ability to fascinate its audience, if take into account that L.A. 2019 is portrayed as a dystopian scenario.
- 45 Atkins, Op. Cit.: 86. On Blade Runner’s video games see: “Replicating the Blade Runner”, in *The Blade Runner Experience*, pp. 79-91.
- 46 “Determined to maintain the look and feel of the original *Alien* film... the team recreated the processes used by Hollywood 40 years ago. (...) Sets from *Alien* were recreated on a one-to-one scale using blueprints provided by 20th Century Fox. Once this was done, the team pulled out different aspects of each set – panels, doors, pieces of furniture – and used them to create a style guide (...). Creative Assembly also experimented with the old Hollywood technique of ‘kit bashing’: taking pieces of ordinary objects (...), mashing them together and giving them a new paint job to make them look like a futuristic tool. For that extra level of authenticity, the team limited themselves to only using objects that were made before 1979.” James Batchelor, “18 things we learned about *Alien: Isolation* last night”. *Develop*. (13 February 2014).
- 47 According to *The Economist*, Activision’s *Destiny* (2014) cost 500 million dollars to develop, while “*Star Wars: The Old Republic*, an online game released in 2011, is reputed to have cost between \$150 million and \$200 million”. See “Why video games are so expensive to develop”, in *The Economist explains* (online) September 25 2014. As a comparison, Ridley Scott’s recent A-list film *Alien: Covenant* (2017) had a reported budget of 97 million dollars.
- 48 Jorge Luis Borges, “Abenjacán el Bojarí, muerto en su laberinto”, in *El Aleph* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1949: 52)
- 49 See Karen Collins, *Playing with Sound: A Theory of Interacting with Sound and Music in Video Games* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013).
- 50 K.J. Donnelly, *The Spectre of Sound: Music in Film and Television* (London: BFI, 2005); 14. Quoted by Whalen.
- 51 Zach Whallen, “Case Study: Film Music vs. Video Game Music: The Case of Silent Hill”, in Jamie Sexton (ed.), *Music, Sound and Multimedia*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007); 69.
- 52 For some insight on the roles of music in shaping the video gaming experience (diegesis, ambiance, immersion), see Rod Mudney, “Music in Video Games” (*Music, Sound, and Multimedia*; 51).
- 53 “[E]very scene is composed to create this cohesive acoustic environment, whether the emphasis is on dialogue, or sound effects, or the music.” Evan Puschack, “Listening to *Blade Runner*” (youtube video): <https://nofilmschool.com/2017/05/watch-sounds-blade-runner>
- 54 See Jérôme Peignot, “De la musique concrète à l’acousmatique”. In: *Esprit*, Paris, no. 280, pp. 111-123.
- 55 Andrew Stiller, “The Music in *Blade Runner*”, in Judith Kerman (ed.), *Retrofitting Blade Runner, Issues in Ridley Scott’s Blade Runner and Philip K. Dick’s Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1991): 196--
- 56 I am using the term with a different meaning from the one intended by R. Murray Schafer in *The New Soundscape: a handbook for the modern music teacher*. BMI Canada, 1960.
- 57 Tim Summers, “Texturing and the Aesthetics of Immersion” (*Understanding Video Game Music*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 57-84.
- 58 “[I]n the earliest *Lumière* exhibitions the films were initially presented as frozen unmovable images, projections of still photographs. Then, flaunting a mastery of visual showmanship, the projector began cranking and the image moved.” Tom Gunning, “Astonishment: the (in)credulous spectator” in *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*. edited by Linda Williams (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, c1995): 118
- 59 These parallels have been noted by Matthew Flisfeder in “Techno-space, Simulation and The Hyperreal” (*Postmodern Theory and Blade Runner*, Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2017); 118.
- 60 *Postmodern Theory and Blade Runner*; 158.
- 61 Atkins, op. cit., 85. See also: Henry Jenkins, “Game Design as Narrative Architecture”, in Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (eds.), *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2004), pp. 118-30.
- 62 The new film, which has treated the original with uttermost respect is, on the other hand, remarkable for the lack of density and texture in its environment, when compared with the 1982 film. However, this seems to be a conscious choice, rather than a failure.

- 63 "I watch *Blade Runner 2* or *3* times a year, it's one of my favorite movies. ...I always wanted to "be there" in a certain way. More than the story itself, I'm in love with the atmosphere and as a mortal I will not be able to live in that kind of future. From my point of view, that's where virtual reality has a huge potential". Paula Benson, "Essential viewing for *Blade Runner* fans: An atmospheric tour of Deckard's apartment". In: *Film and Furniture* (online), July 1, 2016. <http://filmandfurniture.com/2016/07/blade-runner-deckard-apartment-tour/>
- 64 Vincent Gault, "Blade Runner 9732 VR Project: How one guy did it with substance." In: *Allegorithmic.com*, November 17, 2017. <https://www.allegorithmic.com/blog/blade-runner-9732-vr-project-how-one-guy-did-it-substance>.
- 65 See Dean Takahashi, "Blade Runner 2049: Memory Lab takes sci-fi fans into a VR experience", in *Venture Beat* (online), October 21, 2017. <https://venturebeat.com/2017/10/21/blade-runner-2049-memory-lab-takes-sci-fi-fans-into-a-vr-experience/>
- 66 Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, c1999).
- 67 Robert Scholes, *Fabulation and Metafiction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, c1979).

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