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Realities aren't Real!

A (Really) Brief Cinematic Chronicle of the Constant Resistance of the Real against Urban Planning Realities

Neoklis MANTAS¹,
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Abstract. Planners are asked to deal with an aphoristically constructed urban reality, while being practically reluctant towards the 'un-programmable' real life of each citizen. However, the conceptions and perceptions of the Real (realities) have changed during the timespan. What follows is an anthology of the three pivotal mutations, which are linked to certain 'structures of feeling' (a term used by Raymond Williams): modern, postmodern and metamodern, and aspires to detect their inexhaustible mark on urban planning (conception of urban reality) and urban living (experience of the urban Real), as featured in three representative films: Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), Burton's *Batman Returns* (1991) and Nolan's *Inception* (2010).

Keywords. Cinematic City, Real, Urban Planning Realities, Metamodernism, Phenomenology

Prelude: Reality is the Ambiance of Real

Baudrillard had expressed a Lacanian warning about the intrinsic difference between Real and reality (1981/1994). According to the French post-structuralists, Real is noumenal and can only be lived without being predicted, whereas realities are formed according to conceptions and perceptions, as an attempt of dealing with the infinite and primordial Real. On the same wavelength, one could say that planners are asked to deal with an aphoristically constructed urban reality, while being practically impotent towards the 'un-programmable' real lives of the citizens. Likewise, citizens are forming their own perspectives towards urban life by defying or being indifferent to the imposed planning simplifications. However, those conceptions and perceptions of the Real (realities) have changed during the timespan, as they are highly sensitive to the ever-changing contemporaneity.

Within that framework, the first part of the paper detects three pivotal mutations in the historico-geographical experience of the Real, which inevitably left their inexhaustible mark on the conception of urban reality (urban planning) and the perception of the Real (urban living). But how the lived experience of the Real can be approached conceptually? Here, the theorizing concerning the experience of the Real is about to be attempted through the association of Raymond Williams' term (1961/2001) "structure of feeling" with the Lefebvrian Spatial Triad (Lefebvre, 1974/1991). Thus, those mutations are linked to certain 'feelings' of the Real: the modern feeling of Real, the postmodern feeling of Real and the metamodern feeling of Real. Each of those 'feelings' is the common ground for the emergence of different urban planning and urban living realities at each historical-geographical juncture. According to the authors, those

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'feelings' are the *élan vital* that drives any cinematic attempt for representing the urban, whilst the films themselves can be regarded as documents of the dramatic negotiation between the synchronic planning and living realities. In more depth, the second part of the paper turns to DeCerteau's (1989/2011) concepts of urban "strategies" and urban "tactics," as presented in his book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, and attempts to link them with the notions of 'filmed space/filmic place' and 'narrated space' correspondingly. Within that theoretical spectrum, urban planners are powerfully "producing" places through institutional "strategies" that crystalize dynamic space, a similar attempt to author's artistic choices. In parallel, citizens are creatively 'consuming' the given places through every-day appropriational "tactics" of resistance, likewise a film character's narrated emotional climax. Lastly, that peculiar *bras-de-fer* is detected in the three representative films of the third part: Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), Burton's *Batman Returns* (1991) and Nolan's *Inception* (2010).

Act I: Structures for Feeling the Urban

Real, even if it is noumenal or infinite, is lived - conceived and perceived - through shared 'structures of feeling' and it ends up producing a certain historico-geographical reality. Those structures that help us feeling the Real are not clearly expressed or officially articulated, like ideologies (Williams, 1961/2001). In contrast, they can be easily detected in artworks and indicate the *Zeitgeist* of their epoch. In other words, they are ways of feeling the ongoing present and may range from formal consent to total dispute with the dominant culture.

During the timespan and over that spectrum of consent and dispute, the simultaneous extension of that 'structure' syllogism to urban reality points out two diametrically opposed modes of feeling the urban Real: a) **planners' utopian ideas** (the conceptualized space without life that tends to align with the dominant vision for achieving the ideal urban condition) and b) **citizens' actual experiences** (the lived space that denounces the dominant conception of the urban Real). Inevitably, planners' utopian ideas are developed within conceived space (Lefebvre, 1974/1991) and are characterized by simplifications about urban life, whereas citizens' actual experiences are constantly rising against those simplifications by reminding the profound - and often omitted - emotional dimension of being alive within the city. The formers are thinking of and dealing with the city in the abstract way of symbols and indicators, while the latter are trying to compose their idiosyncratically anarchistic manifestos, which are usually disputing planners' *ceteris paribus* condition.

Consequently, the three structures for feeling the urban can be outlined as an inextinguishable confrontation between the historico-geographical conception of the desired reality that guides urban planning and the asymptotic experience of everyday life with these planning realities.

The Modern Structure for Feeling the Urban

The modern conceptualization of urban space was obsessed with the scientific prediction of the Real and it was accompanied with a deep faith in the validity of universal truths, the typology of things and pure Reason. The ideal urban condition could be achieved through facing the city as a clock-worked machine and treating its dwellers as robots. For the modern urbanists, urban planning had to be used in order to program the mechanical progress in large scales, while promoting the functionality of the city (Harvey, 1990). However, the dominant conception of the urban Real, which was founded on the austere techno-scientific reason, was challenged by the lived experience of the modern condition and the socio-political yearning for the restoration of sentiment. Citizens were not robots.

The Postmodern Structure for Feeling the Urban

The postmodern conceptualization of urban space that succeeded modernism was mainly concerned about the artistic direction of the Real. In postmodern times of de-industrialization, when the deep faith in Grand Narratives was replaced by a fundamental nihilistic doubt, artistic intertextuality - which was based on cynical criticism, melancholic irony and deconstructive playfulness - changed the utopian vision towards the city. During that historico-geographical juncture, the ideal urban condition could be achieved through facing the city as a terrain for setting phantasmagoric spectacles and treating its dwellers as greedy audience. Cities had to be sold (city marketing). For the postmodern urbanists, the city was regarded as a deeply nostalgic palimpsest of pasts and commercial potential at present (Harvey, 1990). Urban planning was adapted to the retro-aesthetic dogma of an atavistic design. However, the dominant conception of the urban Real, which was founded on the intertextuality of the architectural decorations, was challenged by the lived experience of the postmodern condition and the socio-cultural yearning for organic integration within the city spectacle. Citizens were no longer hypnotized spectators.

The Metamodern Structure for Feeling the Urban

The metamodern conceptualization of urban space brought the branding of the Real to the fore. In the new millennium, it is time for city branders to poetically re-define the socio-cultural beta version of postmodern city marketing (Mommaas, 2002). Of course, that redefinition is taking place amid a severe digitalization, which does not leave cities unaffected. The ambivalent cultural contemporaneity is named as meta-modern by the cultural theorists Vermeulen and Akker (2018), and produces new - open and global - systems about urban identities/images, which are based on meta-modern mythopoeias that are attempting to re-construct the de-constructed by fusing modern naiveté and postmodern knowingness (Dempsey, 2015). Consequently, after the modern functional and postmodern phantasmagoric emphasis on urban planning, the new emerging urban planning reality approaches the city as a concept-land, where dwellers' dreams may be fulfilled: you can be creative in a creative city, you can be up-to-date in an intelligent city, you can be famous in a celebrity city (Knox, 2014). For metamodern urbanists, urban planning is mainly a matter of copywriting, as it has to increase city brand awareness and predispose particular (thematic) attitudes towards the urban. However, that new-age conception of the urban Real is often incompatible with the lived experience of the metamodern condition. Citizens are not avatars: they cannot be manipulated as in a video-game.

Act II: Orthodoxy of Filmic Places vs. 'Heretical' Filmic Spaces

If planners' utopian conceptions of ideal cities may be distinguished behind the lines of blueprints or technical reports, the psychic trauma that triggers the constant desire for a better place to live in may be traced in Arts. According to the authors, the dramatic negotiation between the synchronic planning and living realities has been relatively obvious in films. We turn to films because they stand as kind reminders of our practical impotence towards the materialization of the ideal city. The film is carefully planned; its story-plot is pre-given, exactly like the dominant conception of the city. However, it can be perceived in alternate ways by the audience. That fact brings in mind DeCerteau's theory about space/place. Through that linguistic prism, urban planners are used to think with places and the only freedom citizens have is to formulate alternative sentences (Vermeulen, 2015). Hence, a worth mentioning instant cinematic encounter of the seemingly contradictory DeCerteau and Lefebvrian thought takes place.

More specifically, filmic space, defined as the constructed space through all techniques that form the material object that is called film (Buckland referring to Souriau, in Koeck, 2013), can be considered as a suspension of synchronic urban dynamics, whereas diegetic space, namely the fictive space that is created between the visible on-screen and invisible off-screen space, can be activated only through the dialectic exchange with the spectator. In the same wavelength, films may stand as documents of crystallized Lefebvrian places (i.e. anchors in space) or as open terrains that enable the subversion of those places in a DeCerteau way (i.e. spatialization). Moreover, the paper is inspired by DeCerteau's (1989/2011) concepts of urban planning 'strategies' and urban living 'tactics', as presented in his book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, and attempts to link them with the notions of 'filmic (static) space', or '**filmic place**' and 'trialectically practiced place', or '**emotional spaces**', correspondingly.

Filmic Place

Filmic places are aesthetic crystallizations of the dynamic urban space and most of the times are harmonious to the prevailing historico-geographic conceptions of the ideal city. The orthodoxy of the production of those places is connected with the Lefebvrian conceived space, i.e. the dominant space within a society, which is designed to manipulate those who exist within it. Just like urban planners are powerfully "producing" suspensions of the dynamic urban space through institutional and structural "strategies," filmmakers make specific artistic choices (e.g. direction of photography, mise-en-scène, and montage), where the conception of an ideal urban reality usually lurks.

Emotional Spaces

Being confined within the filmic place of a movie, spectators can exercise their 'heretical' anagnosis to form an emotional space, as a result of the trialectic relation between the constructed filmic place, the dramatic mythos of the hero(in)es and the synchronic perception of the urban real. In a DeCerteau way, each spectator could creatively consume the given filmic place by reflecting on a plot climax that has been already programmed by the auteur. Within that framework, the last film sequence can be seen as the narthex, where the perceived filmic reality is about to meet real life.

Act III: the (brief) Cinematic Chronicle

Eventually, through references to the filmic places and the emotional spaces of three representative science fiction films, the three structures for feeling the urban can be verified. Besides, sci-fi films are ideal for detecting the encounter of imagined Realities with the lived Real, as they are synchronic documents of the historical-geographical conception of a desired reality and the non-coincidence of everyday experience with these (filmic) realities.

Metropolis (1927) by Fritz Lang

The filmic place of Lang's silent film is expressionistic. Through film's chiaroscuro photography and the epic linear montage towards its didactic happy-ending, Lang's vision can be seen as an emotional alignment with planners' ideas about urban utopias during functional modernity. However, the emotional space, which is opened beyond the artistically formal conception of *Metropolis* and real-life modern experience, reaches its optimistic apex at the last scene, where the heart becomes the mediator of head (capital) and hands (labor). The horizons of modern empathy had to be broader than the heartless, robotic logic of modernity.

Batman Returns (1991) by Tim Burton

The filmic place of Burton's oeuvre is intertextually operatic. Film's 'technicolorish' glossy photography, along with references to various cultural texts, such as comicbook/noir aesthetics or architectural gothic, constitutes Burton's vision a melodramatic duplicate of planners' ideas about the imagineered urban condition during a spectacularly melancholic postmodernity. Unlike modern optimism, postmodern emotional space is pessimistic. That is obvious in Batman's last Christmas scene, where the 'freaks' of the society - genuine (Penguin) or masked (Batman) - stay at the backstage of the phantasmagoric city spectacle.

Inception (2010) by Christopher Nolan

The filmic place of Nolan's creation is constructed through an oscillation between modern and postmodern polarities. On one hand, film's matte and neat photography, along with plot's naiveté before the scientific approaches of ideal (e.g. dreams are plain chemical processes), remind the positivistic mentality of modernism. On the other, the dream cities of the film, where all the scientific laws (e.g. gravity, time) are defied, are raising a postmodern awareness about the protection of inner felt experiences. Thus, Nolan's focus on the mental ideal cities can be paralleled with planners' metamodern obsession with concept-cities. Above all, metamodern emotional horizon remains vaguely optimistic. This is more than obvious at Inception's spinning top enigmatic scene, where the spectators have to decide whether to believe or not in the dream quality of the ideal (informed naiveté).

Epilogue: Cities Through the Looking Glass

Cinema offers a great opportunity for looking at our cities through a magnifying glass. In films, the dominant conception of the ideal city that seems to guide urban planning is blended with every day and real-life disputes. In other words, films may communicate effectively the urban feeling at a given historico-geographic juncture. The three aforementioned films are typical examples, considering that they depict modern, postmodern and metamodern urban feeling:

- Modern Mechanical Plans for heartless Robots
Modern reality made urban planning seem rigid and mechanic, while treating citizens like heartless Robots in the middle of a universal city,
- Postmodern Pop Designs for bionic Cartoons
Postmodern reality promoted a spectacular and nostalgic version of urban planning, in the name of which citizens seem to be cartoons in a graphic city,
- Metamodern Conceptual Guide addressed to Avatars
Metamodern reality is obsessed with the conceptual aspect of urban planning, with its directives predisposing particular (thematic) attitudes towards the city.

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