

# Visions of the Urban Landscape: An Analysis of Futuristic Cities in Science Fiction Cinema

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the depiction of futuristic cities in iconic science fiction movies (**Blade Runner (1982)**, **Akira (1988)**), analyzing how these urban landscapes affect human interaction in these environments. The study will examine the visual aspects that define these backdrops. The paper will also study the use of architecture and urban design in bringing these cities to reality.

This paper will explore how science fiction films have showcased society's evolving relationship with technology and also inspired new changes in architecture and urban planning. The objective is to understand how these movies use futuristic cities to examine common issues regarding society, technology, and humanity's future.

**Keywords:** Dystopian, Utopian, Futuristic Cities, Urban Landscapes, Architecture, and Technological Growth.

## INTRODUCTION

Cities have always played an important role in the science fiction world. From the skyscrapers in **Metropolis** to the streets of **Blade Runner**, filmmakers have showcased cities that reflect humanity's aspirations and fears with the future. These representations often serve as both warnings and aspirations for what the future could be. These cities not only inspire viewers but also possess the power to reflect the fears and ideas of the general public.

This paper aims to study the design of these cities, focusing on how cinema showcases futuristic environments to improve their storytelling. By studying how architecture and space are integrated into these films, this study sheds light on the role of urban settings in shaping these films. The paper also offers insights into the creative visions that have shaped the depiction of the city in science fiction cinema.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Paper 1: **Urban Phantasmagorias: Cinema and the Immanent Future of Cities**

This paper deals with the changing ideas of futuristic cities over the course of the 20th century. The paper has taken the example of 4 specific movies namely:

**Metropolis (1927), Blade Runner (1982), Alphaville (1965), and The Matrix (1999).**

In the beginning, they discuss about the rapid urbanisation that happened in the 20th century and how that influenced ideas about what the future would look like. In the next part of the paper they try to find a common denominator in all the above mentioned movies- they conclude on the following points. All the movies deal with the potential influences of technology on the futuristic cities and the people living in it. The further dissect each movie based on the dystopian futures presented:

- Metropolis depicts an oppressive, mechanized urban dystopia, contrasting an affluent upper-city with an impoverished under-city controlled by technology.
- Alphaville portrays a society controlled by a surveillance system and oppressive communication technologies, blurring the boundaries between humans and machines.
- Blade Runner shows a technologically futuristic world where human-like androids (replicants) are indistinguishable from humans, questioning the essence of identity.
- The Matrix goes further, creating a virtual reality program that completely confuses the viewers between the real and the simulated, trapping humans in an artificial world.

In conclusion, the authors argue that the movies are plausible depictions of futuristic cities posing an imminent threat to humanity.

#### Paper 2: **The Future Cities that Were Shaped by Visual Culture**

Much like the first paper this one deals with the influence of modernism in architecture in the 20th century. While at the same time sci-fi movies of the era started visualising what modern cities would look like. The paper mainly deals with 3 major movies from the 1980's:

#### **Blade Runner(1982), Akira(1988), and Back to the Future II (1989).**

The paper then talks about how certain fictional aspects of the above movies have become reality in today's world, with examples of 3D digital advertisements and holograms being displayed on building facades (which can be seen in Back To The Future II).

The paper argues that what was once imaginary in 1980s sci-fi has now become part of the practical reality of modern urban environments, demonstrating the influence of cultural production on shaping the built environment.

The paper concludes by suggesting that further research could explore the continued relationship between contemporary sci-fi, literature, and the design/development of future cities.

#### Paper 3: **“It was the city killed the beast:” nature, technophobia, and the Cinema of the urban future**

The paper talks about the portrayal of cities and technology in futuristic films. It mainly deals with 4 major movies, namely:

#### **The Day the Earth Stood Still(2008), Metropolis(1927), THX 1138(1971), and Blade Runner(1982)**

This paper points out that these films often show a dystopian vision of technology and urban environments becoming oppressive and dehumanizing. These cities are portrayed as crowded and claustrophobic places where people lose their identity. Technology is seen as a double-edged sword - while it has enabled human control and advancement, it has also led to the exploitation of nature and human beings.

Overall, the paper argues that the treatment of future cities in science fiction films is more about exploring the human condition and the moral failings of society, rather than offering realistic predictions of urban development. These films use the city as a setting to examine broader questions about the relationship between humans, technology, and the natural world.

#### Paper 4: **FUTURE CITY IN SCIENCE FICTION FILMS**

This paper mainly deals with the development of futuristic cities and its architecture over the course of the 20th century. It talks about selected movies from each decade starting from the 1920's. It traces selected films that are considered important shifts of the depiction of the future city in fictional films. Sci-Fi films portray a visualisation of what cities could turn into in the future. The paper analyses the recurring patterns in the depicting future city in these films. It highlights main themes used by filmmakers to draw the image of the city in Sci-Fi films. These themes are: the Utopian and Dystopian cities, and how the cityscape

affects the people living in it. The paper also argues that the portrayal of cities in Sci- Fi films is a significant evidence of the the ideologies they belong to and of the people in that era.

**Paper 5: City and Cinema (Özden Toprak)**

The paper mainly deals with the deal relationship between the development of the modern city and the growth of cinema as an artistic medium. It talks about how cinema has presented cities in diverse ways from portraying the elegance of cities like Paris and Rome, to depicting the chaos, and dystopian aspects of life in films like **Blade Runner** and **Alphaville**. Cities are not just settings in films, but active characters that shape the narrative and experiences. The presentation of cities in cinema reflects the production and social conflicts inherent in urban spaces.

The paper talks about the concept of "cine-city" and how films reflect the social, psychological, and ideological parts of the modern city and urban life. **Midnight in Paris** is used as an example of a film in which the city of Paris is a key part of the story and theme of the modern and historical form, about nostalgia, artistic inspiration, and the "golden age". Finally, we explored how film was deeply influenced and influenced our understanding and experience of modern cities.

**Paper 6: Ideology as Dystopia: An Interpretation of Blade Runner**

The paper analyzes the film "Blade Runner" as a complex dystopian narrative. It emphasizes how the film challenges conventional notions of what it means to be "truly human" in a world increasingly dominated by advanced technology and artificial intelligence.

The paper discusses the film's setting, which reflects a future marked by environmental degradation, corporate dominance, and social fragmentation. The paper also explores the film's architecture, which contributes to its dark and oppressive atmosphere. The author argues that "Blade Runner" serves as a critique of contemporary society, reflecting anxieties about technology, capitalism, and the loss of genuine human connection.

Sl no	Topic	Key Findings	Research Gaps
1	<b>Urban Phantasmagorias: Cinema and the Immanent Future of Cities</b>	<p>This paper deals with the changing ideas of futuristic cities over the course of the 20th century.</p> <p>The authors argue that the movies are plausible depictions of futuristic cities posing an imminent threat to humanity.</p>	<p>Artificial Intelligence and its effect on society could be explored further. The paper does not address the implications of sci-fi influenced architecture on sustainability and urban planning. Exploring how these futuristic designs align with or challenge contemporary sustainability practices could be a valuable area of research.</p>

2	<p><b>The Future Cities that Were Shaped by Visual Culture</b></p>	<p>The authors suggest that there is a key relationship between contemporary sci-fi, literature, and the design/development of future cities.</p>	<p>The paper talks about the role of technology in shaping architecture but lacks a detailed analysis of how advancements in technology (e.g., virtual reality, augmented reality, artificial intelligence) might further influence future city designs beyond what was imagined in the 1980s.</p>
3	<p><b>“It was the city killed the beast:” nature, technophobia, and the Cinema of the urban future</b></p>	<p>The paper argues that these films often present a dystopian view, where technology and the urban environment have become oppressive and dehumanizing.</p> <p>Overall, the paper argues that the treatment of future cities in science fiction films is more about exploring human psychology.</p>	<p>Dystopian architecture in cinema. While the paper discusses the dystopian nature of the urban environment in "Blade Runner," it does not speculate on how current trends in technology and urban planning might lead to future cities.</p> <p>It would be more helpful if a comparative analysis with other dystopian movies was done.</p>
4	<p><b>FUTURE CITY IN SCIENCE FICTION FILMS</b></p>	<p>The paper traces selected films that are considered important shifts of the depiction of the future city in fictional films.</p> <p>It highlights main themes used by filmmakers to draw the image of the city in Sci-Fi films.</p>	<p>The paper does not address how advancements in technology (internet, artificial intelligence, smart cities) have affected the people’s role in modern day cities.</p>
5	<p><b>City and Cinema (Özden Toprak)</b></p>	<p>The paper talks about the concept of "cine-city" and how films reflect the social, psychological, and ideological parts of the modern city and urban life.</p> <p>The paper explores how cinema has been deeply</p>	<p>Effects of urban design on human psychology could be explored more. While the paper discusses traditional cinema's role in shaping perceptions of urban environments, it does not address how digital media (e.g., streaming platforms, social media) and contemporary filmmaking techniques influence the</p>

		shaped by and has in turn shaped our understanding and experiences of the modern city.	representation of cities today
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Selected Parameters:

- Artificial Intelligence and its effect on society.
- Dystopian architecture in cinema.
- Smart cities and use of sustainability in design.

**Parameter 1: Artificial Intelligence and its effect on society.**

The integration of artificial intelligence into society has caused profound changes across industries, affecting the economy, ethics, and social structures. AI has revolutionized sectors from healthcare to finance. However, this advancement also raises significant challenges, including job displacement, privacy violations, and ethical concerns regarding bias and accountability. (Rosenberg, R. S. (1988). *The Impact of Artificial Intelligence on Society*. Department of Computer Science, University of British Columbia.)

The widespread use of expert systems, for instance, has streamlined decision-making in industries but also prompted concerns about homogenization and the loss of diversity in expertise representation (Gutierrez, C. I. (2020). *The Unforeseen Consequences of Artificial Intelligence (AI) on Society: A Systematic Review of Regulatory Gaps Generated by AI in the US*.)

Moreover, studies highlight the need for responsible AI use, emphasizing collaboration among governments, industries, and public to address societal impacts. Public engagement and education are identified as crucial to fostering understanding and acceptance of AI's societal role (Pachegowda, C. (2023). *The Global Impact of AI-Artificial Intelligence: Recent Advances and Future Directions, A Review*. *arXiv preprint arXiv:2401.12223*.)

**Parameter 2: Dystopian architecture in cinema.**

Dystopian architecture in science fiction cinema often showcase industrialized and overcrowded urban environments. Movies like *Blade Runner* and *The Fifth Element* employ verticality and oppressive structures to convey themes of societal division (Kuhn, *The Architecture of Dystopia*). The dense and chaotic cityscapes shows a loss of individuality and the overwhelming presence of technological control. Similarly, *Equilibrium* and *1984* use stark, brutalist architecture to evoke themes of authoritarianism and the suppression of human creativity.

The representation of urban environments and architecture in 21st-century science fiction films depict dystopian societies under totalitarian control. Power dynamics are visually mediated through the built environment in these films, focusing on the recurring themes of architecture, urbanism, and power relations. (Kiessel, M., & Stubbs, J. (2023). *Urban Dystopia on Screen: The City, Architecture and Power in the Contemporary Science Fiction Film*. *Athens Journal of Architecture*, 9(4), 1-33.)

These depictions influence the audience's perception of urban futures, often warning against unchecked technological progress and authoritarian governance. The role of architecture in these narratives is not just aesthetic but symbolic, representing the psychological and sociopolitical impacts of dystopian futures (Bertrand, *Cinematic Cities: Architecture as Narrative*).

### Parameter 3: Smart cities and use of sustainability in design.

Smart cities are a blend of technology and sustainability, leveraging AI and IoT (Internet of Things) to optimize resource use and enhance urban living. (Batty, M., Axhausen, K. W., Giannotti, F., Pozdnoukhov, A., Bazzani, A., Wachowicz, M. & Portugali, Y. (2012). Smart cities of the future. *The European Physical Journal Special Topics*, 214, 481-518.) Some papers talk about how smart cities aim to achieve sustainability goals through energy-efficient infrastructure, real-time data monitoring, and green urban planning. (Albino, V., Berardi, U., & Dangelico, R. M. (2015). Smart cities: Definitions, dimensions, performance, and initiatives. *Journal of Urban Technology*, 22(1), 3–21.)

However, critics caution against the potential for technological overreach, where increased surveillance and data centralization could infringe on individual freedoms. The balance between leveraging technology for sustainable growth and maintaining ethical standards is a recurring theme in discussions about smart city development. (Townsend, A. M. (2013). *Smart cities: Big data, civic hackers, and the quest for a new utopia*. WW Norton & Company.)

### PRIMARY DATA



The movie *Akira* (1988), directed by Katsuhiro Otomo, presents **Neo-Tokyo**, a sprawling, chaotic metropolis built on the ruins of old Tokyo after a nuclear catastrophe. The cityscape and architecture in *Akira* are central to the film's themes of societal decay, technological advancement, and rebellion. (Debnath, K., & Kumar, N. Postmodern Elements in Katsuhiro Ōtomo's *Akira* (1988).)

Key Features of Neo-Tokyo's Architecture:

**Vertical Urban Density:** Neo-Tokyo is a very dense, multi-layered city, reflecting urban overcrowding and economic disparity. Skyscrapers dominate the skyline, symbolizing technological achievement but also societal division. The lower levels of the city are grittier, often in decay, showcasing the divide between the affluent and the marginalized. (Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/@DamiLeeArch>)

**Neon Aesthetic and Cyberpunk Influence:** The animation follows a cyberpunk style. The city is lit up by vivid neon lights, billboards, and advertisements, showcasing a consumer-driven dystopia. This aesthetic creates a sense of hyper-urbanization and overstimulation, typical of dystopian narratives.

**Decayed Infrastructure and Urban Chaos:** While the upper class of the city live in advanced skyscrapers, the streets are chaotic and deteriorated, populated by gangs and violence. This difference highlights themes of inequality in the dystopian world of Neo-Tokyo and the consequences of rapid technological growth. The film's depiction of a militarized, authoritarian government is mirrored in its oppressive urban environment. (Napier, S. J. (1993). Panic sites: The Japanese imagination of disaster from Godzilla to Akira. *The journal of Japanese studies*, 19(2), 327-351.)

**Dynamic Cityscape:** The use of hand-drawn animation brings Neo-Tokyo to life with intricate details. The city feels alive, with bustling traffic, vibrant advertisements, and a relentless pace that immerses viewers in its dystopian reality.



### Conclusion:

Akira presents Neo-Tokyo as an example of humanity's potential for self-destruction. The cityscape, with its towering skyscrapers and decayed undercity, symbolizes the dangers of unchecked technological progress, political corruption, and societal division. It serves as a cautionary tale about the consequences of rapid urbanization and the delicate balance between innovation and the environment. Akira warns of a dystopian future where technological advancements create ethical issues. In conclusion, Akira's urban environment depicts its central themes of rebellion, power, and the cyclical nature of destruction and rebirth, showing the complexities of modern existence.



(Source: <https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/10/2/16375126/blade-runner-future-city>)



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Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* is a definitive work of cinematic architecture, envisioning **Los Angeles 2019** as a dystopian, cyberpunk cityscape. The film's design draws heavily from art deco, brutalism, and modernist influences, creating a richly layered urban environment. (Kawamoto, M. T. M. (2016). *The Question of Time in Science Fiction Films: An Investigation on Modernism, Postmodernism and Post-Postmodernism.*)

### Key Features of *Blade Runner's* Architecture:

**Vertical Division:** The city is dominated by towering skyscrapers, such as the Tyrell Corporation pyramid, which loom over the chaotic streets below. This verticality symbolizes power hierarchies, with the affluent occupying the skyscrapers while the rest live in the polluted lower city. (Bruno, G. (1987). *Ramble City: Postmodernism and "Blade Runner"*. *October*, 41, 61-74.)

**Industrial City:** The architecture reflects industrial brutalism, with massive, fortress-like buildings that seem oppressive and daunting. This design aesthetic emphasizes the dehumanizing aspects of the city and society. It creates a sense of fear and insignificance to the viewers. (Williams, D. E. (1988). *Ideology as dystopia: An interpretation of Blade Runner*. *International Political Science Review*, 9(4), 381-394.)

**Neon-Drenched Streetscapes:** Similar to *Akira*, *Blade Runner* uses neon lights and holographic advertisements to create a visually overwhelming urban environment. The city is dark and gloomy, amplifying its atmosphere and themes of decay and ruin

**Environmental Decay:** The constant rain and smog highlight environmental degradation. The city feels claustrophobic and artificial, reflecting a world that has destroyed nature for technological advancement. (Williams, D. E. (1988). *Ideology as dystopia: An interpretation of Blade Runner*. *International Political Science Review*, 9(4), 381-394.)

**Conclusion:** The urban environment in *Blade Runner* is a metaphor for humanity's greed. The skyscrapers represent societal division and the decayed streets signify the consequences of economic and ecological exploitation. The cityscape acts as both a backdrop and a character showcasing a future where humanity is lost. Ultimately, *Blade Runner* critiques the urban sprawl of the industrialized city while the people who live in it continue to suffer.

### Comparative Analysis of *Akira* and *Blade Runner*

1. **Urban Density:** Both films use architecture to depict societal divides. In *Blade Runner*, the elite occupy the skyscrapers, while in *Akira*, wealthier areas contrast sharply with chaotic slums.
2. **Technological Advancement:** The cities are symbols of technological advancements overshadowing human values, with both films critiquing the societal impact of progress.
3. **Dystopian Atmosphere:** Dark, oppressive, and chaotic, the cities reflect fears of environmental destruction and societal collapse.

Sources for primary data:

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Debnath, K., & Kumar, N. Postmodern Elements in Katsuhiro Ōtomo's *Akira* (1988).

### CONCLUSION

In examining the portrayal of futuristic cities in science fiction cinema, this study has highlighted how these urban landscapes transcend mere backdrops to become integral to storytelling. Through detailed analysis of iconic films like **Blade Runner** and **Akira**, this paper underscores the role of architecture and urban design in displaying the environmental concerns and ethical dilemmas of their time.

The dystopian atmospheres of these cities, showcased by vertical hierarchies and decaying infrastructure, serve as cautionary tales about the unintended consequences of unchecked technological progress and urbanization.

This paper throws light on the enduring relevance of science fiction cities as both reflective and predictive lenses for understanding the complex relationship between humanity, technology, and the built environment. Future research could delve deeper into the role of emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence and smart urban systems, in shaping both the narrative and real-world development of our urban futures.

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