ON BREAKPOINTS AND FLOWS: AURELI’S CITY ARCHIPELAGOS OF MEDIATED IMAGES IN PETE TRAVIS’ DREDD AND CHRISTOPHER NOLAN’S THE DARK KNIGHT RISES.

MACIEJ STASIOWSKI
JAGIELLONIAN UNIVERSITY, CRACOW

INTRODUCTION

In his book, “The Possibility of Absolute Architecture”, Pier Vittorio Aureli outlines architecture and urbanism as opposing forces that shape the plan of the city. While architecture, in the text, denotes single, site-specific interventions, which, nevertheless, amount to the metropolis’ monumental skyline, the process of urbanization is understood after Ildefons Cerdà’s initial use of the terminology. It’s an: “...over-expanding and all-encompassing apparatus that is at the basis of modern forms of governance.” [Aureli 2011, X]. The distinction is crucial to his argument, that it’s the architectural forms (as pointed at in the works of Oswald Mathias Ungers, Étienne-Louis Boullée, and Giovanni Battista Piranesi) that regulate, direct, or break the flows of urbanization.

The processes themselves – even though described in terms of velocity and dynamics – in reality occur rather slowly. Aureli referred mainly to unrealized, utopian projects, like Piranesi’s “Campo Marzio dell’antica Roma”, speculative vedute, characterized by their critical rhetoric, exuberant form, and aiming at utopian (in the sense of proposals for concrete changes). At the intersection of aforementioned pictorial practice, and tradition of utopian literature, in the twentieth-century cinematic representations of urbanism and architecture, took their role. Mainstream cinema is governed by narrative and condensation. No time for lengthy descriptions. Yet, at the same time, the plots have to be set in a concrete setting, as well as at a specific time in urban/architectural history.

Furthermore, over a hundred-year long evolution of cinematic language came to develop surrogate ways of description, like the synecdoche, which is precisely how cities are depicted in films, in general, thus following Aureli’s main point. Issues of urbanism, as a commentary on the state of the polis, or polemics with architectural trends, steadily move to the foreground.

Film overview

Both – Pete Travis’ “Dredd” (2012) and Christopher Nolan’s “The Dark Knight Rises” – are comic book adaptations, in which the metropolis plays a crucial part. This makes the problem of their site-specifics and portrayal of urban turmoil all the more relevant. In fact, we are looking at two imaginary agglomerations, modelled after nightmarish versions of the biggest American cities: Gotham City – originally based on morbid renderings by Hugh Ferris, presenting fantastical views of New York and Chicago, in which early twentieth century skyscrapers metamorphose into stalagmite towers, growing from night’s empty streets, and “shot” at low angles.

In Nolan’s third installment of the Batman series, Gotham is less grim that Ferris’ originals, but still depicted in cold tonality of a wintry Manhattan. In turn, the second cinematic attempt at adapting John Wagner’s “Judge Dredd”, supplies us with a “scorched earth” look of post-WWIII urban mesh of
tower blocks, and labyrinthine underpasses. Megacity One is an overpopulated city. Instead of ending, war shifted to the conflicts between megablock residents. In fact, large block structures are cities themselves, although organized vertically. Film operates upon this synecdoche, also in terms of distributing the governmental hierarchy, as the mob – taking control over Peach Trees megablock – is situated at the top, while poor citizens are crowded on ground level.

As “Dredd” introduces the conflict driving the narrative instantly, “The Dark Knight Rises” gradually prepares us to the part of the movie, in which the villain (Bane) carries out his terroristic revolution – taking it to the streets, while Gotham’s protagonist and police forces, are literally being trapped in the sewers. In both films, the city becomes a hostage. While the plot of *carnivalisation* (Mikhail Bakhtin’s term describing a temporal suspension of normal order and laws, along with their inversion3) and restoration progress, cinematographic depiction supplies us with visual associations and media-circulated images, referring to historical events – their content being highly charged with violence, spectacular and drastic footage of iconic significance. None of them recreates the events of 9/11, yet it is a similar sort of gravity they exhibit.

**METHOD & ANALYSIS**

**Monument-images**

Argument, which I wanted to present in this paper, is that these forms of visual intertextuality do not only program our bias towards certain problems of urban and architectural nature (as depicted and incorporated into the plot, thus being a part of director’s/scriptwriter’s critical commentary), but that they also function as a form of televised memories. It’s not due to their archival and documentary quality, but because of the tension they build within the filmic structure – in the context of narrative – as well as the image of the fictitious city they build up to.

In “Cinema 1: Movement-Image” Gilles Deleuze depicted classic Hollywood model of cinema as far from being a sequence of static images; still-lives brought to life only by movement. Instead, he viewed them as “immobile sections of movement” – compositions of freeze-framed actions. These “sections” are highly charged with sensory-motor quality of real-life events they refer to (and reanimate within the movie’s plot). In Aureli, the fragmentary architectures of Piranesi and Boullée “behaved” like break points, regulating flow and distribution of urban fabric (with their structure shown as that of an archipelago), the key fragments of a city, urban scenes and architecture-filled frames – as portrayed in cinema – create and image of the city, in a similar manner, only through cinematography and montage. Both “mediated” cities of Gotham and Megacity One are in fact archipelagos, even though panoramic views and aerial shots try to present us with a coherent image of their skyline.

Still, the transformations a “city system” undergoes are too amorphous to grasp. The issue, whether we ourselves construct an image of the city as a topography of urban mesh or a juxtaposition of monumental architectures, has been addressed throughout and ever since Kevin Lynch’s book “The Image of the City”. With cinema – and its’ present focus on terrorism and other threats to the twenty-first century city – this discussion reemerges. Films remain biggest suppliers of images that go beyond iconic and static. They interlock the memory and capture the dynamics of conflicts at the heart of urbanism.
Gotham détourned

The most interesting part of Nolan’s film happens around seventy minutes into the movie, as the buried and disgraced Batman/Bruce Wayne disappears below ground, and Bane’s plot of seizing and severing the city-island form the main land is carried out. This is shown to us in discontinuous fragments. We are unable to grasp the plan’s unfolding in the process of its’ execution. We have to “wait” for its’ “inauguration ceremony” held at the hijacked football stadium. Bane sets off explosives, isolating Gotham from the rest of the metropolis. The city has been given a deadline set by the nuclear reactor’s core meltdown time. It functions as a time bomb, which is driven around the city along with two empty trucks in a game of cups, which only multiplies the obstacles on the way to mechanism’s dismantlement.

Carnivalisation of Gotham has also its down side. The new, self-proclaimed authorities impose their rule through subverting the symbols of former power throughout the city, starting from the stadium, which – in this situation – stands in for the central square or the municipal hall. The court building becomes its own medieval caricature, and the limits of the city turn into literal end of existence, with the expanse of frozen river ready to crack under anybody who tries to pass it. Wealthier citizen’s houses are looted, and prisons emptied. Martial law is imposed, resulting in lack of traffic. But the city is like a limb amputated from arteries and vital organs, so there’s no travel or commute. Due to Bane’s threat of detonating the bomb the moment anybody tries to escape, the island is sieged with army. Military surrounds Gotham, helplessly beholding the spectacle.

In his 1950s text, Guy Debord argues about the mistake Haussmannization of Paris was. By broadening the boulevards, and destroying the “old Paris”, it prevented any possible future revolution from happening; this including the Situationist International’s own. Debord was interested in devising tactics of experiencing the city, as well as contemporary life, calling them a détournement. It’s a diversion – appropriation of capitalist culture’s symbols, by taking them out of context, putting them together, in a new, collage-like structure of non-homogenous elements. Tension created through juxtaposition. The obvious act of détournement in “The Dark Knight Rises”, is the re-appropriation of the sport facility. Bane’s troops do not only cause the field to collapse, revealing the concrete-slab levels of its construction – taking the game form the audience – but, furthermore, introducing their own “game” into the streets of Gotham. The antagonist’s expose takes the form of an announcement of rules, and the judge’s whistle that would mark the beginning is replaced by killing the first hostage.

Simultaneously, a second détournement is in progress, as the “images” of the captive city start to sabotage the unity of the “game”. This is a commentary, which is made explicit mainly in the scenes and sequences that don’t move the plot forward, or are subsidiary to the main course of events. They outline the scope of terror. Its’ source could be linked to the footage transmitted by the CNN during the American occupation of Iraq (2003-2011), and the bomb attacks in London (2005) – events still vivid in the minds of 2012’s film audience. Yet, the crane view of an empty street covered in snow, along with a tank passing through it, could have been taken from archival footage reels shot in the first days of Martial Law in Poland, back in December of 1981. A similar thing could be said about the images of troops stationed at the borders of the city, dating back to the Serbian siege of Sarajevo (1992-1996); the time television viewers were fed with an overload of drastic imagery, as the CNN/BBC reported on the state of the deteriorating city. Slow death, the western audience was made
to watch. Therefore, each of the event-images brings a contextual load, becoming additional lens that fix and focus our perspective on the city. The view of bridges being destroyed, only adds to the metaphorical value.

Along with each of these images comes a memory of an urban failure. The turning of city’s structure into an entrapment, making citizens vulnerable to terroristic acts and topographical dead ends in potential urban warfare. Media-digested images constitute the memory of a cinematic metropolis.

**Dredd the Hof**

With “Dredd”, our dependency on fragmented and partial perspectives is deepened, in order to create a comprehensive “mental picture” of a metropolis in a state crisis. In Travers’ film, the crime is organized and executed in a direct manner. Slo-Mo drug acts as a MacGuffin. Three traffickers are killed by the “Ma-Ma gang”, controlling Peach Trees block. Judges are called in, and instantly trapped by the drug cartel. Ma-Ma “hijacks” the tower block, sealing it shut from the outside world. The vertical city turns into a closed thermodynamic system, in which all former activities instantly die down. Surprisingly, the entropy seems to be in reverse, as it’s the two judges against a platoon of criminals, who cool down the overheated mob system.

The first observation concerns the block, taking the shape of a gargantuan social housing project executed in the form of a high-rise, or – to be more precise – a “hof”; referring to the Viennese superblocks of the 1930s, “...whose spatial and programmatic principle was based on monumental interior courtyard reminiscent of the monastic typology of the cloister.” [Aureli 2011, 201]. The cloister is not necessarily a misleading intuition, as the inhabitants of Peach Trees are ordered to stay in their “cells”, and Judges-made-criminals, appear like monks in the crime-infested place. The inhabitants are ordered by Ma-Ma not to help the law enforcers. The closed city becomes desolate in the worst “High Noon” kind of way. “Dredd version” of the “hof” is a type of monolithic, self-sustaining architecture. Without the flow in of daily commodities, supplies, and services, the system ceases to function. Just like in Nolan’s film, yet without any specified “meltdown” time, the events happening in Peach Trees start to unfold along a time-bomb disarmament scenario. The system is being corroded by two forces simultaneously. First is the isolation – lack of support and maintenance from the outside world. Neither aid nor supervision. Second – is the criminal element, causing disorder and mayhem; precisely – mechanical destruction of the building from within, thanks to heavy weaponry.

There is also a third factor at work, which concerns the issue of size; an observation already made in Rem Koolhaas’ “S, M, L, XL”. He defines an architecture of ‘bigness’ as that, which cannot be controlled by a single architect, and can only take shape of anonymous simple forms. “The architecture of bigness artificially reconstructs the city just as the city is under the assault of urbanization. “Bigness” refers to the scale of gigantic architecture forms – not those developed horizontally, as in the case of megastructures or suburban sprawl, the two primary oppositions for the American postwar city, but rather those that develop vertically as finite architectural forms.” [Aureli 2011, 218-219]. In this way, both Koolhaas (through the research undertaken with OMA) and Aureli, make a point, that “bigness” is architecture tending to get out of control. It sprawls vertically, diminishing the scale of its model inhabitants. The inhabitants of Peach Trees, forced to take sides in
the conflict, reveal a variety of attitudes towards the new authorities and “outlawed” Judges. Their neutrality is questioned and commitment enforced through Dredd’s propaganda of “harsh justice” on one side, and Ma-Ma’s soft-spoken grudge against Megacity One government’s indifference to their situation on the other. In analogy to the “Dark Knight” example, social politics of this small-scale city model is mapped out spatially, as well as encrypted into architectural interiors. In-between outbursts of gunfire and violence in Dredd, we are confronted with shots of deserted corridors, empty staircases, of graffiti sprayed over hallways, broken light bulbs, debris, visible cracks upon the walls, scattered litter and garbage. Deterioration arrived here sooner than havoc.

In Chad Friedrichs’ documentary, “The Pruitt-Igoe Myth”, we see similar settings marked by wreckage, and learn about the reasons for the housing complex’ downfall. The “catastrophe” of Minoru Yamasaki’s project, and its’ subsequent tearing down, was hailed the end of modernism; it was the modernist idea of standardized living, that was mainly flaked by the critics. Friedrichs points out several interlocking reasons, like: de-urbanization of the 1960s, segregation, undermaintenance, rising crime rate, deteriorating conditions, lack of police protection and isolationism policy, caused by reports of patrol cars, fire trucks, and ambulances, being attacked when arriving on call in Pruitt-Igoe. “It was too big, too unmonitored. Criminals could get in and get out…”, says one of the former inhabitants. Before the images of the tearing down of the structure started being circulated in the media, the typical connotation for a TV viewer with the name (Pruitt-Igoe), would be the view of broken windows, out-of-order elevators, and dried blood upon the concrete. “Dredd” replaces old blood with fresh one, adding to it the images of bullet-ridden walls and staircases. Hypotheses match as well. The protagonist, (Judge) Dredd, stands as the executioner of the renovation plot. One carried out by force, as it opposes isolationism and consent for deterioration and criminal activity.

Contrary to Ballard’s “High Rise”, the structure isn’t condemned as pathological in its conception (at least it’s not the main scapegoat). “Bigness” in “Dredd” lacks proper maintenance, as well as the “spirit” that would unify the community (Dredd acts as one). It suffers also because of its desolation. One of the general flaws in Pruitt-Igoe, was the negligence to preserve to community resettled there. Anguish, anger and avoidance did the rest.

CONCLUSION

Remotely detached from the plot, the reference-charged images circulating in the media and cultural contexts, serve as entry points for criticism and commentary on the state and the city form. Injecting additional content from beyond the plotline, the virtual urbanism in films usually depicts cities in grave conflict. Frequently, it’s a result of the dynamics of inner frictions in the system. Manuel DeLanda characterized Deleuze’s and Guattari’s abstract machines as generators of either horizontal (meshwork) or vertical (hierarchies) forms/structures. “Contemporary studies in nonlinear urban dynamics teaches us, that, in many cases, frictions (delays, bottlenecks, conflict, uneven distribution of resources) plays a crucial role in generating self-organization.” [DeLanda: 41]7. Aureli’s archipelago structures, that could also be translated into cinematic cities composed of contextualized images, map the city as a system of flows (urbanization) and its break points (architecture). Be they mediatized memories of the decline of Pruitt-Igoe or the siege of Sarajevo, the filmic image of the city incorporates its present tensions and the memory of its conflicts. That’s enough relevant data to speculate about the directions the flow might take in the future.
ENDNOTES


6 Ibid., 218-219.


BIBLIOGRAPHY


