

# CITIES OF DREAMS

VICENTE SÁNCHEZ-BIOSCA

The cinema is fantastical and irresponsible. Its buildings are designed as whims, without even having to submit to the test of equilibrium or consistency or to the most elementary laws of physics. The screen can happily give itself up to the imagination, for nobody will ever call it to account. This condition, which makes it so elusive, also brings it closer to our dreams and longings. The more inconsistent it is, the stronger it becomes as an undying document of all that was produced by the ingenuity of the twentieth century. As a result, examples of fanciful architecture have found their way into films on many occasions, serving to delight architects without subjecting them to the slightest risk, stylising volumes to the point of inhabitability, acting as demiurges of film sets whose days were numbered. Yet those fantasies made it possible to lay foundations in a fertile area of our culture, in the imagination. In these pages I would like to prowl around some of those scenes of urban fantasy, coupling – as in a montage of attractions – various films that belong to the jubilant dawn of the avant-garde with their admittedly subjective reflections in films of recent decades, where they are echoed or which quote from them or recreate their settings. Despite its fragmentary nature, this circular process helps us to glimpse the weary or exultant awareness that many decadent, crepuscular, mannerist or desolate films of the present age possess of having worked their way through the whole of history in just a hundred years.

**FIRST MOVEMENT: NATURE AND THE CITY** *Manhatta*, the legendary film made in 1920 by the painter and photographer Charles Sheeler and the photographer Paul Strand, ends with a beautiful dusk that falls like a mantle over Hudson Bay. Clouds cover the sun as it slowly sinks, while we, the audience, feel the privilege conveyed by the noble sight of that impressive panorama of nature; a view that surpasses mankind's physical limitations, as if the camera wished to bestow a divine gift upon us. The withdrawal of the last boats of the evening forms a lovely picture which evokes the joyful contemplation of nature in its still unsullied purity. Tradition has it that *Manhatta* is an early city symphony, like the ones that were soon to invade the cinema screen: *Rien que les heures* (Alberto Cavalcanti, 1925), *The Twenty-Four Dollar Island* (Robert J. Flaherty, 1925–27), *Autumn Fire* and *A City Symphony* (Herman Weinberg, 1929 and 1930, respectively), *Man with a Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1929), *À propos de Nice* (Jean Vigo, 1930), *A Bronx Morning* (Jay Leyda, 1931), *City of Contrasts* (Irving Browning, 1931) ... and, above all, *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Grosstadt* (*Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, Walter Ruttmann, 1927): the unrestrained rhythm of the metropolis, its fascinating layout, the swarming throng, mechanised life ... In those symphonies the cinema presented itself as the modern technological art par excellence, making editing an imposing metaphor: the city became a veritable assembly line and the music induced a synaesthesia of associations with the images. The myths of modernity (mechanisation, the mass, the city) sparkled in the ecstasy of Europe which came before its fall.

Closely considered, however, *Manhatta* emitted a very different aura: steeped in the genuinely American spirit of Walt Whitman, it aspired not so much to go beyond the human and the natural as to merge nature and city, man and mass, in a sublime and – why not admit it? – mythical synthesis:

"Now I am curious what sight can ever be more stately and admirable to me than my mast-hemm'd Manhattan,

My river and sun-set, and my scallop-edg'd waves of flood-tide,  
The sea-gulls oscillating their bodies, the hay-boat in the twilight,  
and the belated lighter,  
Curious what Gods can exceed these that clasp me by the hand,  
and with voices I love call me promptly and loudly by my highest name as I approach."<sup>1</sup>

These lines were written by Walt Whitman and they preceded the Sheeler–Strand film by sixty years. How is one to trace the seething ferment of the modern city in these words? The modern imagery that palpitates in *Manhatta* – and that left its mark on the posters derived from Whitman's writings – lies at the crossroads of a heartrending dialectic that nevertheless aspires to achieve a fusion. One has only to compare the constructivism conveyed by some of the shots and the sense of nature that invests the view of the harbour with the giddy feeling transmitted by John Dos Passos's novel *Manhattan Transfer* (1925).

Closer to our own time, a more opulent technology unfolds its view of the immensity of natural landscapes: bird's-eye-view shots swooping over the Colorado Canyon, majestic waterfalls, clouds scudding over a sky that seems to be in the process of formation, rivers descending vertiginously, monumental oceans – such is *Koyaanisqatsi*, a film that Godfrey Reggio took seven years to shoot and edit and that was finally released in 1983. An almost cosmogonic vision of a grandiose world in which the human element, as yet, is absent. Association of forms, a slow, hypnotic rhythm to which Philip Glass's crystalline music adds the power of fascination. Then nature gives way to technology: chemical plants, nuclear explosions, electrified landscapes. It is not until the third part that the human element appears, initially at a distance, merged into a mass, then individualised in faces and bodies subjected to slow motion or acceleration. In the whole display, which begins with some rock paintings and returns to them an hour and a half later, not a single voice is heard to emit an utterance in language. Everything is entrusted to the art of musical and visual editing, given over to the gentle, assimilative audacity of forms. As happened in *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, the movement of the eye subjects everything to its phagocytic logic and crushes it: events of destruction and technological marvels, scenes of natural beauty and landscapes littered with garbage. Significantly, *Koyaanisqatsi* is a word which in the Hopi language means, among other things, "disorderly, chaotic, unbalanced life".

*Koyaanisqatsi* exudes urban symphony, visiting the modern world – perhaps with a certain confusion and ambiguity – and transcending it, in a way. Yet something distances it from Ruttmann's youthful euphoria or even Jean Vigo's aesthetic realism. The human element is surpassed, by excess and by default: because it seems dwarfed and stifled in the masterpieces of nature with which the documentary begins and ends, and because it is also smothered by the mass, the movement, the blind dynamic of the crowd. In this dialectic we see something that was missing in the earlier city symphonies: nature. Perhaps this makes it more appropriate to link it with Strand's work. However, though Strand was still aspiring in 1920 to extend Whitman's dream – contributing his grain of sand in the form of a camera<sup>2</sup> – with a utopian celebration of myths of fusion and brotherhood, this synthesis, which could only take place in man, has disappeared in *Koyaanisqatsi*. It is hard to make out what view it takes. Fascinated? Critical? Testimonial? Documentary? Aesthetic transcendence? Probably a mixture of them all.

**SECOND MOVEMENT: THE IMMATERIAL** Few films have been so lambasted by the critics as *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1926). The first stone was thrown by Buñuel, in a famous gibe which described it as a hybrid monstrosity divided between the dazzling majesty of its sculptural aspect; full of photogenic qualities and optical effects,

and pedantic, bombastic, trivial, outmoded romantic sentimentality. The scorn displayed by H. G. Wells also did not help to raise the general opinion. Legend has it that this monumental work became a favourite of Hitler and Goebbels; Thea von Harbou's Nazi militancy provided support for this idea, saddling the screenplay writer (co-writer, really) with all the trashy elements, while Lang's dramatic skill very soon engendered his fame as an anti-Nazi, including a fantastical (and false) last-minute flight from Germany in 1933. For all the scorn that has been poured on it, in the history of the cinema and culture it would be hard to find a film so extensively and mercilessly cited, recycled and parodied as *Metropolis*. The Germanic colossalism expressed in it in the "Great UFA style", which had its setting and factory in Neubabelsberg and which flopped so spectacularly in 1927, unexpectedly revived half a century later as if, unwittingly, it had touched a sensitive chord in the much-trumpeted spirit of postmodernity.

The cinematographers (Karl Freund, Günther Rittau, Eugen Schüfftan), art directors (Erich Kettelhut, Otto Hunte, Karl Vollbrecht), costume designer (Aenne Willkomm), sculptor (Walter Schulze-Mittendorf) and Fritz Lang himself conceived an image of the future set in 2026 in architectural form (factories, workers' city, majestic buildings, overhead bridges), but they may not have realised that all the key events in the story take place in archaic architectural enclaves: the catacombs are the setting for Maria's prophecy and the revelation of the Messiah, the Gothic cathedral is the scene for the allegory of the deadly sins, the Golem house (described thus in the script) is the setting for the devilish manufacture of the double.

There must be something in this melodramatic film for it have reappeared so virulently in the seventies and especially in the eighties: Thomas Pynchon's novel *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), the song "We Don't Need No Education" included in the film *The Wall* (Alan Parker, 1982), Madonna's music video *Express Yourself* (1985), the famous restoration of the film undertaken by Giorgio Moroder (1984) which gave it a new lease of life among modern audiences ... and, above all, *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982). What made *Metropolis* a suitable product for postmodern recycling was probably the very fact that it was a pastiche. However, though Los Angeles in 2019 recalls the world of Lang's film, which is quoted repeatedly (the Babel Tower, which becomes Tyrell Corporation, the character of Rotwang, recognisable as a palimpsest in the new replicating villain, the final duel which ends the story ...), it is no less true that *Blade Runner* established a paradigm, based on the realistic look captured by the engineer and artist Syd Mead, a style dubbed "Retro-Deco Trash-Chic" which David Rivera sees as having a great future. "Since *Blade Runner*," Rivera says, "production designers, consultants and decorators have taken the task of providing the audience with a plausible Near Future worked out down to the last detail very seriously." Nevertheless, this sort of syncretism between Tokyo and New York, the idea of a liquid atmosphere, the claustrophobic intangibility of the exteriors, the volatility of the automobiles ... does not seem any less at odds with the costume design, the movements of the actors and the plot itself with all its dramatic hooks. Might not Buñuel in the eighties have repeated for *Blade Runner* the same harsh words that he applied to *Metropolis* several decades earlier?

**THE MENACING CITY, CITY OF ANGELS** In 1914, Ludwig Meidner proclaimed his enthusiastic "Instructions for Painting Pictures of the Metropolis" to the four winds: "Let us paint what is right in front of us," he urged his fellow artists, "our own world of cities! – their tumultuous streets, the elegance of their iron suspension bridges, the gasometers hanging in mountains of whitish cloud, the roaring colours of the buses and the railway trains, the surging telephone wires (do they not sing too?), the buffoonery of

advertising columns, and the night ..."<sup>4</sup> These futuristic echoes and sensibility made Meidner a revolutionary in the world of painting, an artist carried away by the modern tempest. Yet when his imagination was placed at the service of a new art, a form of mechanical expression and contemporary radicality, the cinema, things seemed, paradoxically, to change. The sets that he designed for *Die Strasse* (*The Street*, Karl Grune, 1923) had an element of archaic imagery. *The Street* contains fascinating outbursts of festive agitation, motor cars and brouhaha, and there are collages, too, but it begins in the innards of a stifling home, like the ones conjured up by intimate chamber dramas adapted for the cinema (*Kammerspielfilme*). Fantasmagorical shadows of the swarming street cast on the ceiling of the family's room attract the attention of the central character, who leaves his wife and plunges into the networks of the tentacular city where ruin and crime lie in wait. The city here is not the modern technological reality that stimulated Meidner to paint ten years earlier; it is a phantom that ripens in the central character's mind, awakening innumerable unmentionable desires which send him spinning in free fall.

There is an image in which this disturbing vision is condensed. In the middle of the night the central character embarks on the pursuit of an attractive prostitute in a dark alley like a tunnel of perdition. Suddenly a faint light appears: two exaggerated eyes startle the man, and also us. Two eyes that look as if they have been wrenched out of a body, gazing at the scene in ominous premonition. They are only the illuminated sign of an optician's shop, but they act as the threshold of the telluric night-time existence of the city, with its powers of attraction and its devastating effects. This is imagery that owes nothing to modernity; it rises from the ashes of the fantastical tales of romanticism that E.T.A. Hoffmann created in the nineteenth century, which various neo-romantic writers made fashionable in the early twentieth century and which *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, Robert Wiene, 1920) transferred to the cinema screen.

A deserted, disquieting, threatening city. There are other fantasies at the end of the last century which reflect solitariness; but a solitariness of a new kind, because it appears within the exchanges of the city. Clouds cover the sky; an eye, in extreme close-up, observes. This image is followed by an overhead shot in beautiful black and white skimming over the network of buildings and streets, which are full of traffic. An aerial view – perhaps what one might see from the window of an aeroplane? No, definitely not. The next shot brings us to the silhouetted figure of a man on the edge of what looks like the flat roof of a building – in other words, the abyss – with his head humbly bowed, gazing down. On his back there are shining, pure white, intangible wings, giving the almost suspended body an ethereal transparency. He is an angel; the city spread out before him is Berlin; and he is standing on the Victory Column in the middle of Tiergarten Park. Only the children in the crowd notice his presence.

The city's guardian angels, Damiel and Cassiel, the two seraphic protagonists of *Der Himmel über Berlin* (*Wings of Desire*, Wim Wenders, 1986), are our guides in an unrecognisable city which, with the fall of the Berlin Wall almost imminent, is soon to disappear; a city ravaged by the scars of destruction. Potsdamer Platz, the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtniskirche, the Ku'damm, Kreuzberg, Anhalter Bahnhof, Waldemarstrasse ... Also, a piece of waste land with a tent erected by a circus – which eventually leaves – and the wall that divides the city (which only the angels can cross with impunity). The invisible angels not only walk in the streets in their fleeting existence; they also hear the thoughts and sufferings of the city's inhabitants; in discreet privacy they take part in their dramas, and their protective hand is stretched out over the dying to give them a few moments of peace, at least, if not redemption. "The Berlin air" (*die berliner Luft*) which featured in a famous song of the twenties is reconstructed in an unrepeatable grey in which the winged spirit of Rilke's poems or some of Paul Klee's paintings loom. Underlying this city watched over by angels, one of whom

becomes human for the sake of love, there is August Sander's photographic map, and hanging over it there is the burden of the destruction of 1945, the recreation of National Socialism in a film that a former angel, played by Peter Falk, has come to shoot there. A past illuminated, or rather sprinkled, with documentary pictures of air raids and corpses, ruins and suffering; a past that is revived by some damaged colour snaps taken by some American soldier who arrived in the city when the Russians had already installed themselves there. In short, an "esthétique du délabré", as Régine Robin says in a fine essay which is also a memorial: this is the aesthetic ruin of Berlin.<sup>5</sup>

This disquieting city, attractive but at the same time threatening, contrasts with *Die Strasse*, an abstract city with no name or attributes. Unlike the exultant, rhythmic city celebrated by Ruttmann in his 1927 symphony, the Berlin portrayed by Wenders is weighed down by the burden of suffering and memory, the leaden atmosphere that these angels desirous of redemption succeed in redeeming to some small extent.

**NON-PLACES** All these surfaces, designs, inhabitants and dramas are glimpses of real cities, filtered through the temperament of an artist or a mediator (angel, demiurge, proto-criminal, pedestrian) whom the artist has interposed as his agent. There have been many sparks of imagination: the city invaded by many spy films, in which its layout is the clandestine secret code of another disturbing earlier layout; the city taken from war films, the sacrificed city, the asphalt jungle, the deserted city, the post-nuclear city of science fiction, the abandoned ghost town of many westerns, the residual *bidonvilles*, the Brazilian hillside slums, the colourful, chaotic cities of India ... There is no space to mention them all. But there is one that I cannot resist including as a colophon: the city that Jacques Tati invented, reflected and constructed for *Play Time* (1967).

This "Tatville" was erected on waste land close to the Bois de Boulogne in Paris; it covered an area of 15,000 square metres and was designed by Eugène Roman in accordance with the director's

precise ideas. Tati filmed it in 70 mm with four sound tracks to give it the necessary visual breadth and layering of sound. The film opens with an uncomfortably immaculate, spotless space: immaterial, transparent, seamless. An airport? A hospital? A hotel? We do not find out for some time. Not a single sign of identity or distinctive mark. We might be anywhere in the world, watching ordinary workers, anonymous travellers or typical business people pass by. It is a precocious expression of what Marc Augé, in his anthropology of the local, calls "non-places".<sup>6</sup> There is not a speck of dust on the glass windows, the floors gleam, the uniforms of the trade fair hostesses and office workers are devoid of any sign of singularity, the settings are ultra-refined. Yet Tati observes this strange utopianism from a humorous viewpoint. Hulot, the central character, charges into these non-places like a bull in a china shop, with his clumsy movements and floppy garments and the little noises he makes when he walks or sits, which sound deafening in the prevailing silence. It is only after nearly two hours that disorderly movement and even chaos take over and the architecture gives way to the human dimension.

<sup>1</sup> Walt Whitman: "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" (1860), in *The Complete Poems*. Penguin, London 2005, p. 194.

<sup>2</sup> Remember that the credits of *Manhatta* do not present it as directed or cinematographed but as "photographed".

<sup>3</sup> David Rivera: "La arquitectura del futuro próximo. El paradigma urbano anti-utópico en el cine posterior a *Blade Runner*", in *Paradigmas. El desarrollo de la modernidad arquitectónica visto a través de la historia del cine*. Fundación Telefónica, Madrid 2007, p. 121.

<sup>4</sup> Ludwig Meidner: "Instructions for Painting Pictures of the Metropolis" (1914), in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.): *Art in Theory. 1900–2000*. Blackwell, Oxford 2003, p. 171.

<sup>5</sup> Régine Robin: *Berlin Chantiers. Essai sur les passés fragiles*. Stock, Paris 2001, p. 291.

<sup>6</sup> Marc Augé: *Non-Lieux. Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité*. Seuil, Paris 1992.

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