

Between Science Fiction and Social Sciences: The “Dark Side” of American Cities¹

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ABSTRACT

From the Metropolis of Fritz Lang to the city-planet of Coruscant, capital of the Star Wars galaxy, the city of the future (or of another universe) seems designed to reflect the “dark side” of our contemporary megalopolis which suffer problems presented as insurmountable: traffic jams, contamination, environmental degradation, ethnic conflicts, deficient public services, rising social and spatial disparities, daily violence... In order to develop this imaginary geography of fear, Latin American cities are often a source of inspiration for science fiction authors because they seem to them simultaneously weird and well-known, old and modern, welcoming and dangerous.

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Introduction: Urban Imagery and Imaginary Cities

From Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* to *Coruscant*, the city-planet devised by George Lucas as the capital of the *Star Wars* galaxy, the cities of the future or set in a distant world seem only to reflect the "dark side" of a contemporary megalopolis. These cities are up against a seemingly unsurmountable series of problems and failings, with a list of difficulties that include traffic congestion, pollution, degradation of the natural environment, inadequacy of urban services, increase in social divide and spatial inequality, ethnic conflict, violence on a daily scale and so on.

Mexico City in the 1980s focused the attention of academics, journalists and novelists on this topic. In 1986, one year after the earthquake that flattened the Mexican capital's historical centre, the French review *Autrement* provocatively described Mexico City as being "between hope and damnation". In 1987, Miguel Messmacher published a study on Mexico that shone light on a dysfunctional and essentially ungovernable urban sprawl.² In the following year, Claude Bataillon and Louis Panabière exposed the problems faced by "the largest city in the world" to ensure the necessary housing, organize employment and manage the travel arrangements of its 20 million inhabitants.³ Along similar lines, North-American researchers contributed extensively towards exposing the imminent disasters threatening their hapless Southern neighbours and, through their writings, stoked the imagination of science fiction writers.⁴

Particularly evocative neologisms have been invented to describe Mexico City in all its fame (or rather infamy), which can also be applied aptly to the capital of the *Star Wars* galaxy. According to François Thomas, the Latin-American megalopolis has become the prototype of a "monsteropolis", a city overpowered by all the evils of modern society, "overpopulation, slums and shantytowns, under-employment, informal working practices and poverty, abandoned children, delinquency and organized crime, ecological pollution and disasters, and so forth".⁵ In his remarkable *History of Mexico City*, Serge Gruzinski placed the life of current-day inhabitants of the ancient Tenochtitlan under the banner of a "daily Apocalypse".⁶

Clearly, it is no coincidence that the action of the famous science fiction film *Total Recall* begins in a not wholly invented futuristic city. When Arnold Schwarzenegger emerges from the city's subway system, chased by his enemies, a knowing viewer will note that the scene chosen by Paul Verhoeven as the backdrop to his subject matter is the Metropolitan Insurgentes station at the centre of the Mexican metropolis [Fig. 1]. The objective, according to the director, was to present a particularly oppressive world, out of human scale. Mexico City's underground metro system was built in a style inspired by the New Brutalist movement that had originated in Britain the 1950s and was first given this name by Alison Margaret and Peter Smithson. It matched Verhoeven's intentions perfectly

1. The translation presented here is the work of the author and has been professionally revised. This article was initially published "Entre la ciencia ficción y las ciencias sociales: el 'lado oscuro' de las ciudades americanas", EURE XXXIII, no. 99 (August 2007): 65-78.

2. Miguel Messmacher, *Mexico: Megalopolis* (Mexico: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1987).

3. Claude Bataillon and Louis Panabière, *Mexico aujourd'hui, la plus grande ville du monde* (Paris: Publisud, 1988).

4. Jonathan Kendell, *La Capital. The Biography of Mexico City* (New York: Random House, 1988).

5. François Thomas, "Villes d'Amérique latine: plus grandes que leurs problèmes?", *Revue de géographie de Lyon* 74, no. 4 (1999): 283-289 (all English texts quoted from non-English sources have been translated by the author and revised by a professional translator).

6. Serge Gruzinski, *Histoire de Mexico* (Paris: Fayard, 1996), 390.



FIG. 1 The scenery of the dystopic movie *Total Recall* (1990) and its reality: the metro station Insurgentes in Mexico City (© Alain Musset, 2005).

because, as he explained, they found another style called New Brutalism, and this very heavy, mainly concrete architecture gave the film its strongly defined style and production design? The production team only had to repaint all the corridors, walls and train carriages in metallic grey to create the illusion of an imaginary metropolis when it was in reality an actual city. It is then only a matter of a few steps to go from Mexico City to Coruscant via the planet Mars...

Latin-American cities are often the inspiration for writers of science fiction when building this imaginary landscape of fear and seclusion, because they are at the same time both strange and foreign, old and new, hospitable and dangerous. In his novel of 2000, *Mantra*, Rodrigo Fresán recalls that, in 1953 and 1954, FBI inspectors had approached Philip K. Dick and his wife offering to pay for them to study for one year at the University of Mexico, UNAM, in exchange for information on the most politically active student groups. Fresán stresses that the future author of *Blade Runner* (originally entitled *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*) had refused this “generous” offer, imagining however that, plunged into the hallucinating universe of the new Tenochtitlan, he could have written three or four science-fiction novels a month.⁸

In this work, we propose to explore the close connection between the representations⁹ or portrayal of Latin-American cities and the reality of imaginary cities, in a geo-fictional study based on decoding the virtual mirrors that, consciously or not, reflect two parallel urban worlds and influence how we perceive them. At the core of our thought-process is to examine how our perception of the city is influenced both by science fiction and by studies on urban sociology and social geography, as well as through the daily experience of areas that are lived in less and less yet receive more and more media attention. As a first step, we will look at how the virtual towns of science fiction draw upon Latin-American cities and the pre-Columbian world (*Aztec Pyramids and Cities of Tomorrow*), then we will examine how workers of today are transported to universes that may appear very distant but which are merely a deformed image of reality (*Galactic Maquiladoras*). In the final chapter covering the city and its dangers, we will see how science fiction exposes the real or imaginary

7. Interview with Paul Verhoeven, *Total Recall*, Studio Canal - Universal, 2003, disc 2. The New Brutalism evoked by Verhoeven is inspired mainly by the work of Le Corbusier and in particular his *Unité d'Habitation de Marseille*. Its hour of glory came in 1960 to 1970, with architects such as Paul Rudolf (United States) and Kenzo Tange (Japan). One of the best examples in France of this style marked by massive forms and right angles is the National Employment Agency (BCMO) of Dunkirk by J-P. Secq and inaugurated in 1971.

8. Rodrigo Fresán, *Mantra* (Albi: Les éditions du passage du Nord-Ouest, 2006), 198.

9. Here we use the term “representation” within the framework of “geography of representations” defined by André Baily: “The study of space representations thus questions us about the methods for understanding the world and the status of reality, i.e. the problem of adequacy between reality, what we perceive and our speeches about reality”. André Baily, *Encyclopédie de géographie* (Paris: Economica, 1995), 372.

failings that threaten the existence of our metropolises as a political object and reduce them to territories dominated by fear.

1. Aztec Pyramids and Cities of Tomorrow

In the wide universe of science fiction, the city-planet of Coruscant (in *Star Wars*) is most probably the best and most thoroughly described urban world. This is mainly because, as well as being the setting for three films directed by George Lucas (*The Phantom Menace*, *Attack of the Clones* and *Revenge of the Sith*), it is also used in many novels, comic strips, electronic and role-playing games where the heroes all are emanations of the original saga.¹⁰ Coruscant, the capital of the Star Wars' Republic, and subsequently that of the galactic Empire, is at the same time a model and a foil where the landscapes and social structures are inspired not merely by the gigantic cities along the Atlantic coast of the United States of America but also by the large metropolises of Latin-America, Mexico City, Lima, São Paulo... with more than a nod to the frontier cities of northern Mexico and the shantytowns of Caracas and Rio de Janeiro.

10. Alain Musset, *De New York à Coruscant, essai de géo-fiction* (Paris: PUF, 2005).

At a first glance, Coruscant, strikes us with its forest of high-rise buildings extending as far as the eye can see in an extraordinary urban sprawl to a never-ending skyline: "They sat at a table in a balcony cafe three kilometres above the surface of the planet Coruscant, the world that was a city without end. Just beyond the balcony rail was a vista made up of skyscrapers extending to the horizon, an orange sky threatening rain, and the sun setting beyond one of the more distant thunderheads"¹¹ If we needed to find an equivalent example or model for this imaginary world with its distinctive vertical architecture, the first port of call would undoubtedly be São Paulo, the economic capital of Brazil, with its panorama of skyscrapers stretching across three hundred and sixty degrees into the far distance. From the top of the Edificio Italia, the view is of a vast ocean of buildings, often with dozens of storeys, which mask the lower parts of the city, so that the regular pattern of streets and avenues disappears and the urban landscape is transformed into a labyrinth like that of Coruscant.

11. Aaron Allston, *Les chasseurs stellaires d'Adumar* (Paris: Fleuve noir, 2003), 13.

Regarded as one of the greatest built-up areas in the world, the metropolitan area of São Paulo is home to "only" 18 million residents (according to the census taken in 2000), a mere nothing compared to the one trillion inhabitants of the galactic capital. Since the mid-20th century, the processes by which the ancient Jesuit mission of 1554 is morphing into an urban sprawl curiously reflect those described and expounded by the *Star Wars* authors. Moreover, the comparison does not stop there. After New York, São Paulo is thought to have the largest park of helicopters in the world, proving fast and safe transport to the local elite, not keen to venture into the permanently traffic-bound streets of city with record-smashing criminal levels. Above the city, a kind of air ballet is

performed in the sky, which can certainly match the spectacle of the *airspeeders* revolving between the towers of Coruscant. In the city centre, the most recent buildings have private heliports, allowing a few rich and privileged to become totally disconnected from the city in which they live, travelling from one gated location to another (home, work, leisure) without ever using the public areas that are thus abandoned to the common people. In 1930, when he wrote about the skyscrapers of New York, Paul Morand predicted that a new revolution in transport was soon to transform our way of life: "Roofless, crowned with terraces, they seem to be awaiting the rigid balloons, the helicopters, the winged men of the future."¹²

12. Paul Morand, *New York* (Paris: Flammarion, 1930), 36.

In evolving, post-modern societies are engendering a loss of communal meeting spaces, the streets, parks and squares, a fact that drives the *Star Wars* authors to establish a close connection between a city's morphology and the forms of sociability supported or precluded by it, between the urban landscapes and the political thought which they represent, reproduce and perpetuate. The reaction of those newly arriving on the planet highlights the ambivalence of their feelings, as they stand in awe of an outsized city, beyond human scale: "Once out of the turbolift, Bria looked around her in wonder and growing claustrophobia. Everywhere buildings loomed over her, so high she had to crane her neck to see their tops."¹³ The behaviour of the young Bria on first arriving on Coruscant recalls that of the Europeans who discovered North-American urban civilization in the early part of the 20th century, with its bold architectural innovation and both marvellous and menacing features. In 1930, George Duhamel exclaimed that he was disgusted by the urban landscape of Chicago ("Chicago! The tumour city! The cancer city!"), with its over-sized buildings, streets that reminded him of trenches cut into a mass of steel and concrete and its glut of stinking cars.¹⁴

13. A.C. Crispin, *The Paradise snare* (Paris-New York: Bantam Books, 1997), 265.

14. Georges Duhamel, *Scènes de la vie future* (Paris: Mille et une nuits, 2003; Paris: Mercure de France, 1930), 72. Citations refer to Mille et une nuits edition.

As can be seen in the films belonging to the second *Star Wars* trilogy, the buildings on Coruscant are constructed in a wide range of structures, forms and facades, giving the city a highly varied and cosmopolitan character. In order to accentuate this exotic impression, which drives the audience towards strange worlds without losing their roots entirely, the authors of the saga use a contrivance that has been known for a long time, that of alluding to architectural models whose names have entered common language but which are loosely identified in order to authorize all manner of interpretation, or any urban daydream. This technique was used by Michael Reaves in *The Shadow Hunter*: "Practically all of Coruscant's landmass – which comprised almost all of its surface area, its oceans and seas having been drained or rerouted through huge subterranean caverns more than a thousand generations ago – was covered with a multitiered metropolis composed of towers, monads, ziggurats, palazzi, domes, and minarets."¹⁵ By using terms like "palazzi", "ziggurats" and "minarets", the extra-terrestrial architecture of Coruscant is linked to major civilizations

15. Michael Reaves, *Darth Maul: Shadow Hunter* (London: Arrow Books, 2001), 16.

which are very distant, in time and space, from North-American people. While a "palazzo" evokes the Italian Renaissance and a "minaret" the old and contemporary Muslim world, the "ziggurat" takes us back to the dawn of civilization and recall the most ancient towns in the world. The famous terraced step pyramids of Mesopotamia symbolizes the first cities built by humans. The place they occupy in our imagination is all the more important in that they inspired the mythical Tower of Babel, of which Coruscant is, apparently, the ultimate expression.



FIG. 2 The skyscrapers of Manhattan from the top-terrace of the Empire State Building (© Alain Musset, 2011).

Drawing his inspiration from the same vein, Paul Morand did not hesitate to identify pre-Columbian pyramids among the profusion of disparate buildings that form the urban landscape of New York: "Skyscrapers! Some are women and others are men; some are like sun-temples, others recall the Aztec pyramid of the Moon."¹⁶ [Fig. 2] In the same way, in *Blade Runner*, the future urban landscape of Los Angeles is dominated by a gigantic construction which is used as a refuge by Tyrell, the most powerful man in the city; this imposing building is simply an architectural extrapolation of the pyramid of the Sun in Teotihuacan. The new Jedi temple built on the planet Ossus after the Yuuzhan Vong War¹⁷ is clearly inspired by Maya architecture, as the artist of the comic strip *Legacy* acknowledges: "For the Jedi temple, I wanted to evoke an ancient Mayan temple, but with landing platforms. I also added zones covered with transparent steel reflecting the sky and the surroundings. I believe that the Jedi planted a meditation garden down there."¹⁸

The stylistic devices used by science fiction writers to anchor their imaginary cities in reality are not very different from those used by 16th century explorers and conquerors in their own stories. Under many aspects, the discovery of the New World was as big a shock for the Europeans at that time as the discovery of a new inhabited planet would be for us. The accounts by the conquistadors appeared so extraordinary that they often raised doubts and mocking remarks on the part of some, while engendering admiration and respect in others. Bernal Díaz del Castillo acknowledges in his memoirs that, for a long time, he could not believe what he was seeing with his own eyes, thinking that he had been transported into one of these tales of chivalry where the marvellous always beats reality.¹⁹

16. Morand, *New York*, 36.

17. This new galactic war is reported in the cycle of the New Jedi Order. It is held 25 years after year 0 of the *Star Wars* chronology, marked by the destruction of first Death Star (*A New Hope*, 1977).

18. *Lucasfilm Magazine*, no. 62 (November-December 2006): 17. It is clear that in episode IV (*A New Hope*, 1977), the rebel base of Yavin 4 is none other than the Mayan city of Tikal (Guatemala).

19. Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *Historia verdadera de la conquista de Nueva España* (Mexico: Porrúa, "Sepan Cuantos", no. 5, 1983), 159.

In trying to explain the Amerindian cities in an intelligible manner to the Spanish king, Cortés used the same stylistic device as the authors of the *Star Wars* saga, converting the Aztec pyramids into mosques and the temple towers into minarets. In his second letter to Charles V, he thus evoked the town of Churultecal: "I can confirm to your Highness that, from the top of a mosque, I counted more than 430 towers in this city, all of which belong to mosques."²⁰ Equally, the first large town discovered by the Spaniards on the coasts of Yucatán was renamed "The Great Cairo" in an attempt to convey its size and richness to those who had never left the Hispanic peninsula. By making such a reference to a familiar civilization, to a known culture in a foreign context means placing a seal of authenticity on descriptions that, without these carefully chosen phrases, could appear highly fanciful.

2. Galactic *Maquiladoras*

In describing the global city of Coruscant, the writers of the *Star Wars* saga are not happy with simply portraying a futuristic megalopolis where the urban landscape is dominated by extraordinary buildings, the symbol of a dominant civilization; they clearly wish to expose the operational mechanism of a society which no longer needs any tangible output to affirm its power, in fact, quite the contrary. Despite being a simple extrapolation of an evolution in progress, albeit pushed to the extreme, the fictional city-planet of Trantor described by Asimov in the early 1950s had already perfectly met the standards for a global city defined later on by Saskia Sassen²¹, who wrote that the planet had only one function, the administration; one goal, the government and that it produced one manufactured asset, the law.²² In a similar fashion, the *Star Wars* Coruscant is first and foremost a political centre that is continuously producing the legislative arsenal and legal framework that can effectively manage a global world. Like all global cities, the imperial capital bases its economic prosperity and its political power on services of a high standard. Apart from constructing the plants to generate energy and reprocess urban waste, there are only a few production hubs, such as the shipyards for repairing interstellar vessels²³ and several factories which, for strategic reasons, had not been relocated to peripheral planets.

In an economic system inspired by our current international division of labour, some workshops-planets with specialized functions fuel the principal consumer markets in the galaxy, i.e. the worlds unable to provide for their own needs. As in any liberal economy, the best way for *Star Wars* businessmen to reduce costs while increasing profit is to relocate production facilities to zones with good relative benefits, including qualified and cheap labour, a favourable local legislation, excellent transport systems... On this point, James Luceno explains why there is no industrial sector on Coruscant: "The Works had been a booming manufacturing

20. Hernán Cortés, *Cartas de Relación, Segunda Carta* (30 October 1520) (Mexico: Porrúa, "Sepan Cuantos", no. 7, 1983), 45. A little further on, Cortés stresses that Mexico City has "many mosques". Cortés, *Cartas de Relación, Segunda Carta*, 64.

21. As emphasized by Saskia Sassen, the global city is not only a pole of strategic decision-making: it is also a place where immaterial goods are produced, above all the services intended for multinational corporations, in a series of fields as varied as insurance, law, accountancy, tax, publicity and public relations. In addition, they are shaped by new political, technical and financial instruments that allow "good global governance" to be put in place. In combination, these two sectors form the heart of the "new urban economy". Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York London Tokyo* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

22. Isaac Asimov, *Le cycle de Fondation II. Vers un nouvel Empire* (Paris: Omnibus, 1999), 63.

23. Aaron Allston, *Aux commandes: Yan Solo!* (Paris: Fleuve noir, 2000), 15.

area until escalating costs had driven the production of spacecraft parts, labor droids, and construction material offworld."²⁴ The planet Kuat belongs to the system that benefitted from this process of globalization for exchanges across the entire galaxy. Under the Old Republic and at the instigation of the reigning families, Kuat became a gigantic production pole for interstellar vehicles. Gathering together a workforce of several million individuals in factories located in the planet's orbit, the Kuat Drive Yards were shipyards specialized in manufacturing very large units for the military sector in particular (imperial class stellar destroyers). In the same way, Bilbringi became the most important centre for the production of hunters and destroyers for the Empire, due to its highly advanced industrial facilities gathered within well-defended production units ("X-7 Factory Stations").

In order to restrict any manufacturing trouble (noise, congestion, pollution...), the most substantial operations were installed on planets where the ecosystem then suffered from the consequences of devastating industrial development. The Fondor system, for instance, was totally upturned by the shipbuilding workshops that exploited the abundance of minerals extracted from its subsoil, moons and asteroids: "But where the colossal corporations that dominated Bilbringi, *Kuat*, *Sluis Van*, and other shipbuilding centres made a pretence of picking up after themselves, no such efforts had ever been made at Fondor."²⁵ And again, uncontrolled industrial exploitation converted the planet Duro into a vast desert whose inhabitants fled to orbital cities. Experiments to clean marshes, purify grounds and make the air breathable only gave limited results because of the lack of technical and financial means. This is the reason why the princess Leia, who was sent to orchestrate the regeneration of the planet, was transformed into the spokesperson for North-American environmental lobbyists. On the dead planet of Duro, she was permanently up against the Republic's central administration, which refuses to grant the necessary means to set up this vital programme.

In the imagination of North-American readers, the situation on Fondor or Duro is based on some level of reality (although mainly of a phantasmagorical kind). When describing the prevailing economic system in the *Star Wars* galaxy, the saga authors largely drew their inspiration from the international division of labour which has predominated on both sides of the US/Mexico border since the mid-1960s, as a result of a type of industry known as "maquiladora" [Fig. 3]. North of the border, the administrative and management functions are grouped together in one establishment (this is the role reserved for Coruscant). South of the border (the geopolitical and economic equivalent of Fondor), the assembly factories are restricted to the role of production facilities focused on manual work, while exploiting significantly more advantageous legislation than in the United States. Indeed, from a survey carried out by the prestigious Mexican institute of higher education, El Colegio de la Frontera

24. James Luceno, *Labyrinth of Evil* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2005), 174.

25. Id., *L'éclipse des Jedi* (Paris: Fleuve noir, 2001), 268.

Norte, in the early 1990s, 10% of the companies operating in the frontier zone acknowledged that they had been attracted there by the more flexible Mexican environmental legislation. More than a quarter of the *maquiladora* factories regarded this part of the legislation as the main reason for them setting up their operations south of the international border.²⁶

In reality, the same arguments are put forward in the *Star Wars*

novels to explain why the most polluting industries are located on planets far from Coruscant: removal and distance are, in this way, presented as a good solution in a society marred by the NIMBY (Not In My Backyard) syndrome. In *Rebirth*, a novel in the New Jedi Order cycle, the New Republic pilots gather together on the planet Eriadu and are immediately greeted by a repulsive atmosphere, with dollops of ammonia, ozone, sulphur and hydrocarbon vapour. The urban landscape is bristling with immense industrial skyscrapers that cut out the pale yellow sky, darkened by factory smoke. The explanation of this ecological disaster is provided by Corran Horn, who heads the group deployed to fight the invading Yuuzhan Vong. According to him, international companies are producing manufactured goods at lower cost, without taking any notice of the environment. This means that the smell is merely a by-product of industry.²⁷ It is easy to understand why this environmental issue matters so much in a “remote galaxy” seeing that reflects all the concerns of North-American society. For somebody living in Austin (Texas) or Phoenix (Arizona), the planets Fondor and Duro are not located many light years away from their homes, but are close at hand and are called Matamoros (Tamaulipas) and Nogales (Sonora). Kathy Tyers, author of the apocalyptic descriptions of the planet Duro, comes from Long Beach, California, a state sharing a frontier with Mexico, and the writer Michael Reaves, who began his career in *Star Wars*, was born in San Bernardino, 40 km west of Los Angeles. Even James Luceno, a former carpenter, admits he often goes to the other side of the border to draw his inspiration from there.²⁸

More worryingly for the *Star Wars* authors is the fact that millions of workers are looking for distraction after a long and hard working day, which led to the construction of many pleasure stores that tarnished the entire planet, transforming it into a kind of poor Las Vegas. The destruction of the natural environment is therefore coupled with a real moral problem – a particularly thorny issue for North-American writers often troubled by ethical and religious concerns. Kathy Tyers, the author of *Balance Point*,



FIG. 3 The Maquiladoras of the Future in the Alex Rivera's movie *Sleep Dealer* (2008). In the city of Tijuana workers are connected to their job on the other side of the border. As says the boss to the new recruits: "The United States are given everything they have always wanted: the workforce without the workers".

26. Although the capital of the maquiladora industry is Ciudad Juárez (217,000 employees and 291 factories in 2005), Baja California also occupies a crucial place in this system, as Tijuana, Mexicali and Tecate are among the Mexican cities with most factories located in their territory (574, 135 and 115, respectively).

27. Greg Keyes, *Renaissance* (Paris: Fleuve noir, 2002), 101.

28. See <http://www.starwarschicks.com/books/Books/authors/luceno.html> (accessed December 21, 2017).

is a member of the Christian Writers Guild and regularly talks at public conferences on religious topics. Correspondingly, on the Mexican side of the border, many establishments are engaged in more or less legitimate leisure activities, the bars, casinos, hotels used by prostitutes that encourage the image of a country populated by prostitutes and gangsters. This tradition dates back to the time of the prohibition and puritan leagues, when alcohol-deprived *gringos* went to Ciudad-Juárez or Tijuana to drink their whisky in safety. This dark episode in American history was often used as the framework for science fiction, and the evil-looking night clubs of Fondor can easily be seen as the cantinas of Mexicali or Nuevo Laredo transported to the planet under another guise.

3. The City and its Dangers

In North-American science fiction, hyper-concentration of industrial and commercial operations, excessive population density and the loss of the privileged link established from time immemorial between man and nature are placed in opposition to the ideology that has roots dating back to the 19th century and is found in the naturalist novels of H. J Thoreau²⁹ and the poems and essays of Ralph W Emerson.³⁰ This negative vision of the urban world is not restricted to a North-American setting, as Joëlle Solomon Cavin pointed out in her book *La ville, mal aimée*, describing how for a long time western society scorned the great built-up cities, preferring an idealized rural way of life and honouring the sturdy countryside dwellers.³¹ By insisting on the extent and diversity of the problems encountered when managing the galactic capital, the *Star Wars* authors only spread pessimistic speeches about the future of our own cities. The step from a megalopolis to a "monsteropolis" is quite easy to take, especially when reality is on the shirt-tails of science fiction.

In Coruscant, as in the real cities that are its model, traffic saturation causes an exponential increase in air pollution: "Traffic clogged the Coruscant sky, flowing slowly about the meandering smoggy haze."³² By presenting an identical situation, Claude Bataillon and Louis Panabière chose to rename the Mexican capital calling it "Smogopolis", perpetually wrapped in a yellowish cloud that blocked out the nearby mountains. According to studies carried out in the early 1980s, air pollution had then reached the point of no return, with factory smoke causing physical and mental health issues for the weakest and most exposed. "Every day at 7 a.m., 12 noon and midnight, the soap and dogfood factories release pollutant gases that have disturbing effects on the head and stomach and which cause hair to fall out".³³ For William Sandell, the production director for *Total Recall* (produced at Churubusco Studios in 1989), living in this city replete with escaped gases and factory smoke was like living in the world capital of pollution. According to him, breathing the air of Mexico City was like smoking forty cigarettes a day.³⁴

29. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. J. Lyndon Shanley, introduction by John Updike (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

30. *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, introduction by Mary Oliver (New York: The Modern Library Classics, 2000).

31. Joëlle Salomon Cavin, *La ville, mal aimée. Représentations anti-urbaines et aménagement du territoire en Suisse: analyse, comparaisons, évolution* (Lausanne: Presses Polytechniques et Universitaires Romandes, 2005).

32. R.A. Salvatore, *Attack of the Clones* (London: Arrows Books, 2003), 53.

33. Bataillon and Panabière, *Mexico aujourd'hui, la plus grande ville du monde*, 37.

34. *Total Recall, Making of*, Studio Canal - Universal, 2003, disc 2.

Since the original environment of Coruscant has almost entirely disappeared, children whose parents have chosen to live in the galactic capital can only see animals, fish and plants in museums or “holographic zoos”, and have no real connection with them. So that children can gain an idea of what they would have known elsewhere or in another time, a great botanical garden was set in place on the roof of a skyscraper. As well as imported plant species from across the known universe, they cultivated plants and flowers that had become extinct on the surface of the planet hundreds of generations previously. Kevin J Anderson intentionally called this gigantic terrarium a “Skydome”, in a direct allusion to the “Biodome” of Montreal. This gigantic cupola of glass and steel³⁵ recreates four great “natural” ecosystems accessible all visitors: the tropical rainforest of the Americas (even when it is snowing outside); a Laurentian maple forest which changes season by season; a marine ecosystem replicating the estuary and gulf of the St. Lawrence river; the Sub-Arctic and Sub-Antarctic polar worlds. The Biodome opened in June 1992 (i.e. two years before *Jedi Search* was published in the United States), and is described officially as an oasis in the heart of the city. This means that it plays the same role in Montreal as the Skydome does on Coruscant. For a mere 8 to 20.25 Canadian dollars (as per the published rates for January 2017 to February 2018), visitors can take an educational walk travelling the length of the American continent without the need to leave their own home.

35. The Biodome is built in the old cycling track built for the 1976 Olympic Games.

Among the dangers threatening science fiction towns, the most significant is apparently insecurity. Indeed, the juxtaposition of different races and social classes with conflicting interests is presented as a factor of permanent tension, and the cause of increased criminality, mirroring the Northern or Latin American cities that serve as models for scenario writers and novelists. Writers sometimes have no hesitation in transposing well-known situations to an immediate future without changing the names of the districts where their imaginary heroes are living. This is exactly the position of the French author Fabrice Colin, who described the deeply entrenched socio-economic inequality of Rio de Janeiro in 2020, at a time when androids are in charge of law enforcement and local authorities want to eliminate social freeloaders and criminals. His main character, a young orphan called Tiago Pericles Edelson, works for a particularly violent gang and lives with his grandfather in a miserable hovel in Rocinha, “the largest favela of Brazil, wedged between two arms of mountain, flowing down the hill like a deluge of cubic houses, a tide without end”. In a cynical way, Fabrice Colin stresses that the government is unconcerned with the murders and the drug traffickers, as long as their crimes remain within the favela. At the opposite end of this dire world are the rich and beautiful districts, including Ipanema’s “Rua Viconde de Pirajá” overflowing with shops, restaurants and exorbitantly priced art galleries.”³⁶

36. Fabrice Colin, *Invisible* (Paris: Mango, 2006), 26, 31.

With “Le Petit Monde (The Small World)”, a poetic and violent European

manga comic, J.D. Morvan and Toru Terada replicate the socio-spatial divisions typical of large metropolises in under-developed countries. Whereas the rich people of the future live in well-protected districts, the poor are confined to a gigantic shantytown that covers the nearly vertical walls of the crater where waste from the modern city accumulates. Toru Terada's landscape, depicting this universe of violence and misery, in a strange way points to the favelas of Rio de Janeiro. Chased by death squads financed by the upper classes and tolerated by the official police, the street children try to survive through an ever-expanding cycle of sordid dealings: "robbery, prostitution and drug trafficking are the only means of earning their living here. Children start early in this business and the longer it goes on, the less scruples they have."³⁷

Since *Star Wars* reflects as well as denounces the problems posed by an out-of-control development of modern metropolises, delinquency, in all its forms, is logically introduced as a normal part of everyday life. In the United States and Latin America, TV viewers are showing a growing interest in programmes whereby the viewers witness live scenes of brutality and criminality under the cover of denouncing the shortcomings of central administration and the misguided clemency of the courts. These programmes specialize in presenting vile news stories in a sensational way (attacks on banks or grocery stores, kidnappings, assassinations, car pursuits...). In prime time, they attract millions of TV viewers fascinated by the institutionalized violence that is hidden behind the pretence of a "journalistic report".

The characters in the *Star Wars* novels feel the same anguish as their readers even thinking about going through the streets of a city transformed into a trap for passers-by. "Mahwi Lihnn trekked through the back streets and alleys, searching for the Dewback Inn. She was certainly not overimpressed with this area of Coruscant. The surface streets in this sector were all twisted turnings and narrow byways, teeming with gutter scum looking for an easy mark."³⁸ The recurring impression of the slums and dross of the galactic capital, seen as a dangerous place where the anxiety of being attacked has replaced the desire of meeting one another, helps to build the collective image based on a fear of the other and on the expectation of daily violence. In Mexico City, this is the role played by the Tepito district, which encompasses all the apprehension of the ordinary citizen, as noted ironically by Rodrigo Fresán: "Tepito is the Mexican capital of fast smuggling and even more expeditious death."³⁹

Having just arrived in the depths of the city-planet, the young Han Solo must face a group of teenagers who seek to mug him: "Down again. He was five hundred stories down, by now. The streets grew ever seedier. One time, a gang of kids approached him as he hurried along."⁴⁰ Highlighting, in a somehow distorted way the stereotypes that typify street gangs, the leader is "a huge dark-skinned kid with a black fall of greasy hair",

37. Toru Terada and J.D. Morvan, *Le petit monde, T. 1, Vamos, vamos!* (Dargaud, 2005), 9.

38. Reaves, *Darth Maul: Shadow Hunter*, 85.

39. Fresán, *Mantra*, 434.

40. Crispin, *The Paradise Snare*, 273.

the prototype of a young *Chicanos* whose parents crossed the border between Mexico and the United States illegally. This youngster expresses the strength and ubiquity of these ethnic gangs (made up of Blacks and Latinos) who frighten North-American middle classes, the quintessential WASPS (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants). In December 2005, according to police statistics, there were 463 gangs in the municipality of Los Angeles (including 246 of Hispanic origin) and 38,974 affiliated members (21,790 Latinos). In 2002, according to another official census,⁴¹ the County of Los Angeles was home to more than 1,300 street gangs with over 150,000 members, a sufficiently large number to keep the inhabitants of this Californian metropolis permanently on edge. One gang alone, 18th Street (Mara 18), had a membership of almost 20,000 young people in the city, scattered among several dozen sub-groups in the downtown area and across most metropolitan districts.

The link between Hispanic youth and gang member becomes all the stronger when the bonds woven among young criminals on both sides of the border led to the North-American street gang model exported to the great Mexican cities. Since the mid-1980s, the *bandas* operating in the outskirts of Mexico City and the *cholos* of the border cities took full advantage of factors such as industrial de-structuring, growth in unemployment and school failure to expand and multiply. They replaced the old gangs and groups (*gavillas*, *palomillas*, *pandillas*) that traditionally brought together young boys from popular districts, importing fashion and values from “the other side”: clothing, graffiti, various drug use, ritual violence – and also coded language and hybrid music. In Central America, the violence of the *maras* (local street gangs) was out of control. According to the Guatemalan police, Mara 18 and Mara Salvatrucha (both with origins in Los Angeles) could count on a membership of over 160,000 young people between 12 and 25 years of age. Conflicts between the two group often concluded in mass slaughter with tens of youngster killed.⁴²

In actual fact, neither the place or the time matters. It is the modern city in itself, with its architecture, the way its space is organized and its landscapes, that is fuelling this delinquency. All the authors in the *Star Wars* universe agree on the point that the urbanism of Coruscant is likely encourage crime: “With its countless dark canyons, precipitous ledges, hidden recesses, and jutting parapets – its surfeit of places to hide in plain sight – Coruscant invited corruption. Its very geography inspired secrecy.”⁴³ With all its nooks and crannies and shady zones, the large city seems to provide a secure refuge for twisted individuals and delinquents who want to hide their criminal activities. This is why contemporary town-planning insists on open urban areas and on keeping watch in public spaces, so that it is possible for everybody to look all around themselves, with communities monitored at all times and in all places.⁴⁴ The goal of these systems is to unsettle potential criminals, while the modern city, seen as both deaf and blind, is supposed to pose a threat to honest

41. Alejandro A. Alonso, *Staff Writer, Streetgangs.Com Newsletter*, updated December 22, 2002.

42. See http://www.libertaddigital.com:83/php3/noticia.php3?fecha_edi_on=2005-09-20 (accessed December 21, 2017).

43. James Luceno, *Cloak of Deception* (London: Random House, 2001), 123.

44. Jean-Pierre Garnier, *Le Nouvel Ordre local. Gouverner la violence* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1999).

citizens.

The solution can pass muster by re-ordering society, i.e. by introducing more effective police control. A nostalgia for "the good old times" when the State knew how to subdue rebellious groups or delinquent gangs can certainly seduce part of the population, frightened by the excesses perpetrated in a democratic system considered to be too permissive. The floodgates then open to populist, reactionary or security-conscious speeches, similarly to the way that Brakiss acts to attract the young Zekk towards the Shadow Academy: "The empire had very little political chaos. Every person had opportunities. There were no gangs running wild through the streets of Coruscant."⁴⁵ Nowadays, we are used to hearing these same speeches during election campaigns designed to entice voters terrified by the rise of daily violence. Manuel Andres Lopez Obrador, the PRD candidate in the last presidential elections in Mexico (2006) even requested assistance from the former mayor of New York, Rudolph Giuliani to set up a "law and order" programme to fight crime in the federal district of Mexico City.⁴⁶

45. Kevin J. Anderson and Rebecca Moesta, *The Lost Ones* (New York: Boulevard Books, 1995), 109.

46. Giuliani received the tidy sum of 4.3 million dollars for his consultancy work, mainly paid by Mexican businessmen.

Conclusion: Back to the Ghetto and Death of the City

For those who do not believe in a political or police solution to the problem, the potential answer is to escape and lock oneself up protected areas, even at the price of draconian restrictions to personal freedom. This is the urban model chosen by the inhabitants of Coruscant. In order to flee from the real or imaginary dangers waiting for them in the street, they preferred to withdraw into locked-up buildings like in a castle encircled by barbarians. As a consequence, a gated community is seen to be the outcome of a long urban history marked by the impossibility of getting social classes with divergent interests and ethnic groups whose ways of life are incompatible to cohabit in the same territory.

Although we see each building in the galactic capital as a gated community, the small community of Dometown, built by Lando Calrissian in the basement of the megalopolis is the closest approximation to this system. Visitors must go through a maze of seemingly long-abandoned tunnels and passages to reach the entrance of this underground paradise, built at almost two hundred meters below ground level. The only access to the area is protected by an enormous armour-plated gate controlled through a complex and fool-proof electronic code. Once through this barrier, visitors will find themselves facing an urban landscape similar to those of the gated communities that are scattered across the suburbs of great American cities: "They stepped onto a terrace overlooking a huge subterranean cavern, a hollow dome, easily a kilometre across. Luke, quite astonished, found himself on a platform that looked down into a complete pocket city of low stone buildings and cool green parks. The dome was brightly lit, the air sweet and pure, the walkways and byways clean and

tidy. The buildings were widely spaced, their stone walls brightly painted. Pathways snaked through neatly kept lawns, and the roof of the dome was painted a royal blue."⁴⁷

Along the same model, the principle of self-seclusion has been largely adopted in Latin America to ensure the well-being of the social categories who feel themselves imperilled by the rise in violence and the lack of security. It follows that these *condominios cerrados* (in Spanish) or *condominos fechados* (in Portuguese) are presented as the urban panacea for solving the immediate problems of a massive social crisis. Gated communities are also multiplying in the suburbs of the great Latin-American cities, such as in the area around Toluca where large billboards extoll the merits of protected allotments built to shelter the middle classes dismayed by the awful spectacle of a city they rediscover every night on TV: "The home your family deserves" proclaims one of the advertisers, while another company has no qualms in naming themselves as "City Builders".

In the imagination of city dwellers, these protected spaces are an oasis at the heart of a violent and insecure world. The French comic strip *Moréa*, where the action takes place in 2082, exploits the same tone, stressing that high society Cubans seldom, if ever, leave the protected perimeter of the downtown area and prefer to patronize enclaves like the "Cubana County Club" (similar to the "Country Clubs" of Buenos Aires), where they enjoy playing golf and polo. This self-seclusion enables them to escape from the sad reality of the external world: "Among poor people, unpleasant things occur in the street, one calls that insecurity [...] Among the rich, there are lawns, thick gates and pretty things fixed on the walls".⁴⁸

According to this point of view, science fiction both introduces and denounces one of the threats that, in our collective imagination, weighs most on American cities: the progressive disappearance of public spaces and the end of the city as a political body. In *Coruscant*, the streets have gone from the surface: they are only found in the lower city, where outlaws reign and the poor hide away in their slums. In the upper city, the only crossing points are footbridges stretching between skyscrapers, a fact that severely restricts circulation but ensures the maximum sense of peace and security. As already pointed out by Jane Jacobs in 1961: "Streets and their sidewalks, the main public places of a city, are its most vital organs. Think of a city and what comes to mind? Its streets. If a city's streets look interesting, the city looks interesting; if they look dull, the city looks dull."⁴⁹ Her warnings against technocratic and inhuman town planning, the destroyer of urban forms that encourage inhabitants to meet (traditional districts, seen by developers and urban architects as an obstacle to modernity), have without doubt influenced the *Star Wars* authors pessimistic vision of their world.

As a consequence, *Coruscant* appears to be the deformed image of a

47. Roger MacBride Allen, *Ambush at Corellia* (New York: Bantam Books, 1995), 96.

48. Christophe Arleston, Dominique Latil and Thierry Labrosse, *Un parfum d'éternité* (Toulon: Soleil Production, 2011), 35.

49. Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1993; New York: Modern Library, 1961), 37. Citations refer to the Random House edition.

reality found everywhere in our world: overly-large cities that had become simple "living machines" where new ways of life and social practices heighten the divide between the mere city dweller and the engaged citizen. The galactic capital is only one exasperated representation of the post-modern Los Angeles described by Mike Davis in his famous book, *City of Quartz*.⁵⁰ Even more worrying is that solutions for making megapolises such as Coruscant, Mexico City or São Paulo bearable do not take in the causes of the crisis (poverty, racism, social and spatial injustice) but are only interested in its consequences (loss of social bonds, insecurity, violence). Since the Virgilian dream that inspired Thoreau has proven to be a failure and the megalopolis has reached its point of no return, from now on, it seems necessary to adapt the practices used by social groups faced with the architecture imposed by modern times: the city is dead, long live the ghettos!

50. Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 1990).