CASTING CONCRETE:

The Evolution in Perception of Brutalist Architecture as Guided by Depictions of Physical and Fictional Examples in Popular Culture

History Thesis

Michael J Fajtl | 5623065|14 April 2022 |TU Delft

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1. Introduction

The protagonist was driving by, the rain dribbling from the night sky onto the windshield. The city passing behind the acrylic plate, dark, monumental structures, illuminated by the flashing neon signs. Streets oppressed by the bare concrete surfaces of the tall mega blocks, void of greenery, interrupted only by the sporadic heaps of litter. The exteriors of buildings lined with mechanical openings, pipes, and shafts, disappearing towards the dark cloudy sky. Just another day living in a utopia.

A scene like this would not be out of place in many films depicting one kind or another of a dystopian fictional future. This thesis will elaborate on the question of why these grim visions of the future are often set in worlds adorned with brutalist architecture and immense concrete structures. The developments that led to the adoption of this style, as a near-universal aesthetic of the fictional dystopia. From *A Clockwork Orange* to *Blade Runner*, works of cinema, and other media, across the past half-millennium utilized this style as backstage in their work to underpin their cautionary message against oppressive fictional regimes and late-stage capitalist dystopias.

First, this thesis will briefly examine several examples to establish this assumption. Then to explore this development, it will be drawing upon the foundational ideas of Brutalism, and its performance and reception by the public from historical and retrospective sources. Illustrating the main points, and its adoption throughout cinema, by using notable real and paper architecture case studies that have played a key role in this transition. Chiefly the Thamesmead Estate portrayed in, among others, Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*, followed by the fictional architecture of *Blade Runner* and its sequel by Ridley Scott and Denis Villeneuve respectively.

In asking the question: How societal and aesthetical factors resulted in brutalist architecture, an egalitarian and utopian movement at its inception, taking on the stereotypical role of the dystopian-future aesthetic in popular media subconscious. The goal being to understand how could a movement conceived as a progressive social tool, egalitarian, inspiring, and a synonym with forward-thinking and modern urban housing, become synonymous with overbearing oppressive regimes and failing society. This thesis will be engaging with the themes of dystopia, totalitarianism, late-stage capitalist society, public surveillance, mass housing, social class stratification, environmentalism, and the 'consumerization' of the human condition.

2. Interpretation Through Concrete

2.1. Concurrence of Terms

To work within this context several definitions present in the medium of the film must be established. First and foremost, Speculative Fiction is a broad category of fiction genres with elements that do not exist in the present or historical reality of our universe, as opposed to movies based on real historical events or set in an analogue of our own world. Science Fiction then is a subgenre of speculative fiction, whose story deals principally with the impact of actual or imagined science upon society or individuals. At the same time, a story may also be labeled as "Dystopian Fiction" (Tate, 2017), meaning it explores social and political structures in a setting contrary to the author's ethos, often used as an analogy to the real world dealing with such things as mass poverty, public mistrust and suspicion, a police state or oppression. The term "cognitive estrangement" (Buchanan, 2010), as coined by a science fiction theorist Darko Suvin, describes the instance of when the viewers are taken out of the everyday and are forced to experience the world as strange and disjointed, either through a setting or a plot device (machine) that are absolutely new to them, forcing them to imagine a different way of conceiving their world.

From the architectural point of view, the difference between "architecture in film" and "film architecture" must also briefly be established in order to discuss these ideas. Architecture in film in this context would be defined as films that are about architecture, I.e. where the design and creation is the main motif and focus of the movie. Film architecture, or what might be called set design, is the overall notion of designing a world, a concept for a scope of action, in this case that being the plot of a film. Film architecture, therefore, creates a backdrop for the plot of the movie but is not (at least on the surface) a part of the story. (Kühne, 2020)

For the purpose of this exploration, this thesis defines the term "Popular Culture Consciousness" as any shared sets of ideas, imagery, and meanings existing in popular media that a casual viewer is knowingly aware of. As a rudimentary example of this, the average audience of a film that's taking place in the future is usually aware of the trope of a flying car, and would not be surprised when seeing it on screen in such a world. This in turn then, allows the definition of a "Pop-Culture Subconsciousness", which would be any shared sets of ideas, imagery, and meanings existing in popular media that a casual viewer is not actually knowingly aware of, but is nonetheless subconsciously perceiving and responsive to them. A simple example of this from film school would be the use of lateral movement on screen to hint at the character's alignment. With characters moving left-to-right being perceived as good and those moving right-to-left being perceived as bad. This has to do with how western culture has gradually conditioned human brains to associate movement towards the right side as an indicator of progress or success. The average movie viewer is not aware of this technique, but will nonetheless subconsciously be influenced by it when categorizing the given character.

This terminology then permits this thesis to examine the association of the Brutalist style with the dystopian future as a media trope existing within the Pop-Culture Subconsciousness. For a parallel example from architecture: It can be seen that over the course of modern history neo-classical architecture in the West became associated with the values of democracy, with an established long-lasting institution, with knowledge, and indicating the legitimacy of a said government. And although an average individual without architectural education might not be consciously aware of these associations, they nonetheless perceive and consume them on a

subconscious level. And in contemporary society, the population perceives architecture through film and other media more than any other source.

2.2. Primary Assumption

By establishing this definition of pop-culture subconsciousness, this thesis is in turn working on an assumption that Brutalism in dystopian cinema is indeed a prevalent feature, one of which the average viewer is only subconsciously aware. Therefore, to support this initial assumption, the presence of Brutalism as an identifiable feature in dystopian fiction movies must first be established. Besides the case studies, this thesis will discuss further, a brief list of examples both from Western cinema as well as Eastern cinema follows, in order of release. These include works with notable commercial success, high critical acclaim, or works that have since gained a significant cult following. The story of each of these movies could have conceivably taken place in the context of a different film architecture, yet the team behind the camera chose Brutalism proper or an aesthetic reminiscent of Brutalism as the backdrop to the fictional dystopia they were creating.

Figure 2.1: Ministry of Truth, Still from *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1984)

In a film adaptation of the renowned book *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, we see the institutional buildings of the infamous INGSOC, using an aesthetic reminiscent of Brutalism, in line with their descriptions in the text of the book. Although the real-life structures used for filming were not Brutalist in name and period, rather representatives of the British factory aesthetic, their lighting and usage display a clear resemblance to ideas discussed in the *Brutalist Manifesto* by Reyner Banham (1955), who himself build upon the gritty aesthetic of factories. Throughout the movie the protagonist and the viewers feel the cold exposed concrete, embodying the overwhelming control the totalitarian state has over every aspect of life in this world.

Figure 2.2: Neo Tokyo skyline, Still from *Akira* (1988)

In the Japanese movie *Akira*, widely acclaimed for its visuals and animation, we see the architecture of the futuristic city of Neo Tokyo. Set in a world rebuilt after a great catastrophe but remaining nonetheless in a state of urban and societal decay. From the blocky, heavy megastructures filling up the skyline to the dirty concrete streets controlled by biker gangs, the spanning Brutalist metropolis dominates the screen, setting the tone of the environment.

Figure 2.3: Streets of Tokyo, Still from *Ghost in the Shell* (1995)

The Art Director for the Japanese cyberpunk classic *Ghost in the Shell*, Hiromasa Ogura, cited Hong Kong and the Kowloon Walled City as an inspiration for the Brutalist, concrete-neon city in the movie. Wanting to capture the deteriorating urban landscape set towards high-rise buildings of Hong Kong, creating a society of highly advanced technology contrasted by low living standards. (Lum, 2018)

Figure 2.4: Gattaca Space Center, A still from *Gattaca* (1997)

Gattaca, a biopunk movie set in a Brutalist retro-future, depicts a sterile and frigid society driven by genetics and eugenics. The perfectionist social order is reflected in the architecture, using minimalist, clean, sharp structures next to advanced technology. Alongside proper Brutalist interiors and movie sets, the real-world CLA Building and Marin County Civic Centre Building, though not brutalist in name, are utilized and colorized to reflect this fictional reality.

Figure 2.5: City of Libria, Still form *Equilibrium* (2002)

Equilibrium takes place in an apparent future utopia, maintained by the eradication of human emotions, with the fictional nation using strict symmetry and geometric graphics as symbols of oppression and power. Utilizing Brutalism to show a totalitarian society, where individuality is lost, through a cold and monotone setting of minimalism, using predominantly greys and blues, large inhumane spaces, and no decoration. This contrasts with the underground movement attempting to restore human emotions, which is visually full of warm colors and ornaments.

Figure 2.6: The Capitol, Still from *The Hunger Games* (2012)

In *The Hunger Games*, the Capitol of Panem, an advanced urban center inhabited by the decadent and powerful elite, communicates its totalitarian and absolute power over the districts with symmetry, columns, and mass grandeur. According to the director, the buildings were inspired by Brutalist architecture from the last century, expressing power and an architectural influence of dark times in human history through massive and monumental architecture. Several sets were also homages to Fascist and Stalinist architecture, with the movie showing the Capitol utilizing the importance of mass experience, emphasized by size, straight lines, and uniform design. (Architales, 2015)

Figure 2.7: Megablock Peach Trees, Still from *Dredd* (2012)

In the film *Dredd*, Mega-City One is a dystopia defined by ultraviolent crime and a lack of social order, an urban nightmare created by an extreme environment and harsh laws. The setting is an overexaggerated representation, modeled on the urban landscape of Johannesburg. A heavy metal version of Brutalist and Metabolist architecture, the entire movie takes place in a single mega block, a residential structure of unprecedented scale from concrete, strongly reminiscent of a modernist top-down approach to housing following the second world war.

Figure 2.8: Tower block, Still from *Highrise* (2015)

In *Highrise*, the chief apartment building in which the movie takes place rises as a socially stratified, alienating structure above the surrounding vast flat surfaces. Based on J. G. Ballard's novel, the film is about the influence architecture has on human behavior and the possibility of controlling one through the other. Throughout the runtime, the residents of the Brutalist skyscraper slowly descend into chaos, patterns of irrational behavior, and eventually unjustified violence, gradually overturning the established serene social order. The book's author was inspired by studies in the 70s focused on the impact of high-rise housing on the inhabitant's mental health, in face of British social and architectural realities. (Vlachou, 2016)

3. The Roots of the Brutalist Dream

3.1. Le Béton Brut

What we today categorize as the Brutalist style emerged in the 1950s in the United Kingdom, as one of the responses to the reconstruction era in post-war Britain. As a derivation of modernism, Brutalism was a continuation of minimalist construction but also characterized by bare building materials and exposed structural elements over any decorative design. Mostly making use of exposed concrete and occasionally brick, angular (at first symmetrical) geometric forms, and a monochromatic color and material palette.

Within the United Kingdom, the style became synonymous with utilitarian affordable social housing projects, drawing influences from socialist principles, before spreading abroad. Since then, Brutalist architecture became commonly associated with institutional buildings such as city government institutions, libraries, and university buildings. The heyday of Brutalism ended in the 1970s, as it became increasingly associated with urban decay and totalitarianism. The reasons and means of which is what this thesis explores. Today the movement as a whole continues to elicit a stream of criticism, for its apparently “cold” and “soulless” character. It has nonetheless gathered support from designers and local communities, many of which have come to revere their Brutalist buildings as iconic. (Reading, 2018)

3.2 Manifesting Brutalism

Throughout history architectural and artistic styles came about in either one of two ways: Either they originated as a movement, with their ‘founders’ rallying behind a specific goal or manifesto. To mind comes the example of Italian Futurism. Or alternatively, the style was categorized through an endonym, retrospectively, by historians, of which its founding figures were unaware, considering themselves as avant-garde. For example Cubism. Reyner Bhanham, the author of the *New Brutalism* manifesto, considered Brutalism to be both. (Bhanham, 1955)

Publishing his manifesto after Brutalism was already being implemented for nearly a decade, Bhanham semi-codified and summarized the characteristics of Brutalism, providing a common framework, but also acknowledged and explored its rise that occurred before his text. He saw Brutalism as a style that emphasized memorability, material rawness, and honesty of structure.

Bhanham traced the origin of the term “New Brutalism” (Bhanham, 1955) to its use as a critique of new upcoming architecture, more specifically those structures deviating from the ideas and aesthetic of the New Humanism, becoming something of a term of abuse by communists. The New Humanist movement was exemplified by brickwork, segmental arches, pitched roofs, small windows, and a generally picturesque, human aesthetic. Contrasted with the flat roofs, glass, and exposed structural elements of modernism, which the early communists opposed. Bhanham also noted the traceable connection to the French term *le beton brut*, for raw concrete. He also noted the link with Le Corbusier alongside other architects who foreshadowed the approach of Brutalism, among others Louis Kahn, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and Alvar Aalto.

Most notably, however, Bhanham recognizes the impact the architectural duo of Alison and Peter Smithson had on the development of Brutalism. While the style began its own growth before them, the Smithsons made it into a radical, social form of architecture. They can be credited with the idea of fashioning memorable forms out of raw materials, in order to capture

the spirit of the inhabitants and to really provide a place that would harmonize with the complex experiences of the inhabitants over a long period of time, throughout the lifespan of the project. Appropriated by Alison and Peter Smithson, the term Brutalism became a programme, one with the structure exposed in its entirety, without interior finishes, in which it is the contractor who aims at a high standard of basic construction, devised in a way as a small warehouse.

From this early era of Brutalism led by the Smithsons, Banham identified several core characteristics of Brutalism: 1 Formal legibility of plan, symmetry, apparent from the outside. 2 Clear exhibition of structure. I.e. the building is made of what it appears to be made of, but also the acknowledgment of utilities, which do not come out of a wall but are delivered by the use of visible pipes and manifest conduits. 3 Valuation of materials for their inherent qualities. These characteristics described Brutalism in its early stages, gradually however symmetry of plan began to fall out of favor, meaning Banham turned to a different approach.

Banham instead went on to define Brutalism in terms of a building as “an image”, visually valuable, but not by the standards of classical aesthetics. That which is seen affects emotions, a building that is immediately apprehensible as a visual entity will go on to elicit an experience. With this, while considering future developments, he arrived at a more proper definition of Brutalism which is: 1 Memorability as an image. 2 Clear exhibition of structure. 3 Valuation of materials. As laid out by Banham (1955).

3.2. Casting the Thamesmead Estate

Perhaps few other structures have come to symbolize Brutalist Architecture more than the Thamesmead Estate in South-East London. Its construction, adoption, decay, and renewal over the last 50 years can be seen as directly paralleling the development of the entire style. Commissioned by the Greater London Council as one of several experimental projects intended to provide an answer to the post-war lack of housing in the face of rising urbanization, the estate was to be a reasonably self-contained community, rather than a dormitory. Architects at the time of its construction in the 1960s praised the estate, calling its design a “harmonious integration of human values, aesthetic expression and modern techniques” (Chadwick, 2019, p. 17). The residential community had everything envisioned in a bright utopia at the time.

Working around the presence of water, the white concrete buildings were shining in the warm blue waters, reflected alongside yachts, bikinis, and polo necks, with talks at the time about extending the lake for events. Build on top of former marshland, connected with bridges, and raised above the historical worries of flooding, the estate created a space-age landscape comprised of long spine blocks, terraced pyramid apartments, and expressive concrete staircases. The white concrete towers stood like sentinels above the artificial lakes, a powerful and artificial effect compared to the bleakness of the open landscape, signifying a triumph of modernism over the forces of nature and dereliction. Due to a lack of skilled craftsmen at the time, a new prefabricated concrete balency system was to come to the rescue, erecting the high-level walkways, tower blocks, and concrete barriers blocks in record time.

In spite of this grand vision, in reality, the early days of the estate were less than idyllic. By April 1967 the first phase with 1494 homes was finished, surrounded by a wasteland of mud, puddles, concrete, and equipment. The initial tenants had difficulties adjusting to the new environment as they felt like they couldn’t leave a mark on their own community. The typologies turned out to be unsuited for the prefabricated concrete methods used, resulting in leaking joints, higher than expected costs, and on-site casting. The Venetian bridges and paths above ground level, a trend so popular in the early 1960s, resulted in a dead first floor. The residents

complained about a lack of facilities and a sense of isolation, a problem only worsened when the project abandoned the planned construction of a rail connection and instead continued to rely on infrequent busses. Combined with the lack of shops, restaurants, and a town centre the unfinished product was described by Chadwick (2019) as a “cheap Spanish package holiday”, one ready to receive the stereotypical British tourists stranded in an unfinished hotel and parodied in bawly films like *Carry on Abroad* and *Are you Being Served*, as described in his book on the history of the estate by Chadwick (2019, p. 20). As the industry at the time shifted from concrete back to brick, the estate construction was left lacking. And as the newly build phase dropped the concrete entirely and focused more on traditional privately-owned row houses, the South Estate was left to decay and vandalism.

3.3.One Clockwork Orange

“As we walked along the flatblock marina, I was calm on the outside but thinking all the time, so now it was to be Georgie the General, saying what we should do and what not to do, and Dim as his mindless, grinning bulldog. But, suddenly, I viddied that thinking was for the gloopy ones and that the oomy ones use like inspiration and what Bog sends; for now it was lovely music that came to my aid. There was a window open with a stereo on, and I viddied right at once what to do…” - Character of Alex (Kubrick, 1971)

Figure 3.1. Thamesmead Estate Waterfront, Still from *A Clockwork Orange* (1971)

Stanley Kubrick’s 1971 *A Clockwork Orange* follows the crimes, arrest, and subsequent attempt at rehabilitation of the fictional character of Alex DeLarge (Malcolm McDowell), depicting a futuristic but delinquent society, one where crime is rampant throughout the city and sexual imagery is common in its interior decoration. After giving us a glimpse of Alex’s violent crimes committed with his gang of “droogs”, the story shows his arrest and life in prison, presenting his inner thoughts as he falsely pretends to repent. In order to leave the prison, Alex volunteers to undergo the experimental Ludovico treatment, a technique that makes him physically ill at the thought of violence, therefore rendering him harmless to society. The

experiment is demonstrated to be a success and after his release, Alex attempts to reintegrate into the society, but in a series of unfortunate events, he encounters several of his previous victims as well as the former members of his gang, who are now policemen. After being beaten up and taken advantage of by the opposition to the current government, Alex apparently attempts suicide by jumping out the window. Later in the hospital, he is visited by the prime minister who, fearing bad press from the rising outcry against the Ludovico treatment, strikes a deal with Alex. The minister promises him a pardon for his acts of delinquency in exchange for Alex's cooperation, who as we hear through his inner monologue, has now been cured of the treatment and regained his old violent self. The story, therefore, deals primarily with the themes of free will and choice in the faces of a violent society.

The infamous scene quoted above and displayed in Figure 3.1, sees the character of Alex fight his gang while walking by the Thamesmead waterfront. This scene cemented the reputation of the estate as ultra-violent, a place of urban and societal decay, potentially influencing the reputation of the whole British modernists housing overall. Taking note of this development, this reputation was soon exploited by the political opposition to public housing projects. First used as a justification for a reactionary attack on post-war social housing, and later as a strategy to market the area as 'edgy' and iconic for selling it off as privatized housing. It was during this time that the sense of post-war utopian optimism changed into a conviction about the failure of modernist architecture. A figurehead of Brutalism the Thamesmead Estate, and by extension the entire movement, became associated with physical brutality, nihilistic crime, and vandalism.

After just finishing his work on the renowned 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, a project marked by its high budget and expensive movie sets, Stanley Kubrick set to create a low budget film adaptation of the dystopian satirical black comedy novel *A Clockwork Orange* by Anthony Burgess. The director thought it better to use the real thing instead of a movie set recreation. He maintained that just like a history drama would be shot on real historical locations, a near-futurist movie needed a futurist-looking location. Kubrick was said to be looking for an area that looked futuristic, just like the empty spaceship corridors in his *A Space Odyssey*, looking for the alienation of a supremely modern space, but not a space that would already be horrific in itself. Looking through architectural magazines and scouting the surrounding London for potential shooting locations, the director wanted a future on a very small scale, and therefore he found, in his own words, one of the worst housing apartments around, the Thamesmead Estate.

Figure 3.2. Thamesmead Estate, Still from *A Clockwork Orange* (1971)

Figure 3.3. Alex's Apartment Building, Still from *A Clockwork Orange* (1971)

Stanley Kubrick chose the estate for its "pristine futuristic feel" (Chadwick pp 21), deciding to use the enhanced formal beauty, lakes, and crips white environment of the architecture to provide a sharp thematic contrast with the shocking scenes of ultra-violence in his

movie. Although the critics at the time have already begun to dismiss the estate as a run-down dystopia, Kubrick was attracted by those same high-end Riviera qualities that had so fascinated those same architects just a few years prior. He didn't think Brutalist architecture simply equaled a brutal behavior, instead Kubrick thought a new architecture would produce a new kind of person.

Figure 3.2 sees the character of Alex walking to his apartment building over the second level of the Thamesmead Estate bridge walks. Just as throughout the rest of the movie, no other inhabitant or street life are visible, with heaps of litter throughout the area. The public spaces of his apartment building (Figure 3.3) are shown as empty of people, with graffiti present on the walls and furniture found in a state of disrepair.

Figure 3.4. Brunel University Lecture Theatre, *Still from A Clockwork Orange* (1971)

Besides Thamesmead, the film also prominently featured the Lecture Theatre at the Brunel University campus, another example of Brutalism, as the Ludovico Medical Clinic in Figure 3.4. The campus underwent a major expansion in the 1960s, with several new concrete buildings by Richard Sheppard, Robson and Partners. The Lecture Theatre building remains divisive among the students and staff to this day, both in terms of aesthetics and functionality. The striking front façade seemingly either loved or loathed for its visual impact and scale. (Jarvis, 2017)

It is important to note that overall, the Brutalist architecture of the Thamesmead Estate and the Brunel University Campus themselves only appeared in about one-tenth of the film's total 136-minute runtime. Used mainly in establishing shots and exterior scenes. However, it is its use of Brutalism, alongside the bold interior sets, that the film is most remembered for today. This is, at least in part, due to the cognitive estrangement induced by Brutalism in the film's audience, with the viewers experiencing the style as strange and other-worldly, even alongside this peculiar depiction of the future. Brutalism, therefore, became firmly entrenched in their memory, alongside the film's scenes of violence.

3.4 The Thamesmead Estate Legacy

And so the opinion on the Thamesmead Estate slowly transformed from being hailed as: a "true utopia of affordable housing, with plenty of green spaces and artificial lakes, and hopes for providing a permanent solution to London's post-war housing shortage" (Coo, 2017) shortly after its construction, to an example of the apparent failure of the welfare state. A shift happening regardless of the interest of the estate's inhabitants.

In his book *Remaking London*, Ben Campkin (2013) makes a connection between how the so-called failure of post-war social housing was used as a justification for the scaling back of government public housing programs. With certain public actors creating a narrative about the undeserving poor, poverty and disease, disregarding the reality of the weak connection between post-war housing and actual crime. Campkin traced this narrative to a BBC documentary *The Writing on the Wall* (1974), which claimed that when "everything you use is anonymous, dull and concrete, it is not perhaps surprising that inhuman tragedies occur" (Mansfield, 1974). Campkin further stated that this portrait in media, influencing the Thamesmead Estate's reputation, was the beginning of the trope of a "dystopian urban wasteland". A kind of marketing campaign, where the feel of a deprived urban area is packaged and sold as a commodity to the affluent through the media of film or music.

However, during the subsequent period, there were also attempts to fight the image depicted in *A Clockwork Orange*, and to portray the development in a positive light. The movie *The Optimists of Nine Elms* (1973) uses the estate as a location of a new high rise and follows a family that desperately wants to move there from the slums they inhabit at the beginning of the film. This provides a glimpse at the soaring ambitions of the middle class during the British welfare state era, of which Thamesmead is again used as a chief example. In 1974 a promotional advertisement video *Living at Thamesmead* portrays the Estate with an upbeat atmosphere showing playing children, people meeting, and sunny skies. The video frames Thamesmead Estate as a place that offers young people a chance by providing them with housing and occupations. Following this period, a new wave of migration brought life back to the estate, and in the 1990s, a new town centre and shopping mall were finally constructed, bringing the needed destination the area lacked for decades. Currently, further urban redevelopments are in progress, relocating activities to the ground level and linking the town to the city with rail transit.

Nevertheless, contrary to these efforts, the latest phase of Thamesmead's developing legacy shows a rise in the trend of the "dystopian urban wasteland", as described by Campkin (2013). Musician Aphex Twin used the location for the filming of his music video *Come to Daddy* in 1997, conflicting with the established portrayal of the Estate as bleak towers and landscapes. The cultural cool television series *Misfits* (2009-2013) used Thamesmead as a setting for its delinquent youth characters undergoing community service. And a short film *The Bard of the Street* (2016) used the landscape as a stage for an urban reimagining of Shakespearean works. These works of media manufacture a vision of Thamesmead as socially provocative, but no longer as a dangerous place to live, transforming its image into a concrete sculptural playground now intended for the elite following the super cool trends.

4. Picking up the Aesthetic of Dystopia

4.1 Architecture and Science Fiction Film

According to the influential French architect Robert Mallet-Stevens (1928), a movie set presents the character before they ever appear on screen, communicating to the audience their social position, habits, lifestyle, and personality. In Science Fiction the setting and technology itself are an inseparable part of the story, a character of their own. It can therefore be inferred that a movie set in the future would communicate that fact through the environment before any of the story is revealed.

Science Fiction itself shifted from the bright utopian visions of the future to the visions of destruction and disasters. This was a result of the developments in the 20th century that changed our perspectives about the cities of tomorrow, chiefly the Second World War and the threat of a nuclear disaster during the Cold War. In these new visions, dystopian architecture showcases an unequal social hierarchy, where the priority of technological and economic placement often makes the cities cluttered and unreceptive to natural light. Technology and authoritarian government play a key role, in reinforcing each other. Science Fiction became a way to present these dystopian visions of the future, and to search for a solution. These dystopian narratives used many political directions, and utilized themes of global ecological disasters, multinational corporation takeover, nuclear wars, increased pollution, and economic exploitation, with people in these films often losing hope and abandoning the planet. However dark, these Science Fiction narratives are a projection of contemporary events into the future. (KSA MA Architectural Visualization, 2015)

Science Fiction films can generally be said to have three roles: They offer commentary on contemporary developments. They provide a testing ground for innovative visions. And they create a realm in which different approach to art and architecture can be realized. (Kühne, 2020). Unlike real design practice, the medium of film is well suited to translate the architect's boldest dreams and worst nightmares, it has no limits, and it offers an escape from reality, with no need to be realistic or functional. With very few genres having such an impact on the image of the future as Science Fiction does.

4.2 Blade Runner, A Concrete Adaptation

"Dozens of tiny explosions ripple across the night sky as a vast, illuminated cityscape comes into view, its horizon obscured by smoke. Hover cars in the foreground haloed by rings of light direct our gaze towards vast twin pyramids in the far distance. The camera drifts slowly in to allow us to explore the texture of one of these glittering monoliths, all ironwork and blinking light, external elevators crawling up its surface. In flashes, we see the megalopolis reflected on the surface of a gigantic eye." (Wintersgill & Bartlet, 2017)

Perhaps few works of cinema have influenced our imagination of a dystopian future more than Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*. The 1982 neo-noir science fiction film depicts a dystopian Los Angeles of the not-so-distant future year of 2019, an adaptation of the 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric* Sheep by Philip K. Dick. Following the character of Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford), the titular Blade Runner, the movie depicts a future where indistinguishable synthetic humans, known as Replicants, are used as a disposable workforce off the planet. When a group of replicants rebel and escape to Earth, Deckard is forced out of retirement to track and "retire" them. His investigation takes him to the headquarters of the Replicants maker, the Tyrell Corporation, where he meets the captivating woman Rachel, who as both him and the audience soon learn is also a replicant, though this fact is unknown to her at the time. Throughout the story, the film follows both Deckard as he is eliminating the group of Replicants one by one, and their leader Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer), who is set on extending his manufactured lifespan by any means necessary. Before the conclusion, Deckard falls in love with Rachel and begins to question

the morality of his job and his own existence. After a climactic cat-and-mouse battle between Deckard and Roy, who at this point is the only of his group left, surprisingly chooses to save Deckard from falling off the roof of a building to his death, displaying more humanity than his opponent did throughout the course of the film. The audience is treated to a solemn speech from Roy, about all of his life and experiences being lost like tears in a rain, before his lifespan runs out. Through these motives, the film is questioning what it means to be human and polemizing about the existence of a soul.

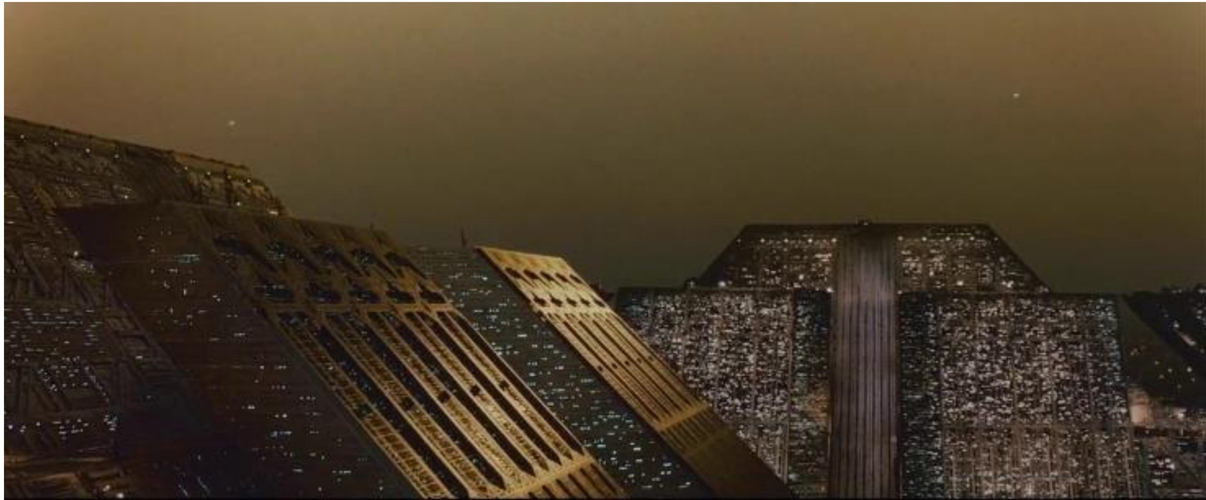

Figure 4.1. Tyrell Corporation Headquarters, Still from *Blade Runner* (1982)

Figure 4.2. Tyrell Office, Still from *Blade Runner* (1982)

The first stop in Deckard's investigation is the Tyrell Corporation headquarters (Figure 4.1). The audience perceives the power this company holds even before entering the buildings as they are treated to a zooming shot of two massive pyramids on the horizon, slowly growing larger until taking up the entire screen. The materials are dark, the silhouette more sculptural and elaborate than a simple polyhedron, the exterior is lined with lights, mechanical openings, pipes, and exterior elevator shafts. For the purposes of shooting the scene, handcrafted miniature models of the pyramids were made, though they remained an imposing form even in their

smaller-than-life scale. This brutal landscape can be traced back to concept art by Syd Mead in Figures 4.5 & 4.6, who seemed to have an even grander vision. His original artwork shows a landscape dominated by geometric shapes, dwarfing skyscrapers next to them, quite reminiscent of the grandeur of Superstudio concepts from the 1970s.

The interior of the pyramids communicates the same weight of the structure. Tyrell's office shown in Figure 4.2 treats the audience to oversized, heavy, vast rooms, with double ceiling height and meticulously arranged objects to convey the power and complete control Tyrell has. Only heavy materials and geometric shapes are present. The whole space is reminiscent of an inside of a temple, symmetrically lined with eight large columns, which direct the focus towards a full-bleed window overlooking the city of Los Angeles. It must be noted the view from this window is the only time during the runtime of the movie when the sun can be seen. Taking the metaphor of the temple the character of Tyrell represents god, the large table in the center of the room is an altar, and the sunshades that lower at his command to block the sunlight represent the control Tyrell has over this world. Later in the film, the audience is shown a peek at Tyrell's personal quarters whose space and doors possess the same sense of scale and heavy grandeur, although are made more comfortable by cloth draped around the heavy columns. (Kühne, 2020)

Figure 4.3. Los Angeles Street, Still from *Blade Runner* (1982)

Figure 4.4. Deckard's Apartment, Still from *Blade Runner* (1982)

The scenes set in the streets (Figure 4.3) below are of the same aesthetic but of a different character. The imagery is driven by darkness to express the uncanny, the shots and framing are executed to present a sense of helplessness and industrial sensation. The Los Angeles of *Blade Runner* is a vertical city of isolation, with vertical buildings, limited access, lack of contact between people, and gated communities. At one point in the film, we see Deckard driving home, entering a building, and getting to his apartment, without encountering a single another person on his way. This future is not too far-fetched from reality as to be unbelievable. Familiar structures and architecture are retrofitted to fabricate a futuristic aesthetic. The exploitation of society's fears over immigration, overpopulation, poverty, pollution, and deterioration.

Deckard's apartment seen in Figure 4.4 is showcased to be the quintessential residence of a bachelor in this dystopian future. Unkept, lived in, with alcohol never located too far. The low ceilings and heavy wall concrete blocks are broken out into coffers, permeated by a sculptural motif that made it feel like a literal cave enclosure. For this motif on the walls, the production took castings of the walls in a Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Ennis House. The stated intent being "to make it feel totally claustrophobic" according to the production designer on the film, Lawrence G. Paull (Blade Runner: Designing the Future, 2020, 22:50).

Figure 4.5. Blade Runner Concept Art by Syd Mead, KSA MA Architectural Visualization (2015)

Syd Mead, a visual artist and an industrial designer, played a large part in the creation of this vision of the future. His drawings are known for rendering the mood, working with lighting, and fixtures and never drawing objects in isolation. His objects always have a surrounding, in this case, they were set in a context of streets, buildings, and dreary neon signs and rain. Heavily inspired by the landscapes of Tokyo and Shanghai. Director Ridley Scott said he just felt that Mead nailed the look of that urban development when he saw his concept images. The city shots Mead drew were showcasing megalithic structures on an enormous scale, ones reminiscent of the works of Superstudio and mid-century modernists. Lawrence G. Paull said that from the beginning he knew what the idea of the street was going to be. In his vision, everything was going to be very claustrophobic, with columns and buildings to the edge of the sidewalks, and heavy-handed looking (Blade Runner: Designing the Future, 2020, 18:47)

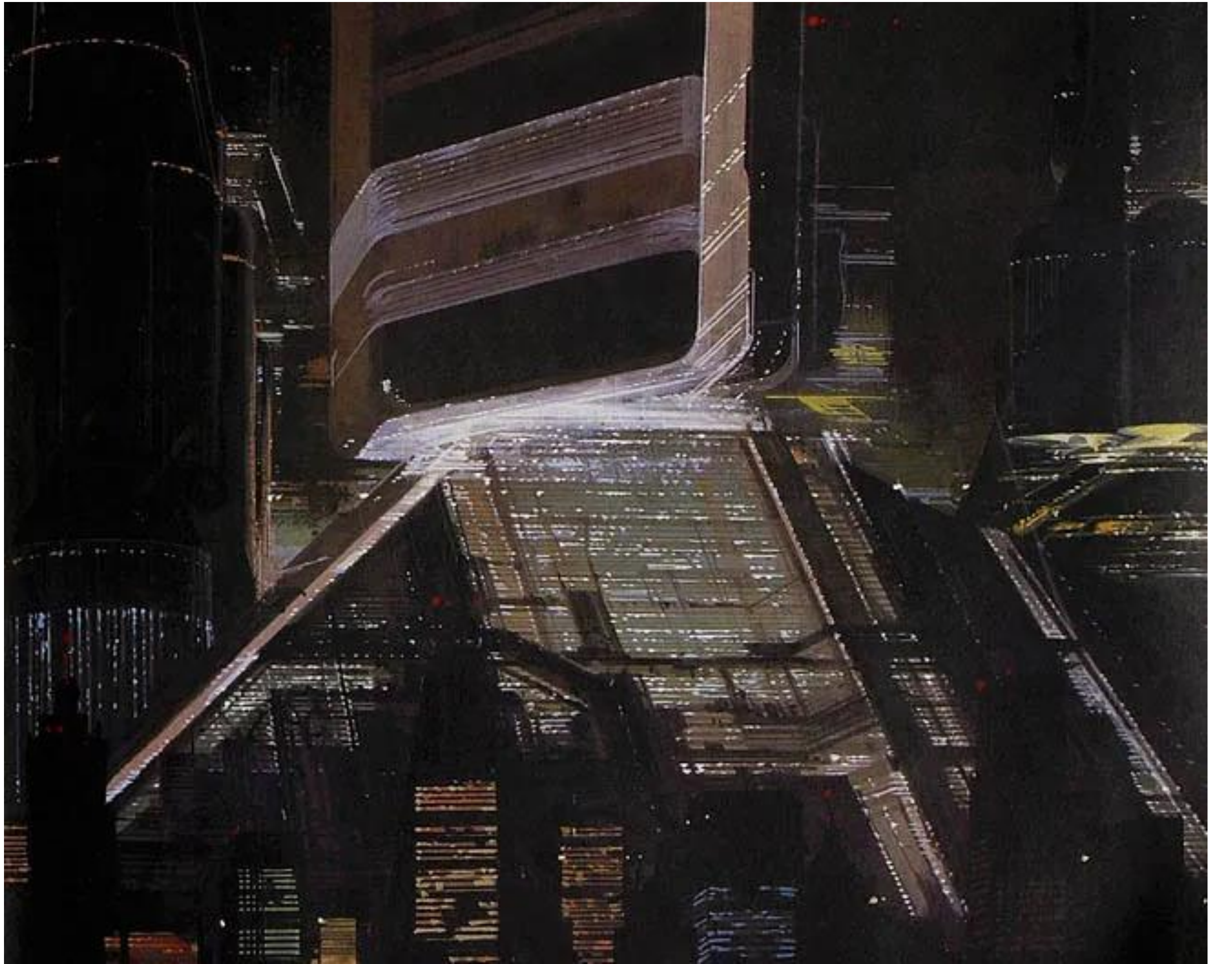

Figure 4.6. Blade Runner Concept Art by Syd Mead, KSA MA Architectural Visualization (2015)

The real-life sets used for the street shots underwent a great amount of construction for buildings and industrial design, unprecedented in the industry at the time. This effort was that much more impressive considering the production was working with a limited budget, resulting in an aesthetic of retrofitting pipes, ducts, and air conditioning units onto old buildings, a guts-on-the-outside approach. An idea that has a precedent in Bhanham's *New Brutalism* manifesto from nearly three decades earlier. Because the real buildings used for the streetscape were not tall enough, a decision was made to shoot at night, further reinforcing a sense of dread. Additionally, the production was given extra time to complete the sets due to actor strike at that time., giving the set designers additional time to truly flesh out this future.

Thanks, to this the filmmakers were essentially evolving what the future could be. The process of accumulation and addition, of endless repairs and devices attached on things, ended up giving the production that futuristic look yet gritty look. This became the whole essence of the film, a setting where the normal supplies and services have broken down, as it became easier to build onto old. Where, as Syd Mead put it: "the street became an urban basement" (Blade Runner: Designing the Future, 2020).

Figure 4.7. Los Angeles, Still from *Blade Runner* (1982)

Indeed, this dichotomy between the glamorous and clean world in the structures above, seen here in the Tyrell Headquarters, and the oversaturated filthy streets below, is a natural building upon a motif of vertical stratification, which is traceable at least to the city in *Metropolis* (1927). In that film the binary structure between the capitalist and the workers, the realms of below and above, are shown in the shining skyscrapers and speed for the upper class, and the doomy slow catacombs underneath for the workers. In *Blade Runner* the canyons of buildings don't allow the audience to see inside, only allowing them to see the uniform monumentalism of the exterior (Figure 4.7). Or, as Syd Mead put it: ”The street level, particularly, had become like the sever of the underside of the city, and being trapped on the street was, not only just unromantic but thoroughly nasty way to spend your life, because the streets were simply a service access to the megastructures and the high rises that now comprised the city.” (Blade Runner: Designing the Future, 2020, 18:20).

This vertical stratification of the structures, representing the social stratification of the people, made the world feel realistic. Director Ridley Scott said it was important that this future had to be real, for it to feel as familiar as possible. Creating a landscape that is set forty years in the future but almost seems like it was set forty years ago. In the end, the presence of Brutalism in the dystopian reality of the world of *Blade Runner* was perfectly summarized in one sentence by the actor playing the Replicant 'villain' Roy Batty, Rutger Hauer. When reminiscing on a conversation he had with Ridley Scott, Hauer said he found the tethered, destroyed look of the future fascinating. The idea that "the future is old, it's not new!” (Abbott, 2000, 15:12).

4.3. The Influence of Blade Runner

Regardless of its innovative visual and sound effects, striking set design, and deep story, *Blade Runner* was deemed a commercial failure upon its release in the movie theatres. This was partially caused by a great amount of competition that year, competing for ticket sales. Another reason was the troubled production and interference by the film studio, which demanded cuts of certain scenes and an addition of a voice-over by Harrison Ford, an idea the actor considered unwise.

However in the coming decades *Blade Runner* was blessed with a commercial and critical revival after the director's cut came out in the 90s, better representing Scott Ridley's vision. The public was perhaps not prepared for such a bleak vision of the future at the time of release, but the

contemporary industry took notice and incorporated the ideas and aesthetic into other works. Ending up influencing MTV, multimedia advertising and communication, the film gained a cult following. It became so popular in that niche of media that it largely shaped the pages of Cyberpunk fiction and Science Fiction cinema following it. *Blade Runner* shaped the face of the future, going from a fascinating failure to a cult classic, somewhat like the Architecture of Brutalism.

4.4. In a Dystopia 30 Years Later

Indeed this dystopian vision of the future slowly gained such an iconic status that a sequel directed by Denis Villeneuve was eventually released. *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) takes place three decades later in the timeline, and sees the world descent into an even deeper state of dystopia, followed by a doubling down on the use of Brutalism. The inspiration this time was disclosed directly, with Denis Villeneuve stating he "wanted it to feel brutalist, that severe concrete architecture that started in the 1950s" (Clemoes, 2017). And the production designer on the film, Dennis Gassner when in a meeting with the director, after he thought for a second when asked about the movies, said "brutality…It's a harsher environment. The world has gotten much more demanding. The force of nature against us, and the architecture need to have strength, the brutality, to stand up to it." (Clemoes, 2017)

The same Tyrell headquarters building from the original film undergoes a kind of Brutalist reinforcement, with even grander and more monumental spaces than in its first depiction (Figure 4.9). With structures and the environment itself becoming even foggier and darker. To emphasize the style the movie starts with a predominantly monochromatic pallet, with colors added as the movie progresses.

Figures 4.8 & 4.9. Still from *Blade Runner 2049* (2017)

And it is at this point in time when the association with Brutalism becomes so obvious that it begins to draw criticism from the side of architectural historians. With the movie having been praised by those who have seen it for its design and depiction of Brutalist architecture, it has become apparent that the central philosophy of Brutalism, rooted in socialism, is not aligned with what the society in this future is depicted to be. Cultural theorist Mark Fishes argues modern films are set in the future encumbered by a present, with moviemakers now incapable of imagining an enlightened future. In the current perception of society, humanity is at the end of history, and there is, therefore, no future after capitalism. Therefore the urban environments depicted in these films are only reinforcing a bleak vision of the future, one that is nearly identical, though much exaggerated, to the problems of the present. (Clemoes, 2017)

However, such critique appears to have missed the shift in perception the style has been experiencing for the past 50 years. For it is exactly this apparent disassociation between the intended core philosophy of the movement, as established by Reyner Bhanham and the Smithsons, and the late-capitalist unreality of the film that is what brutalism came to represent within the Pop-Culture Subconsciousness of the (western) culture. Indeed a depiction of Brutalism in a movie set in a truly utopian future, one that has managed to solve the issues of public housing and urban decay, would be in line with its core value, it would however be out of line with its historical reality.

The appeal of Brutalism today lies in the decay and ruin, and the overbearing governmental and economic regimes. A similar trend was predicted by Andrei Tarkovsky in his film *Stalker* (1979). He anticipated the future trend of fascination with post-industrial architecture and the rise of what can colloquially be called "ruin porn". Filmmakers today see a lot of decaying buildings, and instead of building elaborate grand worlds, they see and capitalize on the fascination of decaying spaces.

6. Conclusion

The perception of Brutalist Architecture evolved and has been guided by its depiction in popular media. The original intent of the architects became, at least when it comes to the general population, overwritten by the manifestation of a dystopia, the egalitarian and utopian thinking lost in time. At first, the real-world structures became infamous and underwent scrutiny by their inhabitants. This influenced the moviemakers, who then used Brutalism in their work to represent a backdrop of urban violence in a failed society. This in turn perpetuated a self-reinforcing depiction of a Brutalist dystopia by reaching a larger audience and influencing more people (Figure 6.1).

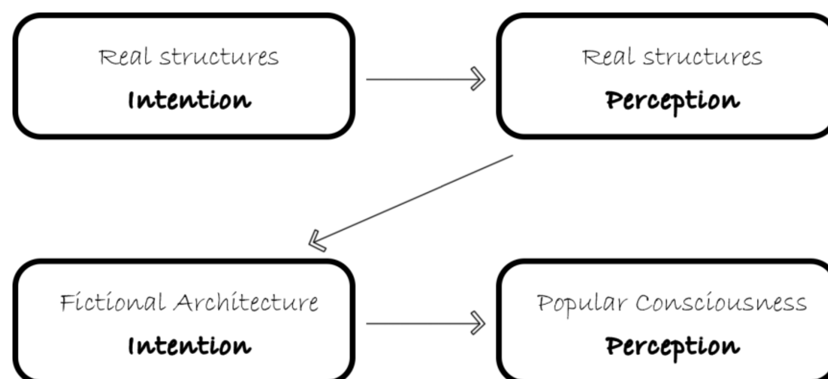

Figure 6.1. Conceptual progression of perception in Popular Culture Subconscious

In the future, the perception of Brutalism might possibly evolve further. In the meantime a revival of Brutalism in private residential architecture and film architecture will continue, drawing upon its current position in the west as culturally "edgy" and selling the dystopian urban experience for the elite. With the passage of time, people will increasingly become disconnected from the real historical building and eventually might remain aware of Brutalism only through its depiction in media, no longer sharing a genuine connection (physical exploration) with a structure.

Figures

Figure 2.1: Perry, S. (Producer), & Radford, M. (Director). (1984). *Nineteen Eighty-Four* [Motion Picture], UK: 20th Century Fox.

Figure 2.2: Suzuki, R. & Katō, S. (Producer), & Otomo, K. (Director). (1988). *Akira* [Motion Picture], Japan: Toho.

Figure 2.3: Mizuo et al (Producer), & Oshii, M. (Director). (1995). *Ghost in the Shell* [Motion Picture], Japan: Shochiku.

Figure 2.4: DeVito et al (Producer), & Niccol, A. (Director). (1997). *Gattaca* [Motion Picture], US: Columbia Picture & Sony Pictures.

Figure 2.5: de Bont, J. & Foster, L. (Producer), & Wimmer, K. (Director). (2002). *Equilibrium* [Motion Picture], US: Miramax Films.

Figure 2.6: Jacobson, N. & Kilik, J. (Producer), & Ross, G. (Director). (2012). *The Hunger Games* [Motion Picture], US: Lionsgate.

Figure 2.7: Garland et al (Producer), & Travis, P. (Director). (2012). *Dredd* [Motion Picture], UK & South Africa: Entertainment Film Distributors & United International Pictures.

Figure 2.8: Thomas, J. (Producer), & Wheatley, B. (Director). (2015). *Highrise* [Motion Picture], UK: StudioCanal.

Figures 3.1-3.4.: Kubrick, S. (Producer), & Kubrick, S. (Director). (1971). *A Clockwork Orange* [Motion Picture], UK & US: Warner Bros & Columbia-Warner Distributors.

Figures 4.1-4.4. & 4.7.: Deeley, M. (Producer), & Scott, R. (Director). (1982). *Blade Runner* [Motion Picture], US & Hongkong: Warner Bros.

Figures 4.5. & 4.6.: KSA MA Architectural Visualization. (2015). Dreaming of the Post-Modern Metropolis: A critical Analysis of the Architecture of Blade Runner. ksamaarchvis.wordpress.com/2015/11/20/dreaming-of-the-post-modern-metropolis-a-critical-analysis-of-the-architecture-of-blade-runner/

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