

Urban Spaces in Dystopian Science Fiction

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Recibido: 3 de octubre de 2011

Aceptado: 30 de octubre de 2011

Abstract

The analysis of the urban paradigm allows us to distinguish the genre of dystopian science fiction from neighboring, openly anti-realistic genres, such as the Fantastic, the Marvelous and space opera. The city, as an explicit and perverted manifestation of post-enlightened ideals—progress, common wealth, pragmatism and ultimately, materialism—semiotically complements the epistemological doubt put forward by dystopian science fiction, which, unlike that expressed by the Fantastic, is based upon the predictable rather than the unpredictable. When it comes to the narrative function of the urban space within the universe of dystopian science fiction, Phillip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and William Gibson's *Neuromancer* constitute a highly representative corpus, for both works, each corresponding to a very specific and important moment in the evolution of the genre, incorporate the city as a determining factor within the semiotic economy of the narration.

Keywords: Gibson, *Neuromancer*, dystopia, Dick, androids.

Título: Espacios urbanos en la ciencia ficción distópica

Resumen

El análisis del paradigma urbano nos permite distinguir el género de la ciencia ficción distópica de otros géneros abiertamente anti-realistas, como pueden serlo lo fantástico, lo maravilloso o el *space-ópera*. La ciudad, como manifestación explícita y pervertida de los ideales de la pos-ilustración – progreso, bien común, pragmatismo y, en última instancia, materialismo– complementa semióticamente la duda epistemológica expresada por la ciencia ficción distópica, que, a diferencia de la duda sugerida por el universo fantástico, no está basada en lo impredecible sino en lo predecible. Respecto a la función narrativa del espacio urbano dentro del universo de la ciencia ficción distópica, *¿Sueñan los androides con ovejas eléctricas?*, de Phillip K. Dick, y *Neuromancero*, de William Gibson, constituyen un corpus altamente significativo, pues ambas novelas, que corresponden cada una a un momento decisivo en la evolución del género, incorporan la ciudad como factor determinante dentro de la economía semiótica de la narración.

Palabras clave: Gibson, *Neuromante*, distopía, Dick, androides.

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0.0. When it comes to its diegetic function within dystopian science fiction, the urban paradigm proves remarkably informative, both structurally, as a recurrent narrative motif, and semiotically, for it complements one of the genre's main tendencies, that is the expression of an epistemological doubt regarding the relationship between the Human and Progress as conceived by post-enlightenment consciousness. From a simple narrative point of view, the city also allows us to formally distinguish science fiction from neighboring, openly anti-realistic genres, such as the Fantastic and the Marvelous, as well as to isolate "true" science fiction from its more direct emulation, that is space opera and even more so from an amorphous, undefined category such as fantasy.¹

0.1. Generic distinctions have suffered greatly from post-structuralist approaches and there is a definite analogy to be drawn between the blurring of narrative genres and that of disciplinary borders in the Humanities, as most postmodern criticism systematically borrows theoretical apparatuses from neighboring disciplines.² The success of this vaguely defined notion of inter/multi-disciplinarity has generated a certain uneasiness regarding the necessity for a structural distinction between different narrative categories, for postmodern thought thrives to articulate an all-encompassing theoretical template that both includes and transcends its original corpus of study, be it literature or narration in general.³ This decidedly postmodern re-

¹ Although the notion of "true" science fiction remains open for discussion (Moreno 2010: 68-110), the fact remains that *Star Wars* or *Galactica* do not express the same type of concerns as *Johnny Mnemonic* or as *The Matrix*, nor do they elicit the same type of response from the receiver.

² Naturally, some intersections are to be expected between literary studies and, for instance, history or sociology; however, literary studies cannot be considered as a sub-section of history nor of sociology, and this applies all the more to disciplines the objects of which were never the study of literature in the first place, such as psychoanalysis or philosophy.

³ There lies perhaps the most consequential flaw of postmodern approaches, which tend to privilege a given epistemological or ideological agenda (sometimes both, as Sedgwick does in her *Epistemology of the Closet*) over the original object of study of our discipline; as a direct consequence, our field has been progressively losing

configuration of the different categories of cultural expression has indeed yielded positive results, for it has allowed popular culture studies to attain some type of academic legitimacy. However, if there is no doubt that entire narrative categories, formerly—and often summarily—dismissed as belonging to “inferior”, “low-brow” culture, that is artistically challenged and culturally insignificant, have benefited from the instinctive, typically postmodern suspicion of all pre-established classifications, this same suspicion has also magnified the general confusion regarding different narrative instances, undoing in some way what traditional structuralism had achieved, that is a logical, objective manner to distinguish different narrative tendencies within the concept of genre. Hence, science fiction has become an increasingly wide genre, which is generally considered to include a fair amount of diverse, more or less anti-realistic narrations—in particular space opera and fantasy—which, from a theoretical standpoint, presents a very serious problem when it comes to the definition of our corpus of study, as well as to the critical evaluation of individual works.

0.2. As expressed elsewhere (Ferrerías 2011a), today’s cultural scholar is confronted with the difficult task of establishing a canon of authors, works and genres out of different narrative domains that have precisely always been recognized as anti-canonical, that is unworthy of canonical consideration. However, if it is a given that popular culture should not be seen merely as the product of sheer escapism and commercial motivations, it cannot be inferred that all popular cultural artifacts are significant, regardless of their popularity. Because of its multiple connotations and aesthetic possibilities, the motif of the city contributes to the semiotic weight of many popular narrations, hence to their possible cultural and artistic values.⁴ In the case of two main, undeniably canonical works of modern science-fiction, namely Phillip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and William Gibson’s *Neuromancer*, the city as a narrative motif

definition to become a vague and confusing cluster of ideological and philosophical speculations; since postmodern thought is not as interested in literary texts or in narrations as it is in meta-theory, the necessity of distinguishing between radically opposed types of narration has become a very secondary priority.

⁴ See the hard boiled detective genre, which exhibits a much higher social consciousness than the adventures of Sherlock Holmes or of Hercules Poirot; although London is undeniably present in the fictional dimension of Sherlock Holmes, the presence of the city barely affects the narrative syntagm, and can sometimes be altogether absent from the narration, as shown by one of Sherlock Holmes’ most famous adventures, namely *The Hound of the Baskervilles*; Conan Doyle’s sleuth resolves enigmas in closed spaces whereas the hardboiled detective must navigate the city and interact with its creatures in order to reach the truth.

represents the rational side of the epistemological doubt that is expressed through the irruption of irrationality in the Fantastic genre.

The analysis of the urban paradigm in the genre of science fiction can hence be used as a structural tool, first to isolate dystopian science fiction from another category with which it is often confused, that is the Fantastic, and secondly, perhaps more significantly, in order to deepen our understanding of the epistemological implications of modern science fiction.

1. Fantastic Countrysides

1.1. The Ordinary Impossible

The association between two radically different narrative tendencies such as the Fantastic and science fiction relies in part upon the presence of an epistemological doubt in both genres, however, this doubt is not expressed in the same manner in either genre, nor does it correspond to the same concern. The doubt expressed by the Fantastic is irrational while that put forward by dystopian science fiction is rational, and we find this opposition reflected in the choice of narrative motifs, and particularly in that of a most fundamental element to all narrations, that is background or setting.⁵ The Fantastic can be defined as the irruption of the unexplainable—and not the unexplained as Castex would have it⁶—in a highly realistic universe, that is a dimension in space and time that corresponds to what we perceive as reality.⁷ The typical protagonists of the fantastic narration do not present any remarkable characteristics, quite to the contrary, they tend to be extremely ordinary, as are their situations, both social and topographical, which eases the process of identification with the recipient in order to favor the narrative tension

⁵ See John Potter's classic description of the fictional universe in *Elements of Literature* (1967), which presents characters, conflict and setting as the three fundamental articulations of any narrative form.

⁶ The element that disrupts the fabric of reality in the fantastic narration cannot be reduced to any type of rational explanation without immediately altering the narrative structure: such narration would then leave the fantastic realm and enter what Todorov calls the Uncanny (Todorov 1970). If we were to accept Castex's view, any detective story could then be considered as belonging to the Fantastic, which is inadmissible in terms of generic classification.

⁷ We are limiting our analysis to the modern Occidental fantastic and to its corresponding reception; it goes without saying that the post-industrial revolution European perception of the world is specific to its context and differs from those of other cultures, as any perception of reality is naturally mediated by cultural and historical determinations. The modern Occidental fantastic is mostly represented by European and north American authors and does not correspond for instance to Latino American Magic Realism nor to *lo real maravilloso* in terms of narrative structures.

that we find at the core of the Fantastic.⁸ In semiotic terms, the narrative syntagm of the modern fantastic narration is articulated upon a simple binary opposition between the ordinary—characters, settings and situations—and the extraordinary, that is an element, either a motif or an event, which cannot be rationalized according to the accepted, official epistemology. Hence, we find a fundamental doubt regarding our ability to understand and control reality at the core of most modern Fantastic narrations, which reminds us of the uncertainties regarding the nature of reality suggested by dystopian science fiction, from Galouye's *Simulacron 3* and Dick's *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* to Cronenberg's *eXistenZ* and the Wachowski brothers' *The Matrix*. However, the epistemological doubt expressed by the Fantastic is not grounded upon the same conception of reality as that put forward by science fiction, and this difference becomes very tangible when we consider the urban space as both narrative motif and semiotic marker.

1.2. The Threat from The Outside

Unlike the epistemological crisis of dystopian science fiction, the irrational threat that rips the fabric of reality and constitutes the very engine of the Fantastic narration is fundamentally external to the human condition, and it is no surprise if it often takes the shape of a supernatural occurrence, that is of an event that supersedes the laws of nature and whose mere presence not only questions our knowledge of reality but also the means by which we have achieved it. Typical motifs of the Fantastic, such as vampires and ghosts, represent the intrusion of Otherness in our normative view of reality; the human element—generally the protagonist(s)—is never responsible of the epistemological crisis created by the Fantastic, but rather suffers its consequences in a generally isolated, and, more often than not, rural environment. If the city does appear in canonical modern fantastic narrations, as is the case with London in *Dracula*, the conflict is nonetheless lived towards the inside; the city is a mere background rather than a significant setting, and only intervenes indirectly in the progression of the narrative syntagm. From Maupassant's country homes owners who fall prey to the irrational to Lovecraft and King's inhabitants of small, New England provincial

⁸ Tobin Siebers' notion of the "Romantic Fantastic," which associates the Fantastic with the European romantic movement is therefore problematic for two main reasons: first, the romantic hero is by definition an exceptional individual, whose adventures are all but ordinary; secondly, the actions of romantic characters are motivated by feelings rather than reason and hence, their perception of reality does not correspond to the pragmatic, one-dimensional view of reality that spawns the modern Fantastic. (For a functional definition of the modern Fantastic, *vid.* Ferreras 1995.)

towns who must confront the impossible—from “*Le Horla*” or “*Qui Sait?*” to “*The Colour Out of Space*” and *Needful things*—the supernatural threat favors rural environments and does not care for urban space. In the narrative economy of the Fantastic, unlike in that of modern dystopian science fiction, the city is not needed as semiotic vehicle, for the values it represents, such as collectivity, progress, industrialization or technology, are irrelevant when not counter-productive when it comes to create the fantastic effect. The protagonist of the fantastic adventure is immediately alienated from the collectivity and logically, one of his/her major difficulties consists in convincing others to believe the unbelievable, that is the irruption of the irrational in our reality. This struggle is an integral part of the narrative tension and we find, among the basic binary oppositions that characterize the Fantastic, that of the protagonist against the rest of the world; the latter simply cannot accept the existence of the unexplainable, for it would mean the irremediable defeat of the normative epistemological apparatus, the breakdown of all certainties. In comparison, the protagonist of dystopian science fiction is usually part of a normative superstructure and lives his/her adventures at the same cognitive level as those around him/her; subsequently, the city, as an expression of collective identity, acquires a different, more functional semiotic role, for it both documents and complements the narrative conflict.

2. Science Fictional Cities

2.1. The Aggression of Rationality

If the countryside is propitious to ghosts, specters and other spooks, dystopian science fiction on the other hand thrives within an urban space, for the conflict it presents, which also suggests a serious when not terminal epistemological crisis, is born out of a internal projection of a possible future and does not stem from the fear of an incomprehensible element coming from the outside. Our understanding of reality is no longer threatened by an external factor but rather by our own achievements, and whereas, in the Fantastic, the conflict is born out of the opposition between a very livable, routine oriented reality and an irrational, hence inadmissible element, that of dystopian science fiction relies mainly upon the constant threats generated by reality itself; before the irruption of the irrational, the universe of the protagonist of the fantastic tale is comfortably boring, while that of the dystopian science fiction hero constitute an aggression from the very beginning. The presence of science and technology—whether directly associated to the city or not—can in themselves determine generic nature, thus, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* or H.G. Wells’ *The Invisible Man* belong to primitive science fiction rather than to the modern fantastic for they are structured around the possibility of altering reality from the inside

rather than the outside and the knowledge of both Dr. Frankenstein and Griffin comes from the academic world, it is therefore entirely man-made and supposes no intervention from supernatural, fundamentally external forces. The threat that will eventually develop into epistemological uncertainty is not, as is the case with the Fantastic, based upon the irrational, but rather on the contrary upon the rational: both Frankenstein and Griffin are scientists, and both are solely responsible for their creations. We are far from the sudden appearance of an external, irrational element which disrupts our perception of reality, for both Frankenstein and Griffin have dedicated long years to perfecting their respective inventions. As dystopian science fiction developed, the city logically became increasingly important, not only as a reasonable anticipation of the future based upon recent post-industrial history, but also as a natural environment for the representation of modern technological feats and their downfall. Scientific progress and its problematic results is indeed a constant paradigm in the genre, and there is a little of Frankenstein's monster in the Nexus-6 androids that Deckard must "retire" in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* as well as in Wintermute, the Artificial Intelligence module with which Case must struggle in *Neuromancer*.⁹

2.2. Places and Spaces

At the beginning of Warren Ellis and Gary Robertson's monumental *Transmetropolitan*, the Hero, Spider Jerusalem, who has been living in reclusion somewhere "up a goddamn mountain", must return to the city in order to comply with his book contract after he receives a threatening phone call from his editor:

Do you know lawsuit? Do you know sue your ass off if we don't get our books? We figure that you could get them both done within a year. One on politics, one of your choice as per the contract agreement. And we both know you could never write about politics from a distance, so I guess we'll be seeing you in the office soon, eh? (4-5)

⁹ This is not meant to infer that the urban and technological paradigms are determining narrative motifs in regard to generic classification; thus, Proyat's film *Dark City* could be deemed to belong to the Fantastic in spite of the omnipresence of the urban motif throughout the narration, for the threat at the core of the narrative tension, represented by mysterious beings appropriately named "The Strangers," is decidedly external. By the same token, the representation of the technological paradigm in any narration does not necessarily imply its belonging to science fiction, dystopian or not, as shown by Cameron's film *Avatar*, which, in spite of relying heavily upon scientific and technological motifs, responds to the narrative syntagm of space opera.

The city is therefore presented as indispensable not only within the economy of the narration, for the very beginning of *Transmetropolitain's* syntagm is the departure of Spider Jerusalem towards the city, but also as the sole possible source of inspiration. The urban space is presented as the only environment susceptible to support modern and postmodern communication, the only place where real action can take place. It is also a display-case for the infinite and dangerous possibilities of the future and their corresponding effects, both positive and negative, upon our perception of reality. The title itself indicates clearly the omnipresence of the urban space within the narrative universe and indeed, many pages of *Transmetropolitain* are mainly descriptive, both textually and visually, as the city is treated as a representative micro-structure of the entire social and cultural spectrum. In *Transmetropolitain*, the urban space forms a parallel narrative that complements the main diegetic axis and functions semiotically rather than semantically, for it is suggested rather than clearly articulated, and its exploration is as significant as the progression of the main narrative conflict. From a generic point of view, the presence of the urban paradigm by opposition to displacement as a semiotic complement to the main narrative syntagm allows us to isolate dystopian science fiction from space opera or fantasy, just as it has vis-à-vis the Fantastic. The narrative structures of *Star Wars* or *Battlestar Galactica*, which are representative of the space opera genre, correspond to those of the traditional Epic, and both narration's main motifs as well as their syntagmatic organization are updated versions of those we find in very traditional tales, such as *The Odyssey* or *The Adventures of Simbad*.¹⁰ Naturally, neither *Star Wars* nor *Galactica*—nor *Star Trek* for this matter—concedes any semiotically significant space to the city. Along the lines of the Byzantine novel, space opera favors travel and displacement, and does not deepen any type of relationship between the individual and the city, which is conceived as a projection of a collective identity; any given urban space is but one stop in the hero's itinerary and the narrative tension does not develop in an urban environment but to the contrary within the emptiness of deep space. The same can be said regarding fantasy, as illustrated by *Lord of the Rings*, where the journey and its perils constitute the main axis of narration and where cities are mere topographic indicators rather than semiotically charged markers. Although Deckard, the protagonist of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and Case, that of *Neuromancer*, do travel, their displacements within physical space do not constitute the main

¹⁰ For a more detailed description of the analogies between the main narrative figures of traditional Epic and those of space opera, *vid.* Ferreras and Moreno (2011).

axis of the narration, inversely to what we have observed in the narrative structures of space opera or fantasy, where the journey in itself is at the core of the conflict, and could be considered as the main vector of diegetic tension; as illustrated by *Star Trek*, the journey in space opera facilitates the encounters with successive antagonists and hence can be considered as the very engine of the narration. In dystopian science fiction, the journey tends to function as a simple change of scenery and does not support by itself the weight of the narrative syntagm.¹¹

As we can see, at the structural level, the function of the urban paradigm proves remarkably useful in order to isolate the genre of dystopian science fiction from its most immediate narrative neighbors. Rather than a simple succession of *décors* that punctuates an epic journey, science fictional dystopian cities are an integral part of the overall referent of the genre and must be considered as metonymical representations of an entire narrative universe.

3. Urban Dystopia

3.1. Perverted Enlightenment

We find in dystopian science fiction most of the values put forward by the Enlightenment century, the age of reason *par excellence*, albeit perverted in order to create a pervasive doubt regarding our ability to truly understand and manipulate reality. Recurrent narrative motifs such as deep space explorations and the colonization of distant planets echo the great expeditions of Bougainville or Cook, and the triumph of the city over the rural space is the logical development of the pre-industrial demographic configuration. Far from the triumphalist view of space explorations we find in space opera, space travel in dystopian science fiction is problematic and uncertain, and, unlike the cities filled with wonders that the protagonist of fantasy epic narrative encounters along the way, the dystopian science fictional city becomes the ultimate expression of epistemological failure precisely because it was originally conceived according to the precepts of the Enlightenment. Whereas the rural Fantastic underlines the breakdown of reason, dystopian science fiction points to its victory, and proves all the more disturbing that the threat at the center of the narrative syntagm is internal rather than external: it is the very reality we have created according to rational imperatives that turns against us and not some unexplainable outside force that suddenly appears without logical explanation, as if the end result of enlightened ideals meant doom just as surely as if we were victims of an incomprehensible supernatural predator. In the dystopian science

¹¹ Another example of fantasy/space opera can be found in the *Adventures of Flash Gordon*, which, like *Star Wars*, *Battlestar Galactica* or *Dune*, involves the same motifs as traditional Epic.

fiction universe, rationality is not under attack, quite the contrary, it is rationality in all its heartless glory that attacks us through our own scientific and technological achievements, and because it is the most propitious environment for the development of enlightened ideals, the city acquires a essential function in the narration. Whereas the city was to represent the most valuable achievements of reason and progress, it has become an inescapable prison, as humans fall victims to their own, highly rational achievements.¹² We find the urban paradigm as dystopian agent in the Wachowski brothers' *The Matrix*, although somewhat watered-down to better serve the imperatives of commercial cinema,¹³ for the world that the machines have generated is exclusively urban and excludes any reference to nature: it is a city conceived as rationally as can be, that is an inescapable prison of virtual existence. In spite of its weaknesses, due mainly to market oriented decisions, *The Matrix* suggests the epistemological crisis that characterizes dystopian science fiction, as the logical environment of human rationality, the city, has been highjacked by human's most impressive achievements, the machines. However, yet again limited by its commercial ambitions, *The Matrix* rescues the urban space at the end of the narration, eluding the dystopian consequences of its initial premise. As we will see now, this is not the case of Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* nor that of Gibson's *Neuromancer*, which coherently develop the urban motif within the narrative structure, conferring it an essential semiotic weight.

3.2. The End of the Android's Dream

The terms of the most basic binary opposition around which Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* is centered, man and robot, can be read as the struggle of man against himself, against his own rational achievements, for not only are the Nexus-6 androids a human creation but they are also virtually undistinguishable from real human beings: man has created a near-perfect double who has become a direct threat. The human element is confronted from the very beginning of the narration to the consequences of his most spectacular, reason oriented, scientific feat, that is an android that

¹² We find the concept of the city intricately associated with that of a prison in Carpenter's *Escape from New York* and *Escape from LA*: the most culturally visible and successful urban entities in the United States have become gigantic traps where we confine what we refuse to acknowledge, that is the failure of modern, rational human organization.

¹³ I am referring solely to the first installment of the trilogy, for both *The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix: Revolutions*, far too determined by financial priorities, appear far less meaningful and much more similar, in terms of narrative structure, to space opera or fantasy, as the conflict that opposes reason to itself and questions the nature of our perception of reality tends to disappear behind a Manichean opposition between the humans and the creations of the Matrix.

could actually pass for human, for the main narrative syntagm starts when Deckard sets off to chase the Nexus-6 Replicants who have illegally entered Earth. This chase takes place in a decaying city that represents the failure of scientific progress, just as the conflict created by man-made pseudo-humans suggests the errors and ultimately the defeat of technological progress:¹⁴ it is indeed the most remarkable of all human technological achievements that Deckard, a vulgar bounty hunter, must eliminate. The city, which was to be the cradle of our advancement, has simply become un-livable and is forsaken by the authorities themselves, that is to say the alleged political and social elite, as citizens are strongly advised to emigrate through an aggressive promotion campaign revolving around the slogan: "Emigrate or degenerate! The choice is yours!". For those who cannot emigrate, the city, paragon of culture and civilization, has become a prison, signifying the failure of the enlightened dream as well as its condemnation, for the urban space in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* is in actuality the anteroom of death, due to the radioactive dust that has covered the planet and whose origin remains uncertain—we only know that it is somewhat chronologically related to "World War Terminus":

In addition, no one today remembered why the war had come about or who, if anyone, had won. The dust which had contaminated most of the planet's surface had originated in no country and no one, even the wartime enemy, had planned on it. (12)

It can be inferred that the dust is hence a by-product of the last world war, a disastrous side-effect of technological progress applied to weaponry, the consequences of which are most visible and palpable in the city: "The morning air, spilling over with radioactive motes, gray and sun-beclouding, belched about him [Deckard], haunting his nose; he sniffed involuntarily the taint of death." (5) No one seems apt to survive what the city—the triumph of rational human organization—has become, for human civilization has elaborated its own deadly trap, all the more inescapable that it is rationally conceived, yet another fundamental difference vis-à-vis the fantastic, which in this regard appears somewhat more optimistic. In a fantastic narrative universe, one can hope to eliminate the external element that threatens the epistemological balance and therefore

¹⁴ It is indeed highly significant that, in spite of the numerous liberties it takes vis-à-vis the original text, Ridley Scott's cinematographic adaptation of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, *Blade Runner*, has respected the semiotic presence of the urban paradigm, as shown by the very opening sequence of the film—an aerial view of a nightmarish, factory-like city—which could be considered as an initial semiotic micro-structure of the entire narrative universe.

return to normality; dystopian science fiction, on the other hand, offers no possibility for a positive resolution of the narrative conflict—the threat has become ourselves, and its elimination implies our own demise. In the novel, urban decay is metonymically linked to human degeneration through the character of J.R. Isidore, a “chickenhead,” that is an individual whose I.Q. is too low to be eligible for emigration and who is therefore condemned to remain on earth, waiting for certain death:

He lived alone in this deteriorating, blind, building of a thousand uninhabited apartments, which like all its counterparts, fell, day by day, into greater entropic ruin. Eventually everything within the building would merge, would be faceless and identical, mere pudding-like kipple piled to the ceiling of each apartment. And, after that, uncared-for building itself would settle into shapelessness, buried under the ubiquity of the dust. By then, naturally, he himself would be dead [...]. (17)

Isidore lives in a deserted apartment building that is slowly falling a parts and works as a driver for an artificial animal clinic, therefore his topographic situation as well as his occupation reflect the degenerated artificiality of his environment, just as his own mental deficiencies echo the failure of rational, enlightened epistemology: he is himself “kipple,” that is rubbish covered by the dust that has caused humanity to abandon its enlightened center—the city—and to emigrate towards distant planetary colonies. Isidore appears to be the most “human” character in the novel, for he is capable of generosity as shown by his attempts to befriend the android who has found refuge in one of the abandoned apartments; naturally, he is also the most mentally challenged character, a living proof that the dream of the Enlightenment has turned into the nightmare of both, humans and androids. Love, affection, trust have no longer any room in the urban space of dystopian science fiction and can only be represented by a mentally handicapped individual. As shown by Deckard’s highly problematic relationship with his wife, even the most basic element of human organization, the family cell, is disintegrating at the same time as the surrounding buildings. The city has bred a deep, all-encompassing loneliness that causes the breakdown of human communication along with the decay of urban infra-structures; in the end, Deckard appears to be as isolated as the androids he has “retired” and as much as a prisoner of the city as Isidore.

In the dystopian science fictional city, everyone is more or less a “chickenhead”, and proves increasingly incapable of telling the difference between what is real and what is not, be it the attractive young lady that Isidore finds squatting in an apartment below, or the

toad that Deckard encounters in the middle of the desert and that is only revealed as artificial when Deckard brings it back into the city and shows it to his wife, as if the city had the power to turn everything—including an inconspicuous toad—into a lie. By its decaying, hopeless presence, the city embodies the great lies produced by our rational convictions, which, rather than bringing us closer to the truth, have generated falseness and uncertainty as well as sheer human misery.

3.3. Station to Station

"Night City was like a deranged experiment in social Darwinism, designed by a bored researcher who kept one thumb permanently on the fast-forward button."

(W. Gibson, *Neuromancer*)

William Gibson's *Neuromancer* offers another version of the dystopian city articulated in along the same lines as Dick's novel in terms of the basic binary opposition that structures the narration: just as Deckard must fight against androids, Case, the protagonist of *Neuromancer*, has to struggle with Wintermute, an Artificial Intelligence module, therefore both characters are confronted with the product of human scientific progress. Just as in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, the city is the inevitable setting for the action, and although *Neuromancer* happens mostly in cyberspace, urban space is intrinsically related to the development of the narrative syntagm. At the beginning of the novel, we find Case in the Japanese megapolis Chiba, where he is desperately trying to find someone to restore the neuronal connections that allow him to navigate through cyberspace, and that have been severed by his former employer. As usual, the city appears as the center of scientific and technological advancements and, once again, science and technology betray, for Case is unable to locate anyone capable of repairing the damage done to his brain: "In Chiba, he'd watched his New Yen vanish in a two-month round of examinations and consultations. The men in the black clinics, his last hope, had admired the expertise with which he'd been maimed, and then slowly shaken their heads." (6) Case is eventually recruited by Armitage, a puppet of the artificial intelligence entity known as Wintermute, who knows the way to re-establish his synaptic connections, which implies that an Artificial Intelligence unit is superior to Human Intelligence and that the city, the epitome of progress and technology, has failed, for it is no longer able to insure care or even survival. The urban paradigm has become the physical space where "biz" is conducted, nothing more than the lower strata of capitalistic exchange, notwithstanding its claim to arbor the finest that rational, scientific progress and technology has to offer:

"Synonymous with implants, nerve-splicing, and microbionics, Chiba was a magnet for the Sprawl techno-criminal subcultures" (6). All the characters with whom Case interact in Chiba are outlaws in one way or another, as if survival in the city depended on one's capacity to transgress ethical values, which is reminiscent of Deckard's own ethical dilemmas regarding his occupation, and suggests the perversion of another fundamental value from the enlightenment, that of commonwealth. In the streets of Chiba, it is indeed every man for himself, and this general lack of solidarity is present throughout most of the novel, for the failure of rational ideals also implies the loss of any illusion of improving the human condition and a collective regression to instinctive, reptilian reflexes. In *Neuromancer*, Chiba is the concrete result of rationality and scientific progress gone wrong and, unlike *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, it does not offer the possibility of emigration to a distant planet: more than ever, the dystopian science fictional city is a prison, and, just as J.R. Isidore is more or less awaiting slow death in his deserted apartment building in Dick's novel, Case behaves in a suicidal manner when confined to the limits of the city:

Case knew that at some point he'd started to play a game with himself, a very ancient one that has not name, a final solitaire. He no longer carried a weapon, no longer took the basic precautions. He ran the fastest, loosest deals on the street, and he had a reputation for being able to get whatever you wanted. A part of him knew that the arc of his self-destruction was glaringly obvious to his customers, who grew steadily fewer, but that same part of him basked in the knowledge that it was only a matter of time. (7)

The Case that we meet at the beginning of the novel is as victimized by the urban environment as Isidore, and just as mentally deficient, when we consider that the micotoxins his former employer has injected into his neuronal net have rendered him incapable of traveling through the matrix, thus deprived him from his unique talent and turned him into a common hustler living on borrowed time. Chiba, just as San Francisco that agonizes under the dust in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, is overflowing with human kipple, and Case's recovery coincides precisely with his departure from the city, as if leaving the urban environment complemented the regaining of his human worth.

The other urban space represented in *Neuromancer* is the Boston Atlanta Metropolitan Axis (BAMA), known as the Sprawl, and although it is suggested rather than precisely described and occupies a relatively reduced place in the textual economy, it complements the overall referent of the novel at a semiotic level, and functions as a marker of the dystopian future conceived by modern science fiction.

In the world of tomorrow, corporate interests concentrate power,¹⁵ as a natural development of the motivations put forward by the industrial revolution, and the city, as the original vehicle of scientific and technological progress and the natural cradle of corporations, has grown out of proportions, if only topographically, following the most basic movement of capitalistic expansion. The Sprawl is the urban concretization of liberal capitalistic tendencies running wild, as the creations of reason have become most unreasonable:

Program a map to display frequency of data exchange, every thousand megabytes a single pixel on a very large screen. Manhattan and Atlanta burn solid white. Then they start to pulse, the rate of traffic threatening to overload your simulation. Your map is about to go nova. Cool it down. Up your scale. Each pixel a million megabytes. At a hundred million megabytes per second, you begin to make out certain blocks in midtown Manhattan, outlines of hundred-year-old industrial parks ringing the old core of Atlanta... (43)

The definitive urban space is hence described in terms of an incessant, pulsating traffic, which cannot be apprehended as a whole without the risk of running into overload. This overwhelming traffic of data exchange is at the same time informational and human, and shares his origin as well as its manifestations with the Artificial Intelligence module, Wintermute. Both, the Sprawl and Wintermute have been created by human reason and both have grown beyond reason to become an virtually inescapable threat.¹⁶¹⁷ The city, originally designed to administer the highest level of informational and human exchange, has become an entity in itself that has taken control over the entire exchange process, dispossessing humans from their free will and condemning them to an endless, accelerated race, reminiscent of the hard-line imperatives of liberal capitalism, which thrives exclusively on maximum expansion and production: the Sprawl is literally an assembly line that manufactures human lives, fusing workers and machines at a vertiginous speed, as if it were writing the final chapter of post-industrial culture.

4. Past Post-Humanity

The dystopian city brings together some of the most haunting notions put forth by contemporary science fiction, such as exploitation, alienation, dehumanization or the triumph of the machines,

¹⁵ Christopher Nolan's recent film, *Inception*, exploits this correspondence between cities and corporations, a notion we already find in the cinematographic adaptation of Gibson's short story "Johnny Mnemonic," the script of which was penned by the author himself.

¹⁶ Even though the text does not dwell into the problem of future over-population, it suggests it through this description of an uncontrollable flow of data.

suggesting the possibility of a total breakdown of our Enlightenment based epistemology. The victory of reason and technology have come to mean the defeat of humanity and the corruption of its urban space, which has turned into the crucible of progress gone wrong. There is indeed little hope when the monsters that devour our humanity are our own creations, human-like androids and artificial intelligence modules, perfect enough replicas to make us doubt of our own usefulness and whose very existence points to the elimination of the original.

Cyborgs and the post-human have recently become trendy concepts in postmodern criticism, as theory attempts to include some elements from popular culture into its field of inquiry, and demonstrates paradoxically its questionable timing as well as its somewhat uncertain grasp upon a particular corpus of study. The epistemological concerns generated by the omnipresence of technology in everyday life and its effect upon human consciousness are abundantly and diversely expressed in modern dystopian science fiction, and it seems only natural to reclaim the fundamental importance of two emblematic works among many, such as *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) and *Neuromancer* (1984), which did not wait for postmodern theory to project the city of the future, in all its cold, reasonable and aesthetically convincing horror.

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