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Imaginary Cities

May 7th, 2014

Flaws in the System

“The city . . . is a geographic plexus, an economic organization, and institutional process, a theater of social action, and an aesthetic symbol of collective unity.” The ideal city could not be complete without instances of each of these facets. The city is a collective unit, created, in theory, to enhance the human experience through providing a compact area allowing for ease of access for anything its inhabitants require. Achieving this kind of perfection is undoubtedly hard to come by, and though reality cannot provide people with this “utopian” society, the world in the films they watch, can. However, it is not so easy for them to create utopias without latching on to reality-based concepts. It is impossible to deny the city-planning of “successful” cities, and not incorporate it into the imaginary ones. Thus, with this concept, utopian cities will eventually take on the flaws similarly observed in real ones, resulting often in their demise.

Each city in its creation, was designed so that it’s citizens could traverse its entirety within thirty minutes, or a two mile radius -- as lack of transportation means were available in earlier times (Mumford 185). Imaginary cities have built upon this concept, and towering buildings and ease of navigation are always prominent within them. Films like *Tron: Legacy*, *Inception*, and *The Matrix* showcase these ideal concepts. Extremely structured, well planned out, and towering above the outlying areas-- these cities utilize a grid system, but rely more on technological evolutions-- i.e. new forms of transportation, to navigate them. *Tron: Legacy*’s infrastructure is catered to transportation via light-bikes, ships, or as Sam and Quorra use to get

from one complete side to the city to the outskirts, a hovering train. No utopian city is complete without its technology, and its evolution of it-- whether good or bad.

The “utopian” urban setting is the most crucial aspect to consider in the analysis of all imaginary cities created in *The Matrix*, *Tron: Legacy*, and *Inception*. The cities that are “created” in the films are based on attributes of real cities, and were created with the intention to be perfect. All the cities in these films are created to cater to the character’s specific needs: *The Matrix* is fashioned based on the twenty-first century model while the reality of Earth at that point is in decay due to lack of resources and authoritative control over the “machine” called the Sentinels. *Tron: Legacy* takes place on “The Grid” discovered by software designer Kevin Flynn who attempted to create a utopian society to solve the problems faced by the Earthly world. *Inception* is an illusory city that is generated to bridge the divide between dreams and reality in order to capture important information from the dreamer. However, the imminent demise of the cities and the failure to become a true utopia prove that “perfect” cities are unattainable in execution.

The films borrowed dominant elements from modern cities of today in their attempt to construct the ideal society. In the building process they borrowed the systems such as complex infrastructure, accessible transportation, practical architecture, and technological advancements that we use in contemporary cities, theirs were just a more exaggerated arrangement. Additionally, the cities featured in the films are purposefully built and planned to cater to the needs of those living within the area.

The origin of the urban revolution was based on prominent, fundamental details to ensure its success: “production of surplus storable food, a system of writing, more complex social organization, technological advances” (Ellis 1). Cities act as the center of storage, currency,

trade, transportation, manufacture, protection from outside forces, and the center of government. What makes these urban areas so unique is the diversity: the diversity of people, skills, ideas, culture, arts, science, and communication. The ideal goal of city planning is to protect community values such as overall well-being, security, environmental conservation, and equality; however, most if not all of these aesthetics were altered or damaged in the films which led to their destruction.

According to Cliff Ellis, successful city planning is achieved through taking into account three elements: networks, buildings, and open spaces. Networks are the channels that carry the flow of “people, goods, water, energy, and information” (Ellis 2). The most important network system is that of transportation. There are transportation networks including streets and sidewalks which focus on an auto-centered urban development and mass transit including railroads, trolleys, and subways which focus on a more concentrated, communal form of travel (Ellis 2). Highly innovative transportation systems were evident in all three films. In *Inception* mobility is vital to be able to transport between the alternate dream worlds. The engineers of Cobol Engineering utilize air ducts to navigate through the maze without being detected by the dreamer. This is similar to the underground pathways utilized by ancient Grecian gladiators to navigate through the Coliseum without being seen by the audience. *Tron: Legacy* also utilizes auto-centered and mass transit transportation networks. The Grid functions through highly advanced methods of transportation to navigate the city including a massive train that runs the length of the entire metropolis and futuristic light bikes and cars that are constructed based on sleek aerodynamics to increase speed and efficiency. This is similar to our subway and train systems to transport large populations of people large distances as quickly as possible.

A system of utility networks allow the residents to acquire pure water through pipe

systems, discard waste through sewer systems, and acquire electricity, gas, and communication signals through wires and power lines (Ellis 2-3). Modern cities employ complex infrastructure systems and strategic architectural designs to cater to climate needs, city structure, and survival adaptations of the population. City planners consider actions and locations of the population, flow of traffic, dispersal of wealth, and size of buildings when organizing the infrastructure. For example, streets are thoughtfully designed in terms of air and water flow, shields are constructed to protect pedestrians from weather, and structures are erected to cope with climate concerns (Ellis 2). This public structure is highly expensive and hard to control. It is evident in the present-day city of Zion in *The Matrix* that the rapid urban growth and industrialization of the future was unfit to sustain their utility network due to rampant pollution, disease, and population decline.

Next, the arrangement of buildings is a prominent structure of cities. Edifices of cities include: residential structures which include single-family homes and high-rise apartments, downtown commercial buildings which include skyscrapers in the central business district, and industrial buildings which include factories and workshops (Ellis 3).

The function of the center of the city is a significant element in all of the films. The purpose of the center of the city, usually congregated downtown in the central business district is to house large office buildings, factories and warehouses, transportation centers, entertainment and shopping establishments, and working class citizens (Ellis 5). The city of *Tron: Legacy* is set-up in essentially the same way as American cities. The center of the Grid included intersection of main transportation lines and entertainment centers like Castor's End of the Line Club which serves as a center of travel and tourism. The Grid from *Tron: Legacy* is almost reminiscent of the colonial grid system. This planned grid system was meant to divide property into even quadrangular slots appropriate for additional construction and improvement.

The inclusion of the skyscraper is prevalent in *The Matrix*. This building, modeled after the modernist construction style containing a steel-frame and rows of identical windows, proved to be an element of financial glory and symbolism of intense power and control. This structure represents real estate innovation which yields “maximum economic value from a limited parcel of land” (Ellis 5). The skyscraper houses professional workforces in business related fields and other large miscellaneous conglomerates. In *The Matrix* they rescued Morpheus from the agents control after he was captured from a skyscraper of this caliber. The Agents represent the center of information processing and administration of the city which mimics the skyscrapers role in the business district. Skyscrapers are commonly commercial command centers, software corporations, or government headquarters (Ellis 6).

Outside of the central business district, or the out-skirts, house the urban poor. These areas are indicative of rampant criminality and drug-use and deteriorating economic status, amenities, and resources. The buildings are poorly constructed with little up-keep and the social problems are infinite (Ellis 6). This is indicative to the slums of Zion in *The Matrix* which lie outside the world of illusion of perfection and happiness. It can also be related to the home of Kevin Flynn in *Tron: Legacy*, he is isolated from the hustle and bustle of the city because of his hatred, dissent, and opposition towards the authority of the society. He is ostracized after destroying the Grid by introducing Clue’s wrath to their city.

The last facet of city planning is open space. Ellis classified open space in two categories hard spaces and soft spaces. Hard spaces include marketplaces and courtyards where community events take place. Soft spaces include commons, forests, and parks which provide space for leisure. They also act as a reprieve from severe urban environments (Ellis 3). In the films these are often places that are separate from government control and a place where the characters are

able to find respite or hide from their oppressors.

There are two strategies engineers take in terms of modern city planning: visionary city planning and institutionalized city planning. Visionary city planning is like that of *Tron: Legacy* and *The Matrix* in which an outside force comes in to make drastic changes to the structure of the city including extensive alterations to the social, political, economic, and cultural norms. *Inception* demonstrates institutionalized city planning in which the creators utilize the current organizations of the governmental regime but alter the development procedures moderately and rationally. They change small things about the cities like the appearance of the buildings but not sweeping changes to the infrastructure or model of the city itself. The engineers from *Inception* were under more strict guidelines because they had to obey by the rigid economic and political forces that are already in place in the contemporary world so as not to alert the dreamer that this was not reality. Kevin Flynn and the Sentinels from *The Matrix* are creating their own world isolated from our own. “Most city planners...do not work on a blank canvas; they can only make incremental changes to an urban scene already shaped by a complicated historical process” (Ellis 7). Because of this they had more creative control in their construction and execution of the imaginary cities they controlled.

Ellis classifies cities into six categories: a sensible city has a practical structural arrangement; a city with good fit provides networks, buildings, and open spaces for its residents; an accessible city allows people to easily obtain “resources, services, and information”; a city with good control allows citizens to participate in how the city is structured and sustained; an efficient city attains these objectives with the least monetary burden; and a just city issues assistance to the population so societal standards are met (Ellis 9). If a city achieved all of these goals, that city would be a utopia.

The idea of a utopia is what we often strive for in searching for a place to live. Utopia seems to arise from the struggle of desiring more than we currently have. However, the idea of a Utopia seems much more fitting for the imagination than for existing in the physical realm. Under Peter Swirski's view on the nature of Utopias - "precisely that they cannot exist, that they are u-topias, 'no-places,' idealistic imaginings that are impossible to realize in this faulty world of real and flawed human beings" (Swirski 54). Based on the idea that Utopia is something that is unable to be complete, it is easy to recognize the three films for their own flawed or incomplete Utopia. In relation to this idea, the film *Inception* is an example that shows the idea of 'no-place'. The utopias that they create (beginning with Mal and Cobb's Japanese mansion) are imagined. Upon creating a perfect utopia, one does not want to live in it; this idea also relates to Mal and Cobb's mansion. They create the ideal world for themselves, but often do not go to it. This utopia exists only within the realm of imagination, and *Tron* is similar in that aspect. What differs in *Tron: Legacy* is that this imagination does not become a physical reality, but instead a virtual reality through Sam's father, Kevin. However, this world becomes a controlling and fascist society, which shows that this Utopia is indeed incomplete. *The Matrix* is also run by a controlling force – the program which takes the physical form of Smith. It seems a common trait that the utopian government uses controlling forces in order to sustain its beliefs. We can see this throughout history, such as with Hitler's efforts to obtain utopia. We can also see a relationship between *The Matrix* and the idea that once we have achieved a perfect utopia, we no longer wish to live in it. The architect, in *The Matrix* films, is the one who creates 'the Matrix'. In creating the first Matrix, he makes a paradise. However, this Matrix fails because it is too perfect. The human subjects are not comfortable living in this perfect world; to them, it seems wrong.

The most prevalent aspect of modern city configurations that contributed to the

destruction of the cities in the films is the mass exposure and reliance on technology. Technology is what propels our society forward and what sets these cities apart from past cities.

Nevertheless, I think that these films also acted as a warning of the danger of technology and that if we keep incorporating it into our city planning that it will ultimately destroy us. *The Matrix* was basically a world ruled by technology, a domineering tyranny of machines that used it to enslave the human perception so they were unable to see reality. The Sentinels in the film symbolize the detriment of relying on technology: The information society is rooted in voyeurism and escapism. The effect of constant media saturation is similar to perceiving a multitude of stimuli simultaneously. The omnipresent Orwellian viewer desires technological supremacy and a capacity for surveillance that brings power and God-like control” (Rubedo 44). The films warned the audience that the “Myth of the Machine” and exposure to technology will undoubtedly lead to disaster. Because of the technological bondage, there was rampant political unrest through authoritative control, social chaos, and strong economic disparity. In turn, these cities were not able to sustain perfection and demonstrated that when you set out to make a perfect city it will fail.

In *The Matrix*, the Sentinels wanted to create the ideal city, but that wasn’t practical because the human race is unable to attain utopia. This is apparent when the Special Agent Smith informs Morpheus that when they attempted to create the perfect world it was a disaster. At first they thought "that we lacked the programming language to describe your perfect world. But I believe that, as a species, human beings define their reality through misery and suffering. The perfect world was a dream that your primitive cerebrum kept trying to wake up from which is why the Matrix was redesigned" (The Matrix). In *Tron: Legacy* the creator was obsessed with the idea of perfection, so much so that he ended up creating a tyrannical software-based dictator

named Clue that oppressed the freedom of the people to uphold the perfect image. Finally, the city featured in *Inception* is not real and created by imagination, but borrowed elements of our society. However, the cities created were littered with dystopian elements including agents trying to kill the characters and their destruction when the dreamer realized that this seemingly perfect place was unreal. The characters all set out on a mission to create a utopian city, borrowing ideas from our modern substructures but they all collapsed into dystopias.

So, does a utopia have to be flawed by nature in order to be livable? We see a common trend that a 'perfect utopia' is a place that one does not want to live in. This idea can be seen in other literature, such as *Candide*. *Candide*, in the story, stumbles upon El Dorado, but quickly grows bored because of the lack of conflict. However, Utopia is a perfect place, and is something that we strive for. By definition, it seems that to create a perfect place, you must create a harmony of conflict and peace. This is the goal that The Architect strives for in his creation of the second matrix. However, this matrix fails as well. It seems that a utopia is specific to the wishes and ideals of the individual. In that regard, it could be said that a utopian society could only succeed if each person held identical beliefs. This could be the reason behind a utopia often establishing a fascist or controlling government. Nevertheless, a controlling government will eventually cause civil unrest in its society, as it is impossible to force a community to have identical beliefs.

The creation of Imaginary Cities in *Tron: Legacy*, *Inception*, and *The Matrix* are similar to those of modern day cities in that we are constantly striving for perfection. This perfectionism is evidenced by our workaholic natures and the ideal of "limitless potential for improvement" (Rubedo 47). However, our constant need to reach this perfection is what ends up being the greatest obstacle of the film's protagonists. The cities that are created are based on theoretical

facets of real cities. Some ideas they adopted are beneficial such as complex infrastructure, practical architecture, and accessible transportation. However, additional of harsh governmental, social, and technological implications led to horrible outcomes. The process of balancing these ideals is indicative to the construction of real cities. The films revealed a pessimistic element to foreshadow to what our cities will look like in the near future. “What is a good city? We are unlikely to arrive at an unequivocal answer; the diversity of human needs and tastes frustrates all attempts to provide recipes or instruction manuals for the building of cities... a vital city successfully fulfills the biological needs of its inhabitants and provides a safe environment for their activities.” (Ellis 8-9) *The Matrix* is an extremely flawed society based on imprisonment of its citizens to protect them from reality. The city of *Inception* is created for quick accessibility of information but their reality becomes polluted with false perception. The Grid in *Tron: Legacy* is taken over by Flynn in his hopes to build a utopia but what he comes to realize was that it was the imperfections of the Grid that generated its success and freedom.

The analysis of these imaginary cities prove that while some features of modern cities are practical and progressive; when we try to create the perfect city with what we believe to be “perfect,” it is those elements that end up destroying us. Extracting the “best” pieces of reality and molding them into developing the perfect utopian city seems without flaw; though undeniably it is these realistic bits that are wild cards, and will inevitably falter. It is human nature. Nothing can remain perfect because of this. *Tron: Legacy*, *The Matrix*, and *Inception* grasp this so well, and on such different and perplexing levels-- as do all utopian films: the future of achieving perfection looks grim. So how does one create the perfect imaginary city? These three films are advocators that this is purely impossible-- there will always be both human, and now, technological error that will always triumph over attempted perfection.

