



Futuristic Urban Images in Dystopian Science Fiction Movies “Space Sweepers” And “Elysium”

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Abstract

The cinematographic narrative method presents the changes and transformations in urban life with a critical approach, and solutions to the future urban problems are investigated in a different discipline. Thus, the present study aimed to compare and analyze Space Sweepers and Elysium based on urban and social elements included in these movies to reflect on futuristic urban representations in movies. The two films share a future where the consequences of the climate crisis is experienced in societies with a wide gap between the social classes. Based on the visual narrative employed in the movies, the concept of livable city was redefined, and future problems were investigated based on the relationship between the human and life. In the paper, futuristic urban representations were analyzed based on the transformations in the dystopian narrative. It was determined that while the transformation could lead to positive outcomes in human life, it could render the cities less livable, lead to social distances, isolate individuals, alter and transform the concept of urban spaces, which would be dominated by digital technologies.

Keywords: *Dystopia, urban image, futuristic urban representations, movies*

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Distopik Bilim Kurgu Sinemasında Geleceğin Kent İmajlarının “Space Sweepers” ve “Elysium” Filmi Üzerinden Okunması

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Öz

Sinematografik anlatı yöntemiyle insanlara kentlerde yaşanan değişim ve dönüşümler eleştirel bir yaklaşımla sunulurken, kentlerin geleceğiyle ilgili sorunlara farklı bir disiplin vasıtasıyla çözüm aranmaktadır. Bu düşünceden yola çıkarak, sinemada geleceğin kent temsillerini oluşturmak amacıyla Space Sweepers ve Elysium filmleri içerdikleri kent ve sosyal alanlar bağlamında karşılaştırılmış ve analiz edilmiştir. İki filmin ortak noktası, iklim krizinin yaşandığı ve toplumsal sınıf arasındaki uçurumun giderek açıldığı bir gelecek temsilidir. Her iki film de benzer distopik anlatı yöntemini kullanarak, çarpık bir düzen, otoriter bir mutlak güç ve sınıf ayrımının yaşandığı toplumu, hayatta kalma mücadelesini, bir başkaldırı ve yeniden doğuş senaryolarıyla izleyicilere sunmaktadır. Buna karşı, geleceğin yaşanabilir kenti, doğayı ve bilimi temsil etmektedir. Elde edilen veriler doğrultusunda her iki filmde de oluşturulan kentlerin, distopik evreni temsil ettiği görülmüştür. Filmlerdeki görsel anlatı biçiminden yola çıkılarak yaşanabilir kent kavramı yeniden tanımlanmış, gelecekte oluşabilecek sorunlar insan-yaşam ilişkisi bağlamında araştırılmıştır. Bu makale, geleceğin kent temsillerini distopik anlatı yöntemiyle dönüşüm bağlamında incelemektedir. Bu dönüşümün insan hayatında olumlu sonuçlara neden olabileceği gibi, kentleri yaşanabilir olmaktan uzaklaştırabileceği, sosyal kopukluklara yol açabileceği, insanları yalnızlaştırabileceği, kent kavramını değiştirip dönüştürebileceği, dijital teknolojinin kentsel mekanlara hakim olacağı öngörülerinin çoğunlukta olduğu tespit edilmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Distopya, kentsel imaj, geleceğin kent temsilleri, sinema*

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Introduction

Transformation could be described as taking a different form than the previous one, entering a different situation, or changing shape (Dictionary, 1989). Urban transformation could be described as circumstantial or formal changes in spatial and social urban forms. In the literature, urban transformation was associated with the improvement of environmental and social conditions to design and plan livable cities (Milner, 2005, p.32).

Urbanism has been associated with several disciplines (Bumin, 2010, p.11), the concept was introduced by the urbanization observed during the industrial revolution, and globalization led to rapid changes in the relations that determined the status of current cities. Globalization led to certain changes in the factors that determine urban development (Pike, 2005, p.258). Globalization accelerated in the 19th century, introducing several problems. Urban population density aggravated urban supply problems, irregular urbanization, and inadequate green area stock. The climate crisis is anthropogenic in nature and aggravated by the increase in population density (Tally, 2013, p.10). Environmental problems lead to global problems such as deforestation and loss of biodiversity (Grimmond, 2005, p.83). Over time, population growth and building density accelerated urban transformation due to the climate crisis and environmental problems. Urban transformation aims to improve the quality of life and plan and design livable cities. Although urban transformation is thought to aim to increase the quality of life and plan and design livable cities, studies (Erman, 1997, p, 345; Harvey, 1978, p.125) argue that this judgment is debatable.

It could be argued that a significant urban transformation has been observed on a global scale. Industrial revolution led to significant changes in human history, and destruction of cities during wars led to a need for reconstruction and transformation.

The majority of the world population lives in cities, leading to various problems and a requirement to transform the existing cities with a strategic approach. Strategic planning requirements introduced the concepts of "healthy city" and "sustainable urban development". A healthy city should include all urban elements and adopt changes that would improve the quality of life and contribute to human health to achieve a livable urban environment (Başaran, 2008). The concept of sustainable city that entails

social, economic, and environmental planning emphasizes the protection of the natural environment with an ecological approach (Kocalar, 2018, p.136). Sustainable urban development aims to solve the problems associated with the climate crisis and other environmental problems, improve the quality of life by protecting natural resources, and build livable cities for future generations (Anıl, 2005, p.7). These approaches led to research and discussions on livability (Ekşi & Baz, 2019, p.71) as the cities underwent major transformations. A livable city is an urban environment that improves and ensures continuous lives of the citizens in the environment based on equality and accessibility (Kayır, 2007, p.561). Livability is a quite comprehensive concept. Simply, it could be described as life satisfaction induced by quality of life, health, comfort, and good relations (Serag El Din et al., 2013, p.86).

Urban design requires innovation and imagination. This creative discipline has been influenced by the predictions depicted in science fiction movies. Dystopian movies have always criticized the current lifestyle. The present study aimed to discuss the urban transformations in futuristic dystopian urban images depicted in science fiction movies, namely *Space Sweepers* and *Elysium*, to determine the dynamics in current cities that face rapid transformation and find solutions to potential problems. The concepts of dystopia and urban image are described in the context of urban transformation, and the potential problems associated with the relationship between humans and life are investigated based on the visual narrative employed in the movies.

The concepts of dystopia, urban image and livable city were defined based on the literature review, and the views that supported these concepts in science fiction movies associated with urban transformation are discussed. The study hypothesized that dystopian universes in science fiction movies were the representations of future cities. Dystopian science fiction movies that dealt with futuristic urban scenarios are quite important to determine the dynamics in current cities that undergo rapid transformation and solve potential problems. Thus, the envisaged urban representations were analyzed based on the presented urban images and questions such as;

* How the dystopian urban representations were fictionalized in science fiction movies?

*Did all movies that included dystopian urban representations have a common form?

*Could this form theoretically reproduce urban images of dystopian worlds or suggest livable spaces in an alternative world?

* Do the visual images support this construct? and visual descriptions were analyzed. It was determined that most predictions claimed that future cities could not be livable, lead to social problems, isolate individuals, change and transform urban concepts, and digital technologies could dominate urban spaces.

The term dystopia was initially included in the Oxford English dictionary in 1868 by John Stuart Mill to describe an imagined chaotic system or conditions (Ruesen, et al., 2022). Dystopia describes the problems associated with a certain period (Doxiadis, 1996) and the current time rather than the future. Dystopia presents a pessimistic and worrisome future and social problems in dystopian constructs and movies. Thus, dystopian oeuvres aim to raise awareness and confront the society with the facts.

Dystopian predictions are common in movies. Moving pictures were discovered in late 19th century, rapidly improved, and became popular all over the world. Cities became indispensable parts of movies and led to the development of several movements and theories through cinematographic narrative methods. As they presented urban life, they managed to leave significant marks on social memory (Sönmez, 2022, p.56).

Cities are spatial constructs determined by the accumulation of environmental, social and cultural values throughout history (Mumford, 2016). Movies are an art form that employs cities as a background, Movies are an art movement that reflected urban spaces, especially the public spaces that historically defined the urban environment. Over time, movies and cities have established a visual relationship, and urban spaces have been used in movies to reflect the social and physical conditions of the period. This could also be done by creating fictional cities or depicting real ones (Bayrakçı, 2014, p.26).

There is a strong bond between the city and the movies, which guide one another physically and socially (Oktuğ, 2008, p.117). Cinema is an urban art and its existence depends on an urban environment. Movies have been interested in and described the history, the present and the future of cities (Akkuş, 2008, p.14). In the relationship between cinema and city, the influence of cities on movies is as important as the movie characters (Şahin, 2010, p.21).

The traces of the changes experienced by the city throughout history have been addressed by the movies, and the latter include significant historical data on cities. Introduction of the urban image through movies raises public interest in the city and arouses curiosity. The viewer could read the urban image presented in the movies and recognize the physical and social urban condition via the architectural elements in the movies (Bayrakçı, 2014, p. 29). Urban image is the visual quality of a city. It defines the city, distinguishes it from other cities, and makes citizens to make sense of the city and accept it as an entity based on the presented urban elements (Lynch, 2010, p.153).

The need for a social live led to migration and rapid urban growth over time, and acceleration of urbanization led to certain environmental and social problems in addition to scarcity of urban resources. These problems initiated the transformation efforts that aimed urban reconstruction to find solutions (Akkar, 2006, p.29). These efforts that affected the urban image were reflected in urban space designs and accelerated especially after the 80s (Aslanoğlu, 2000, p.1111).

Image is a reflection of an object in individuals' minds (Dowling, 1986, p.109). The looks of a city is the first impression about that city. The image formed in minds of the individuals about a city determines the image of that city (Engez, 2007). Urban image differentiates a particular city and distinguishes it from other cities (Oğurlu, 2014, p.373). Environmental and social urban changes could affect the urban image positively or negatively (Gül, 2013, p.25). Futuristic urban scenarios, especially those featured in dystopian science fiction movies, are about current urban dynamics that undergo rapid transformation and change. Light and color are spatial construction elements that play a key role in the dystopian urban image. Unidentified urban spaces create a perception of an abandoned city.

In dystopian movies, the scale and absolute power employed to represent the metaphors of the system are emphasized on the urban plane depicted as the new habitat. The dystopian city is experienced on the urban plane. The increase in building heights leads to an unrealistic difference between the scale of the individuals and the buildings, the absolute power becomes a perception of oppression by the urban space, underlining the alienation and solitude of the citizens in social spaces.

It is quite important to determine futuristic urban representations in dystopian science fiction movies to find solutions to potential problems. Elysium was shot by Neill Blomkamp in 2013, and Space Sweepers was

shot by Sung-Hee Jo in 2021. These movies are two successful examples of dystopian science fiction. Elysium and Space Sweepers foresaw urban representations of the post-21st century. In both films, urban representations were projected via dystopian urban images with hierarchical depictions and visuals divided by two groups: lower class and upper class.

Method

The study material included two science fiction movies, 'Elysium,' a movie produced in the US in 2013, and 'Space Sweepers' produced in South Korea in 2021 that included dystopian urban representations. The present study aimed to search for the idea of urban dystopia and futuristic urban images. Thus, the components of dystopian construct were categorized as color, light, scale and form, and these components were associated with social areas based on social class distinction, inequality, authority, absolute power, alienation, and solitude. Dystopian urban analyses were conducted based on the dystopian urban components depicted in Space Sweepers and Elysium.

Findings

The common dystopian aspect of science fiction movies was based on the idea that the world would become uninhabitable for various reasons. The idea that the working class would be ignored and wealthy individuals would live in sheltered and healthy quarters is a dominant approach in dystopian science fiction movies (Ünver, 2016, p.865). Thus, the South Korean film Space Sweepers and the US movie Elysium, which were dystopian urban representations that depicted urban space and social life were analyzed. The movies on the current world with a pessimistic narrative present an abandoned, dilapidated urban image where multi-story high-rise buildings and skyscrapers are covered by fog, demonstrating the dystopian aspect of the city.

The movie Space Sweepers, where the sky and the earth were no longer visible in a borderless city, reflects the consequences of an urban space due to further increase in population density, which is currently a significant global problem. The movie depicted a new human habitat built on orbit

as people searched for a new habitat in the space, and it begins with the views of an uninhabitable city covered by fog, darkness, and toxic gases (Figure 1). The first dystopian reference was the name of the UTS corporation and an image of the transfer vehicle. This reference presaged a dystopia defined by an oppressive absolute power. The dystopian image indicated a functional and unchangeable habitat. The movie continued with the image of masked individuals that reflected hopelessness as seen in several dystopias where the power to exercise the right to live freely and happily is under the monopoly of the government. These individuals were space station workers ruled by the absolute power. The working class was not accepted in living spaces and struggled to survive without raising a voice in that dystopian universe. It was conveyed with dark and gray tones. One of the dimensions that contributed to the movie's dystopian construct was the technical elements. South Korean director Sung-hee Jo, who constructed a pessimistic future, achieved this with impressive audiovisual effects. The unsettling atmosphere of the future was enforced by foggy views and scenes where it was not possible to go out without a mask.



Figure 1. Urban Image in *Space Sweepers* (Reference: [https:// www.lendyagasshi.com/2021/02/review-film-korea-space-sweepers.html](https://www.lendyagasshi.com/2021/02/review-film-korea-space-sweepers.html))

The most important aspect of the movie's dystopian construct was undoubtedly the urban image. In the movie, the city truly integrated the pessimistic depiction of the future and increased the credibility of the movie. The movie depicted high-rises and magnificent buildings in capitalism. These magnificent buildings represented global power and domination.

However, the contribution of the urban space to the dystopian narrative was emphasized by the global warming-induced disasters. People desired to reach the mega structure in orbit as a new habitat, not the urban skyscrapers. The urban image was not quite perceptible due to air pollution (Figure 2). The fog that surrounded architectural structures restricted the view and blurred the urban fabric. Furthermore, the presence of people with different nationalities indicated an opposition to the monotony and class differences in the dystopia.



Figure 2. Urban Image in *Space Sweepers* (Reference: <https://www.darksidereviews.com/film-space-sweepers-de-jo-sung-hee-2021/>)

In *Space Sweepers*, the newest urban image included the monumental elevator that connected the space habitat in the orbit and the world (Figure 3). The elevator that carried people from the Earth to the habitat in orbit demonstrated that a new habitat was created in space. The most distinctive feature of the habitat was its resemblance to a flat earth. The presence of nature in that habitat was noteworthy. Unlike the abandoned earth, a balance was established between nature and humans.



Figure 3. Monumental Elevator in The Movie Space Sweepers (Reference: <https://twitter.com/ToughSf/status/1394216123202109441/photo/2>)

Space Sweepers depicted the space in 2092. The earth has become uninhabitable due to the climate crisis. The absence of forests led to depletion of oxygen, and humans started the search for a new habitat in space. UTS Corporation built a new habitat in orbit. Only 5% of the global population was accepted into the UTS habitat. This new habitat was an ecological space that included plants and trees (Figure 4). The movies employed all facilities available in science fiction and questions the effects of virtualization on urban space due to technological advances. The movie's dystopian vision was reflected in the artificial habitat that was based on the correlation between technology and cities of the future.



Figure 4. The Novel Habitat in Space Sweepers (Reference: <https://karasaga.com/space-sweepers/>)

The dystopian authority was the UTS corporation. People are ruled by absolute power in an oppressive environment in dystopias. The dystopian world was reflected in the nature, dominated by green, available in the new habitat in orbit (Figure 5). Thus, the audience witness the transition from a dystopian universe to a habitable universe. The new habitat, which included colorful nature and flowing rivers, forests and trees, resembled a flat earth. The new habitat no longer reflected the grey, dark and foggy universe and replaced it by a colorful, healthy environment.



Figure 5. The New Habitat in Space Sweepers (Reference: <https://www.artstation.com/artwork/zOoan6>)

The urban spaces, which reflect the society of the future used in the movie, were created by various images to reflect the fictional world. Space Sweepers, which reflects an urban image with population growth and certain class problems, clarified the border between science fiction and dystopia and created a unique technological dystopia. The dystopian elements that entail the social dimension included alienation, loss of social communication and loneliness in the movie.

Elysium, set in 2154, portrayed a densely populated and uninhabitable urban image, similar to Space Sweepers (Figure 6). One of the elements that best reflected the dystopian construct of the movie was the urban view. In the movie, the urban image of the future was depicted with a pessimistic approach. People preferred the space station to the city.



Figure 6. Urban Image in Elysium (Reference: <https://www.bilimkurgukulubu.com/sinema/elysium-sosyal-eko-elestiri/>)

While urban population tried to survive poverty and disease, the rich and powerful elite constructed a habitat in orbit outside the Earth's atmosphere to live there. The orbiting space station Elysium represented a new urban image (Figure 7). This new habitat was perfect ecologically. Delacourt represented absolute power in Elysium. Access to the space station was possible via space shuttles controlled by the Minister of Defense, Delacourt.

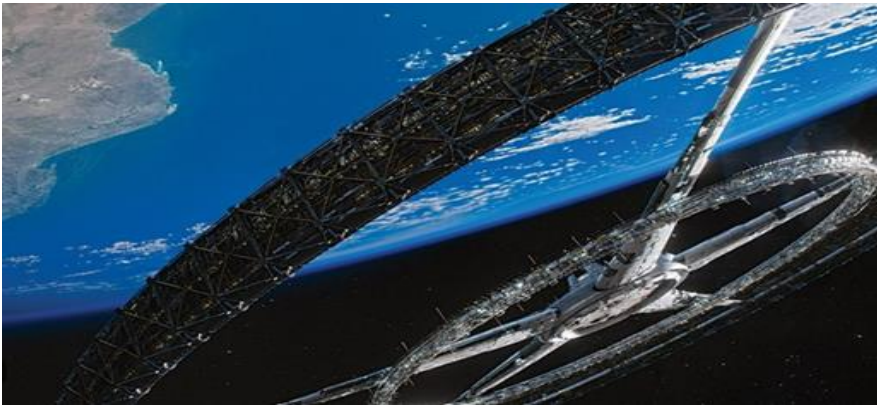


Figure 7. New Habitat in Elysium (Reference: https://www.archdaily.com.br/br/760982/cinemaarquitecturaelysium/54ac46b3e58ece186f000019?next_project=no)

The space station represented power and sovereignty. The movie continued with a scene where the working class was controlled by robots, indicating despair, prevalent in several dystopias, where the power to exercise the right of freedom and happiness monopolized by the government. The movie included dystopian elements such as alienation and solitude, where the working and elite classes were separated, reflecting a social dimension. The dystopian universe was dominated by grey, and the right of the people who struggled with diseases to freedom was taken away. These depictions supported the dystopian construct of the movie.

The dystopian universe portrayed an ecologically devastated city, inhabited by poor and sick people. Elysium, on the other hand, was an artificial paradise where a small number of selected individuals lived without worry (Figure 8).



Figure 8. The Artificial Paradise in Elysium (Reference: <https://www.archdaily.com.br/br/760982/cinmaearquiteturaelysium/54b02825e58ece9827000002>)

In the movie, every individual's dream is to reach Elysium, the new habitat, to survive and escape from poverty and disease. However, the transition from the dystopian universe to the habitable universe was quite difficult and the absolute power did not allow it.

Conclusion

The present article critically analyzed futuristic urban images. In the study, the association between science fiction movies and the city was in-

vestigated, and urban representations in science fiction movies were comparatively analyzed based on dystopian narrative methods. The cities constructed in science fiction movies play are significant reflections of the urban image. The movies offer a different approach to urban transformation and allow us comment on social developments. In science fiction movies, futuristic urban predictions represent modern society's dystopian acceptances in the future. These predictions, which could come true in the near future, are quite convincing since search for new habitats is popular currently.

Historically, 80% of the movies depicted urban representations. The most important correlation between movies and the city is the urban image. Movies allow individuals to perceive the cities and imprint these images in their memories. This is how movies promote cities (Barber, 2002, p.14).

The need for a livable world and transformation led to the idea of creating new cities. Planning and analysis of this process require a review of urban planning and the definition of the city. Movies make this environment visible. Future society and cities require a comprehensive investigation of the combined components of this new urban image.

The main aim of the present article was to raise awareness by discussing the urban problems of the postmodern world through the concept of dystopian urban images (Jameson, 2007, p.265) in movies where habitats were constructed in orbit. The present study argued that the analysis of dystopian cities could provide a new method to determine environmental factors, analyze urban dynamics, and rebuilding cities. Dystopian science fiction movies, especially the recent movies, envisioned livable, clean cities that were built anew to replace existing cities. Technology and absolute power were predominant in these novel habitats since the previous urban spaces have been destroyed with the rest of the world.

The data collected with the analysis of science fiction movies could also address the correlation between dystopian urban predictions and the society. This correlation was analyzed based on absolute power, alienation and solitude. Urban image was analyzed based on color, light, scale, and form. The analysis of *Space Sweepers* and *Elysium* allowed us to determine the effects of the dystopian urban construct on the citizens. Dystopia is the reality of today. As the movies depict this reality, they utilize urban image as a tool of alienation and solitude. In dystopian movies, the city was depicted as uninhabitable and buried under environmental problems,

and citizens are in conflict with absolute power to survive. The city looked ruined, foggy, and desperate. The city is obscure and the relationship between the urban space and individuals are broken.

Movies are important since they could document and promote cities and provide an idea about the future. They are urban documents. Thus, they could also offer solutions to past and future problems.

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