

Dystopoi of Memory and Invention:

The Rhetorical “Places” of Postmodern Dystopian Film

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In her introduction to *The Left Hand of Darkness*, the renowned American science fiction novelist Ursula K. Le Guin (2010) rallies a series of provocations around one central refrain: “Science fiction is not predictive; it is descriptive” (p. xiv). Through its futuristic confabulations, sci-fi deliberately “lies” in order to get at some “truth” about the present; its concerns, though typically projected into an imagined future, stem from “what the weather is now, today, this moment, the rain, the sunlight, look!” (pp. xiv, xv). Le Guin’s imploring directive, *look!*, voices no transcendent, romantic imperative of the genre. It doesn’t ask readers to lift the veil of mystification or to finally see the capital-T truth for the first time. Rather, sci-fi as Le Guin understands it asks readers to perceive how fabrications, the genre’s “lies,” refract the light of quotidian life into new shapes with new contours of significance. Sci-fi matters, in other words, not for its ability to create an entirely novel alternate universe, but for its ability to *reassemble* our own present in an illuminating way. This art—the purposeful assembly of available cultural

material into a persuasive whole—significantly resembles what rhetoricians since Aristotle have termed invention. Generally regarded as the primary and conceptually richest of the five canons of rhetoric (the others are arrangement, style, delivery, and—finally, an oft-neglected category I take up here—memory), invention describes the artful composition of cultural knowledge and rhetorical appeals to suit a specific argument before a specific audience.¹ Aristotle (1997), for example, devotes two of the three books of his *Rhetoric* to the processes of invention, which he describes through various devices and strategies: appeals to *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*; deductive enthymemes; inductive examples; and rhetorical *topoi* (literally “places”; topics; loci), which can be classified as discipline-specific “special” premises (*idia*) or “common” procedures (*koinoi topoi*) used to generate arguments across diverse circumstances. Here, I single out this final concept, the *topos*, as particularly useful in investigating not just invention, but the multimodal nexus of memory and invention.

¹ This definition is my own approximation of an amorphous and contested term. For a useful

bibliographic synthesis of rhetorical invention, see Simonson (2014).

In this essay I configure the rhetorical *topos* as useful tool in the study of narrative fiction film—and particularly dystopian sci-fi film—in order to analyze how film rhetoric draws credibility and connotative rhetorical power from its construction of place. Below, I examine the rhetoric of dystopian space, whose “places” constitute both memetic representations of our world gone wrong and rhetorical “places” (*topoi*) rich in persuasive power. These two senses of place, one traditionally poetical and the other traditionally rhetorical, irrevocably overlap, especially through the medium of film, the rich visual texture of which powerfully orients audiences both within poetical, memetic space and within the persuasive, ideological structures of meaning-making more traditionally assigned to rhetoric. Here, I take up this dualistic sense of rhetorical *topoi* to examine the persuasive dimensions of three dystopian sci-fi films from what film scholar Vivian Sobchack (2005) has called the second “Golden Age” of American sci-fi film (p. 267)—*Alien* (Scott, 1979), *Outland* (Hyams, 1981), and *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982)—each of which exemplifies the complex and difficult patchwork of postmodern spatial composition, and all of which share visual textures that could imply a common narrative universe across the three films. I focus on two particular genres of “place”

that recur in these films: first, what I call the *technological swamp*, or the expansive bricolage of high-tech detail, excess, and waste that implies decay and neglect; and second, the *clinic*, or the overlit surveillance site that implies oppressive, panoptic oversight. Below, I detail how each genre of dystopian place—or *dystopos*—powerfully imbues its narratives with ideological, rhetorical energy, capable of implying and enhancing social arguments. I argue, finally, that the rhetorical coexistence of these *dystopoi* exemplifies the heterogenous complexity of postmodern spatial argument, which one can rarely boil down to a single text posing a single argument.

This essay also notably contributes to an area of study, the rhetoric of film, historically characterized by intermittent interest but general scholarly neglect. While a few rhetoricians, like David Blakesley (in English studies) and Thomas W. Benson (in communication), have repeatedly returned to this topic, film rhetoric has failed to cohere as a consistent subdiscipline of multimodal rhetorical study.² I suspect, though, that mounting interest in multimodal rhetorics as such (without de facto subservience to new media studies or digital rhetorics in particular) could rejuvenate rhetoricians’ interest in film, which—in the era of Netflix and IMAX—remains a potent,

² This is not to say that work on the rhetoric of film is altogether lacking. It is beyond the scope of this essay to supply a thoroughgoing bibliography on the rhetoric of film, but interested scholars might begin with Blakesley’s (2003) wide-ranging edited collection *The Terministic Screen*. Other particularly notable applications of classical

and modern rhetorical theory to film and television include Hendrix & Wood (1973); Behrens (1979); Chatman (1990); Booth (2002); Blakesley (2004); Benson & Snee (2008). See Wetherbee (2015) for another application of the term *topos* to film analysis and Gunn (2005) for a more general examination of visual *topoi*.

influential medium of cultural production. I hope this essay contributes to such a resurgence.

Below, before turning to a specific examination of *Alien*, *Outland*, and *Blade Runner*, I find it necessary to reflect on how the rhetorical study of dystopian space reflects both (1) the intersection between rhetorical (persuasive) and poetical (literary, mimetic) discourses and (2) that between invention and the long-neglected canon of memory. I then turn these critical pairings toward the topic of cinematic dystopian space seen in dystopian film.

Rhetoric, Poetics, and Epideixis

As many historians of rhetoric have noted, the schism between poetics and rhetoric—which mirrors both the disciplinary split between English and communication studies and, within English, the intradisciplinary split between literature and rhetoric/composition—is a fairly new phenomenon. In the words of George A. Kennedy (1999), “poetics can be regarded as parallel to and overlapping with rhetoric” in antiquity; both concern style, generic convention, and appeals to character and emotion (pp. 135-136). In the *Poetics*, Aristotle (2009) prescribes that, in the composition and performance of drama, rhetorical knowledge should dictate how playwrights represent and

emotionally package key social issues (19.1456b). While, as Aristotle explains, poetics dramatizes social events and rhetoric comments on those events through direct speech (19.1456b), both arts require an intimate familiarity with cultural *doxa* and the emotional predispositions of one’s audience toward certain ideas and events (cf. Burke, 1966, p. 296). But, as Kenneth Burke stresses, this distinction between overt argumentation and dramatization rarely yields neat boundaries: the distinction is “forever on the move” (1966, p. 307). Anecdotes and didactic narratives, one might point out, often dramatize events in service of overt argument, while literary genres like the novel integrate numerous rhetorical forms into their discursive fiber.³

Put another way, ancient purveyors of liberal education might have perceived the ostensibly hard-and-fast present-day distinction between rhetorical genres (the political speech, essay, advertisement, etc.) and poetical genres (the novel, poem, film, etc.) as artificially rigid.⁴ Here, the ancient category of epideictic rhetoric merits especial attention. In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle (2007) offers a tripartite taxonomy of rhetorical orations: *deliberative*, political speech concerning future of the polis; *judicial*, courtroom speech demonstrating a forensic under-

³ Numerous critical discussions of the rhetoric of poetics now exist, but Bakhtin (2004) and Booth (1983) provide two paradigmatic and particularly useful examples. Bakhtin focuses on the novel as the artistic arrangement of rhetorical forms like the letter, speech, and so forth, while Booth (and Chatman [1990], by extension) discusses the

dynamics of textual authority between authors and readers. I believe the rheto-poetical study of space I advocate here could supplement both perspectives.

⁴ For latter-day speculation about reintegrating rhetoric and poetics, see, for example, Crowley (1985-1986); Berlin (2003); Bialostosky (2016).

standing of the past; and *epideictic*, or ceremonial speech concerned largely with, but not properly limited to, the praise and blame of individuals and values in order to firm up a sense of cultural community in the present (1.3.1358a-59a). But the concept of *epideixis*, as Jeffrey Walker (2000) has argued, should be understood not as courtly pomp, subordinate to the more hard-headed genres of deliberation and forensics, but rather expanded wholesale into “the rhetoric of belief and desire,” that which “establishes and mnemonically sustains the culturally authoritative codes of values and the paradigms of eloquence from which . . . pragmatic discourse . . . derives its ‘precedents,’ its language, and its power” (p. 10). By Walker’s estimation, the pragmatic genres of deliberative and judicial rhetoric are “secondary” and depend upon “primary” epideictic rhetorics of cultural sustenance and reproduction (p. 10). In a courtroom defense of, say, a man who slew his daughter’s murderer, the litigator might draw from the stock archetypes of masculinity and familial bond sustained through diverse rhetorics of epideixis that praise the individual masculine avenger as an agent of justice.

This robust and inclusive version of epideixis, Walker notes, accounts also for everything modernity has categorized as “literature” (p. 7)—to which we can now rightly add quasi-literary narrative media like film, television, and video games. (To

rehash the example above, nothing in present American culture valorizes the rogue masculine hero more effectively than the epideictic rhetoric of video games.) Such “dramatizations” of social values may not argue before a “decider” or an electorate in the tradition of pragmatic rhetoric (Walker, 2000, p. 10), but they do epideictically sustain certain values and archetypes through their narratives, perpetuating a storehouse of rhetorical knowledge vital to the rhetorician. This storehouse is made up of *topoi*, which provide, as I describe below, charged nodes of discourse that orient audiences within the shared vista of cultural memory.

It follows that utopian and dystopian narratives constitute subgenres of epideictic rhetoric, where rhetorical and poetical expression intermingle. Typically, these genres already read as more overtly rhetorical (or political) than most other literature. It takes few intellectual gymnastics, that is, to bracket the frankly political and persuasive dimensions of prototypical utopias⁵ like Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia* and Francis Bacon’s *The New Atlantis*, modernist utopias like Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*, William Morris’s *News from Nowhere*, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland*, or their modernist dystopian counterparts like E.M. Forster’s “The Machine Stops,” Yevgeni Zamyatin’s *We*, Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, George Orwell’s *1984*, and Fritz Lang’s landmark

⁵ On the various classifications of utopia and dystopia, see Booker (1994); Moylan (200); Baccolini & Moylan (2003); Jameson (2007).

film *Metropolis*. Such narratives follow a version of what Burke (1968) terms “syllogistic” form, following, or at least mimicking, the progression of “a perfectly conducted argument, advancing step by step” (p. 124). Much like deliberative rhetoric, these narratives fix one eye on the future, demonstrating explicitly (by way of a fictional historical narrative) or half-explicitly (by strongly implying such a narrative) how present social circumstances could be adapted for a more desirable future or warped into a disastrous one.

But the similarity is limited. As Marlana Portolano (2012) writes, more than that of the deliberative, utopia and dystopia are “most pervasively . . . the playground of epideictic persuasion,” that which praises some present circumstances and eschews others (p. 118). (One might say utopias generally deal in praise and dystopias in blame—though praise of one ideal implies the blame of another, and vice versa.) True to Le Guin’s insistence that speculative fiction most centrally concerns “today’s” climate, even the most didactically precise utopias and dystopias probably contribute to the storehouses of rhetorical knowledge that dictate attitudes toward the present more than they provide a literal, deliberative route to the future. And when one shifts focus to the messy, fragmentary dystopias to center

not what these texts methodically “argue” for the future but postmodernity, as I do below, the questions for rhetoricians increasingly take up how they assemble an imaginary but intelligible future from the available places (*topoi*) of the present.

Invention and Memory

To better understand the rhetoric of dystopian space, one can consider rhetorical canons of invention and memory in tandem. The classical art of memory, or mnemonics, describes a disciplined system speakers could use to navigate long orations without external aid, by traversing an imaginary set of places (*loci* in the Latin texts) that associatively guide the speaker’s train of thought.⁶ Variations of this system remain highly effective for those willing to commit to their rigors, but the modern proliferation of print resources—not to mention the Internet—has long reduced mnemonics to more or less a historical curiosity. In ancient Roman treatises on rhetoric, however, the canon of memory receives sustained attention as a requisite feature of rhetorical education. The anonymous author of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* ([Cicero], 1999) explains how orators should concoct a path of distinct “places” among which are arranged symbolically significant “images” (3.16). The “image” metonymically represents subject of one’s oration—the orator

definitive twentieth-century historical study of memory places between antiquity and the Enlightenment. See also Jameson’s (1991) brief commentary on Yates in relation to modernism and postmodernism (p. 154).

⁶ My use of memory *loci* extends more-or-less directly from its discussion in Roman handbooks of rhetoric; thus I refer directly to the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* ([Cicero], 1999) and Quintilian’s *Institutio Oratio* (2002) here. It bears note, though, that Yates’s *The Art of Memory* (1999) remains the

might, for example, imagine a lion or a crown to evoke the subject of the king, or royalty more generally—while the *loci* organize the images within the structure of the complete speech.

My contention here is the common use of the term *topos/locus* to theorize both Greco-Roman rhetorical invention and rhetorical memory is no mere etymological accident. To most fully appreciate the metaphorical scope of the term, we can return not to Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, but to his *Physics*, which offers Aristotle's fullest articulation of "place" as a concept (see Miller, 2000; Muckelbauer, 2008, pp. 123-141). There, Aristotle (1957) explains,

a "place" may be assigned to an object either primarily because it is its *special* and exclusive place or because it is "*common*" to it and all other things, or is the universal that includes the proper place of *all* things.

I mean, for instance, that you, at this moment, are in the universe because you are in the air, which air is in the universe; and in the air because on the earth; and in a like matter on the earth because on the *special* place which "contains and circumscribes you, and no other body." (4.2.31-36.209a-209b; emphasis to *special* and *common* added)

Two significant points arise: First, as Carolyn R. Miller (2000) has observed, Aristotle describes physical place in the same "common" and "special" terms by which he describes rhetorical *topoi* in the

Rhetoric; a concern with degree and scope characterizes Aristotle's thinking about literal and metaphorical places. Second, this sense of scope implies a basic function of *orientation*. Rather than the "matter" of a body, which takes no definite shape, or a body's "form," which determines the thing itself but not its location in space, "place" demarcates an object's location in relation to other significant locations (the atmosphere, the earth, the universe, etc.—but also the home, the polis, the nation) (Aristotle, 1957, 4.4.5-14.211b). Rhetorical "orientation," as Burke (1984) describes it, provides reference to "a bundle of judgments as to how things were, how they are, and how they will be" (p. 14). One can append this understanding of orientation to Aristotle's notes on "place" to suggest that rhetorical *topoi* are not just rote procedures or stock arguments, but devices that economically orient audiences among broader landscapes of significance within short discursive space.

While the two differ in express purpose, memory *loci* and *topoi* of invention function somewhat similarly along Burke's guidelines. As the *Ad Herennium* suggests, the "places" of memory provide a contextualizing apparatus for the denotative "images" they house, orienting speakers to the narrative arc of the oration, but also, conceivably, orienting them within a matrix of culturally determined imagery. Memory *loci*, the *Ad Herennium* tells us, should be "complete and conspicuous, so that we can grasp and embrace them easily by natural memory" (3.16). My impression is that

this “natural” memory—that which the orator summons without mnemonic practice—should be regarded also as a *cultural* memory insofar imagistic places find coherence only among the connotative totality of cultural knowledge. Though the *Ad Herennium* does not explicitly prescribe as much, one gathers that these “complete and conspicuous” backgrounds ought to thematically complement the denotative images they surround, orienting the speaker to the set of contextual knowledge to which the speech might refer. It is telling, further, that the Roman pedagogue Quintilian (2002) lists “public buildings” and “the ramparts of a city” among possible memory places, suggesting a further thematic link between memory and the iconography of civic life (6.2.20). In the Middle Ages, as Frances Yates (1999) reports, even the strata of Hell as illustrated in Dante’s *Inferno* were sometimes visualized as memory places designed to “hold in memory the scheme of salvation, and the complex network of virtues and vices and their rewards and punishments” (p. 95). The otherwise quite different examples of Quintilian and Dante each exploit the sense of cultural memory that imbues symbolically significant places.

It’s not terribly difficult to extend such thinking to the imaginary and secular, but no less culturally formative, examples of modernist dystopian space—the towering, tiered urban landscape of *Metropolis* (Lang, 1927), for example, or the joyless streets of *1984*’s Oceania (Orwell, 1977). Here, as in the classical memory place, space

becomes a logically ordered scaffold designed to symbolize a set of ideas or arguments—those regarding the social architecture of class hierarchy in *Metropolis*, or the oppressive faculties of the surveillance state in *1984*. But not all dystopias are so tidy. As Fredric Jameson (1991) contends, the “discontinuous spatial experience” of postmodernism scarcely permits such self-contained spatial logic, instead shuffling fragments of textualized space into a collage of diverse permutations that sum less easily to tight theses (p. 154). I contend here, however, that the effect of such postmodern fragmentation is not to nullify the memory places, but to revitalize the individual *topos* as the nexus of rhetorical invention and memory, a union traceable through films like *Alien*, *Outland*, and *Blade Runner*. That is, the selection and establishment of “place” in these movies constitutes a sort of epideictic invention by way of tapping into and reasserting the currents cultural memory.

Dystopoi in Three Postmodern Sci-Fi Films

There are certainly more recent dystopian sci-fi films I could discuss here—including numerous *Alien*-franchise entries of varying quality and 2017’s impressive *Blade Runner* sequel—but I single out *Alien*, *Outland*, and *Blade Runner* for this essay partly because all three characterize a sort of postmodern turn in sci-fi film, one more or less coincident with the onset of the “cyberpunk” movement and the reshuffling of dystopia into a genre more ambivalent and less didactic than its

modernist antecedents.⁷ As Sobchack (2005) notes, the cinematic era of the late '70s and early '80s—born of post-Vietnam introspection, the rise of second-wave feminism, and the mounting enthusiasm of Reagan-era industrialism—begat a new “Golden Age” of American sci-fi film imaginatively responding to a complex matrix of social tensions. *Alien*, *Outland*, and *Blade Runner* also share a set of aesthetic conventions manifested through spatial representation. Practically speaking, viewers could easily imagine that all three movies inhabit the same narrative universe because the three share a certain “look” and “mood.” Or, returning to Aristotle’s special-common distinction, one could put it this way: *Alien*, *Outland*, and *Blade Runner* each imply a single “common” universe insofar as all three films make use of special places, or *topoi*, that *orient* audiences to that larger universe as a contextual apparatus.

In another sense, these are three very different movies. While they all fit the bill of “science fiction,” their narratives inspire rather different generic classification. Ridley Scott’s *Alien* is the separate paradigmatic stuff of horror cinema, a tense, interstellar slasher flick wherein the titular alien picks off the crew of the starship *Nostromo* one by one until only Sigourney Weaver’s “final girl” remains. Writer-director Peter Hyams’s *Outland*, an underappreciated morality tale aptly describable as “*High Noon* in space,”

unfolds as a sort of futuristic Western, pitting Sean Connery’s lone lawman against a posse of mercenaries serving a sinister interplanetary mining corporation. And *Blade Runner*, also directed by Scott and loosely adapted from Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (2007; originally published 1968), is equal parts detective story and philosophical drama, a complex and visually striking film about the creation and policing of artificial human life (living androids dubbed “replicants”). The respective neo-horror, neo-Western, and neo-noir genre formations of these films, though, do not inhibit their common coherence as sci-fi—and, particularly, dystopian sci-fi. Sobchack (1997) helps to explain why. The essence of the American sci-fi film, for Sobchack, lies largely in its iconography—places, motifs, textures—which comprises set imagistic categories like the spaceship, the robot, or the futuristic city, that “function” similarly from film to film. Sci-fi iconography, she continues, generally establishes a tension between the “alien” and the “familiar”: “Although they may contain many alien images, isolated for wondrous effect, images which evoke the ‘unknown’ in all its scientific, magical, and religious or transcendental permutation, the films must obligatorily descend to Earth, to men, to the known, and to a familiar *mise en scene* if they are to result in *meaning* rather than the abstract inexplicability of

⁷ Despite my focus here on films from circa 1980, the recent *Blade Runner 2049* (Villeneuve, 2017)—which combines the *dystopoi* I here describe as the “swamp” and the “clinic” with other backdrops of

urban poverty and post-apocalyptic abandonment—merits further study in the vein of this essay.

being” (pp. 103-104).

Sobchack’s emphasis on “meaning” returns us to Le Guin’s present-day imperative—to the realm of lived social relations, rhetorical epideixis, and cultural memory. The iconographic tension between the alien and familiar maps approximately onto the image-*locus* distinction of the classical memory place. The alien, like the mnemonic “image,” calls attention to itself, announces its own exceptionalism against a less obtrusive backdrop. The mummified alien ship that the *Nostromo*’s crew in *Alien* discovers qualifies as basically “alien” by this criterion, as do H.R. Giger’s bloodthirsty xenomorph itself and the malevolent android Ashe (Ian Holm), whose inhumanity becomes terrifyingly apparent late in the film. Several occasions in *Outland*, meanwhile, see men burst like fleshy bubbles after stepping into depressurized space; this horrific and unexpected special effect announces our departure from Earth’s embrace and injects an alien element in an otherwise quite familiar narrative. And *Blade Runner*’s reimagination of Los Angeles punctuates a largely familiar portrait of urban decay with alien flourishes like flying cars and plumes of fire that ignite above the skyline—the distinction, here, between the familiar and alien resembling Roland Barthes’s (1981) own categories of

the *studium* and *punctum* in photographic images (pp. 25-28)—but the movie announces its own strangeness most markedly through Rutger Hauer’s intense, animalistic performance as Roy Batty, the ringleader of the renegade group of the “more human than human” replicants.

Such alien “images” are striking and often disturbing, but true to the example of ancient Roman mnemonics, they achieve narrative and ideological coherence only in a familiar context. Fitting this rhetorical function are a certain set of narrative *topoi*—that is, rhetorical “places” of invention and memory—that elicit the connotations necessary to evoke “dystopia.” Let us call them *dystopoi*—literally, *bad places*.⁸ The genres of evocative backgrounds that characterize different dystopian subgenres are many: those composing the vacant bombed-out cities and sparse landscapes of the post-apocalypse, the stratified *Metropolis* (Lang, 1927), the cloyingly hip and homogenous bubble-city of *Logan’s Run* (Anderson, 1976), and so on. The closer such spaces come to logically—or syllogistically, as Burke would say—dramatizing the “arguments” of their narratives, the tighter the connection becomes between the familiar and the alien, and the more the mnemonic “image” comes to appear a simple extension of its *dystopos*.

⁸ For another provocative use of this term, see Boyle and LeMieux’s “A Sustainable Dystopia” (2017), which configures *dystopoi* as technological “sites whose aim is to provide an experience of microruptures as a way to build up greater capacities” (p. 218)—that is, to purposefully encumber and disrupt traditional processes of

invention. Though Boyle and LeMieux also take inspiration from dystopian narrative, their use of *dystopos* as a critical term differs drastically from my own inasmuch as it engages only tangentially with the metaphor of place bound up in classical notions of invention and memory.

The distinction between these postmodern dystopias and their more didactic precursors is not absolute. As Sobchack (1997) notes, the spaces of *Alien*, *Outland*, and *Blade Runner* each represent, to one degree or another, the logic of multinational (or multiplanetary) capitalism, whereby a shadowy elite remotely controls production. Further, these movies represent, in the words of Thomas B. Byers (1987), a “commodity future” dominated by “high-tech corporate capitalism” and a consequent disregard for the humanity of the lower classes (p. 326). And the “commodity future” surely constitutes a dystopian subgenre. In *Alien*, the corporation that owns the *Nostramo* clearly values profitable discoveries over the safety of its crew, while the mining company in *Outland* supplies its workers on Jupiter’s moon Io with dangerous narcotics to increase productivity. *Blade Runner*, meanwhile, sees the very synthesis of human life for reasons of profit-driven exploitation. All three movies inhabit spaces that enable such politically charged subject matter, yet the narratives arcs themselves—the horror, Western, and detective plots—have nothing intrinsically to do with dystopia. These are not “syllogistically” dystopian narratives designed to lay out a point-by-point critique of industrial capitalism in the sense that something like Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1981; originally published in 1932) arguably is. Rather, postmodern dystopia represents more a matter of spatial connotation. I offer two genres of connotatively rich *dystopoi* seen in *Alien*, *Outland*, and *Blade Runner*.

The first I call the *technological swamp*. This *dystopos* entails a façade of intricate and unexplained technological detail coupled with dim lighting, confined spaces, and, usually, the implication of disrepair and neglect. The specific details themselves are familiar enough—pipes, ducts, smoke, leaking fluids, buttons and dials, computer screens, dirt, and clutter—but the sheer profusion of detail overwhelms viewers’ perception. As in the corridors of *Alien*’s *Nostramo* and *Outland*’s mining structure, the technological bricolage swells into an almost organic structure of metal bones and flesh that encircle the structures’ human occupants (see Figures 1 & 2). The low, shadowy lighting that marks the technological swamp *dystopos* also permits an aesthetic link to more characteristically neo-noir settings—the grimy, ribald bar and prostitution hall in *Outland*, or Rick Deckard’s (Harrison Ford) dusty, eerily lit flat in *Blade Runner*—that all feel part-and-parcel of the same dark, swollen monster.

Moreover, *Blade Runner*’s Los Angeles represents an explosion of the technological swamp across an entire urban vista. This city of perpetual night and drizzle appears, like the ceaseless urban sprawl of William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (1984), patched together from surfaces at once high-tech and cheap, its corners littered with garbage and scraps of expendable technology—the sort of insidious, self-multiplying junk that Dick (2007), in *Androids*, terms “kipple” (see Bukatman, 2009, pp. 42-63). It is telling that one of the replicants, Pris (Daryl Hannah), begins her plan to infiltrate the



Figure 1: The “technological swamp” as seen in the interior of *Alien*’s starship *Nostromo*.



Figure 2: The “swamp” displayed in *Outland*’s Io mining colony.

Tyrell Corporation and gain more life (these replicants live only four years) by hiding outside a Tyrell employee’s building in a pile of garbage (see Figure 3). Amid this swamp, humans—and certainly replicants—blend in as just another type of kipple (see Barr, 1997).

⁹ In *The Birth of the Clinic* (1975), Foucault advances the concept of the “medical gaze,” which transforms human patients into a discursive record of abnormality, effectively erasing their

Following Michel Foucault (1975), I call the second genre of *dystopos* the *clinic*.⁹ Clinical places are spacious (almost cavernous), immaculate, and bathed in oppressive white light. The clinical exemplar among science fiction remains George Lucas’s experimental 1971 film

human interiority. In this book and *Discipline and Punish* (1995) Foucault also comments extensively on the kinds of spaces by which this discursive rendering of the human can take place.



Figure 3: Pris (Daryl Hannah) emerges from a pile of “kipple” in *Blade Runner*.



Figure 4: The surveillance state of *THX 1138* expands outward like an endless white canvas.

THX 1138, the Orwellian setting of which sprawls outward like one endless, unblemished sheet of white paper (see Figure 4). *THX 1138*'s image of the clinic arguably recurs in *Alien* and *Outland*, albeit excerpted from the syllogistic totality of Lucas's surveillance state. In *Alien* and *Outland* one notices that the medical bays of the *Nostromo* and the Io colony, as well as the former's cryogenic stasis room and

the latter's punitive holding cells, have a different look from their dark, messy surroundings (see Figure 5). Bright and sterile, these places eschew the textured excesses of the swamp for brute functionalism—medical procedures, quarantine, imprisonment, cryogenic sleep. They also recall Foucault's (1995) aphorism, “Visibility is a trap” (p. 200). Like the Foucauldian clinic, that is, these



Figure 5: The “clinic” as seen in the *Nostromo*’s medical bay in *Alien*.



Figure 6: Tyrell’s spacious office in *Blade Runner* offers a different version of the “clinic.”

places transform their contents—humans included—into observable specimens whose individuality translates precisely into abnormality. Pris cannot hide among the kipple in the corner of the clinic because there is none—only milk-white walls providing a backdrop of pure contrast. In *Blade Runner*, the office of robotics guru Eldon Tyrell (Joe Turkel), which, as Sobchack (1997) observes,

looms above the dark, cluttered city like a giant microchip (p. 234), provides a slightly different riff on the clinical *dystopos*, inflecting its occupants with a sense of ceremonial and vaguely malevolent grandeur (see Figure 6). But again, the immaculate, cavernous space within the Tyrell Building notably offers no room for Rachel (Sean Young), the self-ignorant replicant, to hide from



Figure 7: In *Outland*, the “swamp” and “clinic” coexist in the same shot.

Deckard’s diagnostic Voight-Kampff test nor for Tyrell himself to evade Roy Batty’s bloody vengeance for the curse of such short life. The clinical place reliably entails exposure and surveillance.

As Barthes (1978) explains, the rhetoric of the image is largely “connotational,” exploiting “an architecture of signs drawn from a variable depth of lexicons” that constitute the “domain of ideology” (pp. 33, 47, 49). Put another way, the deep-seated connotative “meaning” of the image stems from its intersection with the epideictic storehouses of rhetorically significant imagery—from the stuff of cultural memory. Barthes’s (1978) essay on “The Rhetoric of the Image” takes as example a French ad for Italian food, analyzing how its constituent iconography sums to a sense of “Italianicity” built of cultural stereotypes. The technological swamp and the clinic are no less connotative approximations, visual textures from whose matrices of association audiences orient themselves in ideological space.

The swamp generally connotes a world of technological excess, in which consumerism has ballooned into a self-perpetuating system of production, consumption, and junk, and which values the abundance of stuff (or kipple) over the actual public good that stuff does; it connotes a certain breed of late capitalism and the absorption of humans into that capitalist matrix. It implies decay, excess, and even anarchy. The clinic connotes a world of quasi-militaristic watchful overdetermination that crushes the individual subject under bright light and Foucauldian panopticism (see Foucault, 1995). It implies compulsory conformity, homogeny, and authoritarianism.

Neglect versus overdetermination: These are two quite different dystopian visions, one receding toward Gibson’s vision of laissez-faire techno-anarchy and the other towards the Orwellian police state. Both, though, are terrible and dehumanizing: it is no better to be clinically dissected than absorbed into the dark night of technological sprawl. These

postmodern dystopias, moreover, reveal that the thematically contradictory swamp and clinic can coexist in the same narrative universe. In one of the more visually jarring images from *Outland*, Connery's lawman and his deputy stand among the high-tech guts of an ill-lit, dusty hallway, looking in on a prisoner who floats in isolation, his cell a pristine white cube. A single pane of Plexiglas separates the swamp from the clinic (see Figure 7).

So what? One significant point, at least, is that postmodern audiences have grown less receptive to the syllogistic narrative that assembles its space to neatly illustrate a single thesis about our social undoing. The rhetoric of the postmodern dystopia is less a rhetoric of syllogistic progression than one of branching enthymemes—divergent, if largely complementary, inferences that rarely conjoin upon a single thesis. This is the logic not of *either-or* but *both-and*: we might be neglected and surveilled and—well, who knows what else? My point does not discount the barbed political subtexts that Sobchack and Byers detect in movies like *Alien*, *Outland*, and *Blade Runner*, but it does place any such political claims within a circuitous matrix of rhetorical composition. The *dystopoi* or memory *loci* by which these films work to invent their narratives provide a network of familiar iconography that ground dystopia in the circumstances of the present without, necessarily, determining the exact directions such narratives will take. Postmodernity, thus, seems to recognize that dystopia may exist in many forms, probably many at once, and that those

forms—to once more echo Le Guin—already exist here and now.

Conclusion

Seymour Chatman (1990) delivers an eloquent synopsis of narrative rhetoric: “In my view, there are two narrative rhetorics, one concerned to suade me to accept the form of the work; another, to suade me of a certain view of how things are in the real world” (p. 203). In didactic modernist utopias and dystopias, Chatman's two rhetorics almost completely converge: establishing the good or bad place of the future entails a corresponding vision of the real-world present and its problems. In the postmodern dystopia, these two rhetorics intersect and diverge more fluidly. When Sobchack (1997) notes that, sci-fi film, “[s]pace is now more often a ‘text’ than a context[,] . . . self-contained, convulsive, and discontinuous” (p. 232), I take this point to echo the rhetorical primacy of place in the composite postmodern text. The rich evocation of cultural memory, in other words, constitutes a rhetorical end in itself, one every bit as vital as the abstract forwarding of a “thesis” or “argument.” I hold, moreover, that such attention to place, in turn, yields a richer, more medium-specific understanding of film rhetoric than that advanced by prior, more traditional models of film as argument and/or communication (e.g., Hendrix & Wood, 1973; Behrens, 1979).

To slightly reframe the matter, I believe that the credible establishment of place increasingly corresponds, in classical rhetorical terms, to the category of *ethos*,

or the establishment of character and credibility that—as Burke (1969) especially has demonstrated—matters in rhetorical performance as much as, or often more than, one’s logical propositions (cf. Hendrix & Wood, 1972, p. 109).¹⁰ Deckard and Rachel’s studio-imposed escape into the verdant countryside at the end of *Blade Runner*’s original theatrical release seems “implausible and artificial,” Sobchack (1997) posits, because of “the new sense that everything in our lives is mediated and cultural” (p. 237). I would add that this thematic rupture, which Scott wisely excised from the director’s (1992) and “final” cuts (2007) of the film, more specifically betrays the sense of place the rest of the film had labored to construct, ceding the ambient modality of the visual—and all the rhetorical credibility it affords—in the process. Especially in the postmodern dystopian film, place represents a vital piece of the rhetorical whole, the neglect of which deadens the influence of the composite text by forfeiting the cinematic economy of rhetorical connotation. So it is, I will add, that many of the glossy and plastic CGI vistas enveloping the last fifteen years of Hollywood blockbusters are already showing their age compared to the carefully wrought settings of the films I discuss here. *Alien*, *Outland*, and *Blade*

Runner remain rhetorically potent for their rich connectivity to the annals of cultural memory. All three recognize that dystopia, the *bad place*, is not just *explained* but *felt* through the *dystopos*—through sensory inundation, epideictic affirmation, and a grounding in the experience of the present. Each film’s successful forays into the realms of the philosophical and political begin, in turn, with this essential understanding of place.

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¹⁰ See Burke’s *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1969), which famously configures “identification” as the primary term of rhetorical engagement. Burke’s reformulation of rhetoric foregrounds *ethos*, or demonstration of consubstantiality,” as necessarily prior to arguments from *logos*, or logic. Hendrix &

Wood (1972), not wrongly but a bit literal-mindedly, suggest that “the rhetorical critic can apply the concept of *ethos* to the sponsoring agency and director of the film, to narrators and characters in the film, and to acknowledged sources within the film” (p. 109).

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