

The Dead City: The Decay of the Urban Organism

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Cities are bustling centres of human activity. They seethe with the intersecting lives of their inhabitants. Richard Sennett, in his book *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization*, writes about the medical discovery of the human circulatory system and eighteenth-century developments in city planning (2002: 255-281). He claims that these city designs, such as those of Washington, DC and Paris, were intended to allow for a form of circulatory system within the city, an improved urban health. He remarks:

Enlightenment planners wanted the city in its very design to function like a healthy body, freely flowing as well as possessed of clean skin. Since the beginnings of the Baroque era, urban planners had thought about making cities in terms of efficient circulation of people on the city's main streets. (Sennett, 2002: 263)

People, traffic and society, in their systematic movement through what Sennett identifies as the "arteries" and "veins" of the city, provide a life within the constructed body of the city, a symbiosis between man and man made. Essentially, society forms the metaphorical blood that courses through the city's veins.

Viewed in this way, the city becomes a single organism, although conceptually it might be viewed as consisting of several fragmented and disparate pieces, such as its buildings and districts. I would suggest, however, that these fragments constitute the urban body's organs, fed by the flow of humanity, integral to the cohesive form of the city organism. As with any organism, once the flow of life ceases, the organism dies, decays and leaves only the carcass of what once was there. The city becomes dead. Cinematic examples of "healthy" cities are abundant, as the busy roads and buildings of celluloid depictions of cosmopolitan areas abound with movement. The dead city, however, is a deserted space, starved of circulation and overwhelmed with stasis in the absence of human activity.

In the last two decades there has been a noticeable, if limited, re-emergence of films preoccupied with deserted city streets. Films as diverse as Terry Gilliam's *Twelve Monkeys* (1995) and Andrew Stanton's *Wall-E* (2008) feature urban wastelands. The ways in which these post-apocalyptic representations have manifested cinematically, in terms of circulation, flâneurie, stasis and the decay of the urban organism, are the primary concerns of this discussion. The empty city is, of course, nothing

new to cinema screens. Earlier examples of similar subject matter can be found in films such as *The Day the Earth Caught Fire* (1961), *The Last Man on Earth* (1964) and *The Omega Man* (1971). While these earlier films demonstrate images of stasis and urban death, in order to conduct a close and detailed analysis of the subject matter, a focus on a select group of films made at a similar period of time is necessary. The 1990s and 2000s releases *Twelve Monkeys*, *Vanilla Sky* (2001), *28 Days Later* (2002), *I Am Legend* (2007) and *Wall-E* are therefore the films under discussion here. What is distinctive about these and the earlier films is that their representations of the city are entirely fictional, futuristic or hypothetical. The maiming effects of war do not feature in these diegeses, not because such representations are scarce, but rather because the regeneration of such war-torn cities is already a reality. The wounds of the Second World War, for example, have long since healed, leaving cities scarred but still functioning. Images of empty city streets as a symptom of reality, such as in *The Pianist* (2002), deviate from the fully deceased urban organism with which this article is concerned.

If the cause of the organism's death is the loss of the society which "circulates" within it, then it would be remiss to neglect discourse regarding the remaining inhabitants of the city skeleton. This meagre residue of society is often either a single surviving human or a select few that still meander through its decomposing veins, denying the complete desertion of the urban environment and justifying the presence of the camera. These few individuals are not enough to constitute a consistent flow around the city, and their presence is removed from a societal understanding of purpose.

In the late nineteenth century, Walter Benjamin identified a new character that had emerged, loitering in the arcades of Paris: a wanderer without clear purpose or destination, but entranced by the consumer goods on display. When writing about the figure he called the *flâneur*, Benjamin notes "the old Romantic sentiment for landscape dissolves and a new Romantic conception of landscape emerges – of landscape that seems, rather, to be a cityscape, if it is true that the city is the genuinely sacred ground of *flânerie*" (1999: 420-421). Given this observation, Benjamin's work is highly applicable to the few roaming survivors that meander through the empty city streets. The lone survivor in the urban environment becomes the *flâneur* of the dystopic future, a figure that David Frisby describes as the "mere stroller" (2001: 28). Yet this solitary figure, although he wanders, sometimes in aimless observation of his surroundings, adopts a new purpose. He must survive; this is his endeavour.

In his "aimless," consumer-driven wandering, the *flâneur* seems completely in opposition to the lone survivor. His task is to prevail in a world where commodity has abandoned him. Such is evident in *I Am*

Legend. Robert Neville (Will Smith), as he moves about the vacant space, hunts deer in the long grasses of Times Square and plays golf on the wing of a plane. Neville must hunt in the formerly bustling urban core of Manhattan in order to subsist. This need to survive is not, however, the only way in which the protagonist's exploration of the city is depicted. A series of static medium shots capture a number of familiar New York sights, such as Grand Central Station and South Street Seaport. These images are like snapshots, like some deviant tourism, as the bridges pour into the river in the background of one shot and the landmarks are completely devoid of all other activity. It is conceivable that, in this case, the flâneur is the idle camera, drifting from object to object in sheer epiphanaic observation of the "delights" on display, an approach that can also be identified in Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962) as a montage of destructive images indulges in Paris in ruins.

It is notable that when the city "dies," access to otherwise prohibited areas and activities is granted in the absence of a formed society. In a one-man society, laws and public conduct hold little relevance. Victor Burgin discusses such a dissolve in the distinctions between public and private, basing his ideas on Benjamin's writings on the flâneur. Burgin posits that "[t]he flâneur who turns the street into a living-room commits an act of transgression, which reverses an established distinction between public and private spaces" (1998: 59). For this theory to hold any relevance to cinematic urban death, it is necessary to trace the figure of the flâneur more closely within the dead city. Susan Buck-Morss, for example, suggests that

for the flâneur, it was traffic that did him in. In the relatively tranquil shelter of the arcades, his original habitat, he practiced his trade of not trading, viewing as he loitered the varied selection of luxury-goods and luxury people displayed before him. (1986: 102)

In the absence of traffic, Neville's ability to "loiter" is restored, as evident while he casually browses the shelves of an otherwise vacant video store. The hyper-modernity that increased the pace of the flâneur's surroundings and arguably dissolved the opportunity for stasis and idleness has, here, been removed and replaced with surroundings that do not move. The triumphs of a consumer's paradise remain scattered about his surroundings, while Neville is free to move about the city in a purposeless manner.

Burgin's observations about the dissolution between the public and the private become particularly pertinent in consideration of this variety of flânerie. As Neville encroaches on previously private spaces, low-key lighting renders these formerly innocuous settings as viable threats to his safety. As he enters a stranger's apartment, a child's bedroom becomes a potential biohazard, and the abundant Christmas decorations stand as

tombstones marking the loss of an entire civilization. The camera tracks Neville's every move in scopophilic fascination, infusing the scene with a sense of paranoia. The once private space seems crowded with invisible eyes that are conspicuously absent in the daytime streets of Manhattan. Neville's conduct, and his freedom of "circulation," render the entire city a private space. The death of the functioning city destroys the restrictions of space and activity. As the last survivor in New York, Neville inherits the previously off-limits spaces behind closed doors. In such a way, the distance between public and private becomes dissolved.

The shots of the abandoned urban center are accompanied by a cacophony of distinctly "unnatural" silences that reinforce the privacy of these formerly public spaces. The soundtrack remains purely diegetic at this point. As Neville seeks out his prey on the urban plains, the only audible sounds are that of crickets chirping among the Serengeti-like flora and the deer's gentle chewing of the vegetation. Other organisms, separate from the city itself, become apparent, growing and living among the metropolitan remnants. Although nature begins to live within the city, they are as scavengers picking at its exposed ribcage, the flesh of the deceased organism slowly fertilizing the ecosystem around it until plant life grows between its joints and out of its eye sockets. In the absence of a collective society, a strong pulse, the organism cannot live: it can merely sustain the wildlife that permeates its carcass. New York, infiltrated by nature, evokes stillness, at least in comparison to the "circulation" of the healthy city. The lack of sound simply accentuates the stillness of the location. Neville has become a primitive predator roaming a newly formed topography, an environment that is representative of both the natural and the unnatural. The city has become an amalgamation of the organic and the artificial and in the process the external has become the private domain. While the sun is up, the city is a place of safety.

At night, however, the city becomes quite different. Neville and his dog, Sam, are forced to seek shelter in their own apartment. Ali Madanipour describes the private space of the home as the "intimate space that is separated, and protects its members, from the public impersonal outside" (2003: 71). In *I Am Legend*, this protection becomes quite literal. The film constructs this one space as removed from the dangers of the infected and blood-craving former members of the human race. The distinction between public and private can only be restored to this environment through fear and threat. The dead streets howl and cry with its nocturnal vampire-esque inhabitants. As the sun sets, some manner of society is restored, but in its new incarnation. The victims of a virus, in a new civilization that outnumbers the last man on Earth, crowd the streets. The camera frames these homogenous beings in a long shot, while Neville continues to dominate the frame in close-up. These are the vermin that feed on the corpse of urbanity. While the camera positions

Neville as separate and superior in his claim to the city's remains, it would be difficult to define his place within this setting as anything to the contrary. Whether it is the plant life that penetrates the city, the wildlife, or human beings, these are simply life forms feeding on the remaining nutrients of the dead city, leaving only the skeleton as the shell of society. The "vampire" life forms circulate concurrently, filling the veins of the city with a new, if aberrant, life. The urban organism misleadingly appears to live, if only in its infected, mutated incarnation; not so much a representation of life as of death in motion.

As the human race succumbs to the effects of a detrimental virus, then, the city undergoes a similar transformation. Its streets become vacant, and its former functions (much like the body and mind of the infected human) fall into disrepair and cease to operate. The streets decay in the absence of activity; vegetation sprouts from cracks in the road and infests the dead city, and the bridges tumble into the persistent waters of the Hudson River. By day the city is a dead organism, with other life forms permeating its borders. Its threat lies solely in the physical remnants left by the chaos of the death of society. By night, the city of *I Am Legend* is the undead city, rising from the grave to enact its vampiric horrors upon its sole survivor, and putrefying in its tomb by day.

It would be relatively simple to draw a comparison here with *28 Days Later*. The film captures images of an evacuated Britain after the release and spread of a virus that transforms its victims into the undead. Yet the distinction between the public and the private becomes differently defined in director Danny Boyle's rendition of the empty city streets. Safety is to be found in open spaces, these, as in *I Am Legend*, are public spaces now defined as private. Even shops and hospitals have become private within this representation, as reinforced by long shots of protagonist Jim (Cillian Murphy) as he meanders through the open spaces of the house of healing. The cinematography draws attention to the vastness of space and the abnormal absence of life. The indoors becomes an uncertain space. In contrast with the representation of the abandoned hospital is the depiction of the church. As Jim enters the darkness of the consecrated space very little light permeates the shots of the building. Outside, high-key lighting exposes every facet of the capital; it is naked in the sun's gaze, while the interior of the church is plunged into intense darkness. It is in this space that Jim discovers the numerous corpses that litter the pews. A high-angle long shot from Jim's perspective is used and interspersed with close-up shots of the wandering protagonist. The dead remain small and numerous, faceless and unknowable beings contrasted with the living face of humanity. In their low-key lit tomb of the public interior, they connote the undead's domain. This is a place that perverse incarnations of *Homo sapiens* have claimed as their private space. The

religious iconography of the cross, the pews and the priest are transformed from symbols of safety to the very embodiment of horror.

Once these interior spaces are penetrated there is no longer any private space; the remaining "safe" spaces become violated by danger, and privacy is dissolved. Burgin suggests that "for the private individual the private environment represents the universe. In it he gathers remote places and the past. His drawing room is a box in the world theatre" (1998: 61). The film allows for previously public spaces to be "gathered" as "remote." These spaces embody the essence of privacy, and simultaneously deny the possibility of privacy through threat. The infected nature of the undead humans that stalk the streets of this particular representation of the abandoned city lurks in the public and the private. Circulation becomes an erratic process, removed from health and cleanliness, as Sennett proposes, and distorts the boundaries between the public and private (2002: 255-281). If threat in *28 Days Later* is potentially lurking around every corner, then access to all, whether living or dead, is granted within the city carcass. The death of the city and the absence of society in this case, then, eventually renders the entire city a public space, with no place of real safety. It is little surprise, then, that the protagonists abandon the city in search of a space devoid of threat. Only in the countryside can privacy, eventually, be restored.

The camera observes the destruction in the streets as Jim explores the vacant city. Police barriers are abandoned on Westminster Bridge, Big Ben souvenirs are strewn about the floor and framed in close-up, a red double-decker bus is turned on its side and the statue of Eros is surrounded by refugee posters and memorials to lost loved ones. These objects stand as a testament to what is missing and the disruption to their symbolic meanings. It is notable that, in a city that is often captured and mapped in relation to its landmarks and tourist iconography, it is these famous if perhaps clichéd aspects of the city that have been most clearly upturned. Essentially, this disruption is no different from nature's reclamation of the iconographic Times Square or the mutilated Brooklyn Bridge of *I Am Legend*. These landmarks in a state of upheaval confirm the authenticity of the location. The city that lies in decay is the former bustling hub of human activity. Yet the desecration of London through its tourist iconography locates the survival of the city as intrinsically connected to this particular industry.

As Jim wanders among the familiar landmarks – Southbank, Westminster and Piccadilly Circus, among others – post-chaos artifacts lie in evidence. The true horror here, perhaps, lies in the absence of "active chaos." The rioters and police of the opening sequence are nowhere to be seen. There is no one else in the streets to observe the "unnaturalness" of the city that has come to a halt. The opening sequence depicts the chaos of the virus spreading. But after physical disarray has been removed and only

its effects have been retained, a new form of chaos takes shape. The chaos here lies in the complete lack of activity, the lack of everyday disorder.

To turn to another film, the opening sequence of *Vanilla Sky* depicts a dream sequence of a vacant New York, with only the rich protagonist David Aames (Tom Cruise) witness to the complete abandonment of "the city that never sleeps." The lack of human disorder is the only noticeable permutation to the public spaces of Manhattan in the film. Circulation has not merely halted but is completely missing from the environment. Much like its Spanish predecessor, *Abre Los Ojos* (1997), in *Vanilla Sky* there is no obvious evidence of chaos, the city has not fallen into disarray, nor does nature seek to reclaim this center of human activity. Instead the streets remain pristine, as if the city were a healthy and functioning organism. As Aames drives, a number of point-of-view shots and canted camera angles are the only commentaries on the scarcity of traffic: indeed, there is a complete absence of traffic. There are no people, no evidence of people having left. Geoff Murphy's *The Quiet Earth* (1985) employs a similar chaos-free desertion for its narrative, although the Australian film is less ordered in its approach: cars strewn across the middle of the road and taps left running, a type of urban abandonment that Julien Temple's 2010 documentary *Requiem for Detroit* also demonstrates. The abandoned city of *Vanilla Sky*, however, is simply deserted in an otherwise fully functioning state, as if it had always been autonomous from its inhabitants. It would be difficult to call the city dead in this incarnation, then, although by Sennett's framework its circulatory system is not apparent.

Conversely, *Vanilla Sky* opens with a series of brief aerial shots of the city, the camera drifting above the roads and buildings, capturing the chaotic traffic that saturates the tarmac avenues of the metropolis. Each shot fades to black before another vision of the inhabited and "healthy" city is presented to the viewer. These shots depict the New York of reality as the result of a dreamlike state. This sequence is immediately followed by David Aames waking and leaving for work. These images are, in fact, the real dream. The shots are deployed at the protagonist's eye level as he progresses from one block to another. The camera renders the absence of life within the city as more natural, to a degree, than the busy conurbation of waking life. The sequence progresses to the eminent location of Times Square where, in contrast to the disarray represented in *I Am Legend*, the attraction is unmarred by neglect. In the absence of its people, Times Square instead becomes the center of consumerist bombardment, a consumerism detached from the people and autonomous in its own right.

Aames runs through the square in confusion over the complete lack of activity. A series of tracking shots as he runs toward the camera are

punctuated by a rapid montage of images. Some of these are the surrounding advertisements and brand names; some are shots of magazines and various other consumer cultural markers. When Benjamin's flâneur frequented the Paris arcades in a similarly aimless fashion, he was the late nineteenth-century consumer, possessed with the spectacle of goods on display in this modern space (1999). The arcades were a space that was not quite the street, nor was it really a typical interior space. Benjamin saw it as a place in which men were idle (*Ibid.*). The modern equivalent would be the shopping center, filled with window shoppers gazing in spectatorial wonder upon the wealth of objects they might possess, progressing nowhere and achieving nothing. David Aames in *Vanilla Sky*, for example, runs through Times Square, from nothing and towards nothing. This act is hasty flânerie. Yet he is engulfed by fear as the weight of the surrounding advertisements bear down upon him in a rapid succession of consumer-culture images. If anything he feels terror at the prospect of becoming the unwitting flâneur, so he runs. His motion negates flânerie, and denies idleness, but his purpose is lost among the commodities that consume him. Aames succeeds both at denying his position as a passive flâneur and at confirming it.

Without the people, cars and movement of the city, its underlying consumerist function is exposed. Here is an issue that can be clarified and exemplified through the use of the work of Georg Simmel. He notes that "there is perhaps no psychic phenomenon which is so unconditionally reserved to the city as the blasé outlook" (2002:14). He also comments on "the rapid telescoping of changing images, pronounced differences within what is grasped at a single glance, and the unexpectedness of violent stimuli as a factor in the psychological landscape of the city" (Simmel, 2002: 11). When these two observations are placed in conjunction with each other, then, the invisibility of excessive stimuli becomes apparent. David Aames's dream becomes a flâneur's delight.

Benjamin describes the flâneur as "someone abandoned in the crowd. [...] The intoxication to which the flâneur surrenders is the intoxication of commodity around which surges the stream of customers" (1973: 55). The opening sequence of *Vanilla Sky* has no customers to surge about Aames as he absorbs the images of commerce, yet the bombardment of images achieves this state of "intoxication," albeit reluctantly. For David Aames, this bombardment, not the lack of activity, is the true terror of his dream. His terror is that the city lives, functions and circulates through these mutated cultural means, and the human element of the city has been made redundant. Here is a representation of a dead society, then, rather than a dead city.

All the representations of discarded cities discussed depict dead societies to some degree. Andrew Stanton's *Wall-E*, for example, is concerned with the effects of global warming on the urban nuclei. The derelict cityscape

of this film is in some part a symptom of societal dysfunction. This city is not, as in *Vanilla Sky*, autonomous, but wholly reliant on human sustenance. The relationship is symbiotic. *Wall-E* demonstrates a dystopic future in which humanity has deserted Earth while it is restored to a clean and fertile environment. In the absence of human presence, the very thing to cause the planet's disequilibrium, the efforts to revive Earth grind more or less to a halt. James Lovelock hypothesises, in his GAIA theory, that the Earth is a single living system, dependent on several components to sustain its existence. He suggests that "this combination [of air, sea and rocks] might consist of a single giant living system and one with the capacity to keep the Earth always at a state most favourable for the life upon it" (Lovelock, 2005). In *Wall-E* it is the absence of humanity which causes disequilibrium to the "balance" of the city, and yet it is also the presence of humanity that allows nature, the "air, sea and rocks" to become disrupted initially. Viewed as such, the survival of the planet in *Wall-E* is dependent on the failure of the independent city organism. It is only once nature begins to re-emerge in the urban desert that humanity can re-inhabit the Earth, and is offered an opportunity to return to rural farming and nature. For the balance Lovelock proposes to be restored, the city must be truly abandoned.

Nature is, unsurprisingly, placed in constant opposition to the manufactured nature of the streets in a number of deserted city films. It is a persistent force permeating the very environments that once subjugated it. In *I Am Legend*, crops grow in Central Park, weeds take root and reach through cracks in the tarmac and grasses grow wild in Times Square. Animals roam free, and diegetic birdsong dominates the soundtrack of the outdoor sequences, as is also the case with Gilliam's *Twelve Monkeys*. Once again, the narrative uses the release of a deadly virus as explanation for the vacant city. A culture of underground survivors lurks below the ruins of civilization, while birds and beasts claim the terrain as their habitats. James Cole (Bruce Willis) is sent above ground to collect specimens of surviving animals. Gilliam's film reveals a number of released zoo animals in incongruous settings. An elephant is shown wandering along the road, alongside shots of lions perched on rooftops. These outdoor spaces, once public, are now removed from such seemingly pointless demarcations. In the absence of society there is no spatial definition, only nature.

Of course humanity, as a separate entity to human culture, is also "natural." In the scarcity of one form of nature (the human being) another takes its place (through the plant life and wildlife feeding off the corpse of the city). With regard to Sennett's work, it would be conceivable to posit two different forms of urban circulatory system that exist within the pre-death cities of the films discussed here. These two systems are not necessarily exclusive or independent of each other, but

rather a coexisting balance of the organic and synthetic. As movement flows around the city, these two attributes are relatively indistinguishable. Chaos is *supposed* to be present, and so, in the healthy, circulating city, it remains unobserved in its various incarnations. When the circulation ceases, however, the organic and the synthetic become distinct. Organic circulation is comprised of human activity, which is suddenly absent. The synthetic, however, is left behind. Cars line the streets; artifacts lie strewn throughout the city. This form of circulation is impervious to decay, but not to deterioration. This distinction, then, is between what is absent and what remains to denote such an absence. In the case of *I Am Legend*, for example, the dearth of population and movement allows for the re-growth of vegetation. The decay of the urban body essentially fertilizes its surroundings. In *Twelve Monkeys*, this act of fertilisation is perhaps more subtle, existing as cobwebs and animals that live within the metropolitan remains.

As Cole investigates a church interior, he enters cobweb-infested rooms shrouded in darkness and dusty atmospherics. Only a few, bluish shafts of light penetrate the tomblike locale, revealing the leftovers of society. The cinematography of *Twelve Monkeys* indifferently observes an ashen statue of an angel in the superfluous church, doused in dust and darkness. As the camera tracks past the forgotten religious iconography, it passes by as if merely glimpsing the object before resting on an owl amid the material clutter of the room. Here it is the organic that dominates the camera's view, but also the artificial world. Not only does nature occupy a panoptic position within the city (whether from rooftops or rafters), but Cole appears as the only "unnatural" being within the walls of the metropolis. His bulky contamination suit renders him synthetic, while time and nature have slowly reclaimed synthesis for their own.

Wall-E, however, explores the suffocation of nature as the city's "cause of death." The film initially establishes the setting from outer space. A montage of galaxies and stars is edited in time with the incongruously optimistic non-diegetic music. The image gradually moves toward Earth to obtain a closer look at the planet. As the globe's physical features become visible, a land of brown is revealed. The camera tracks quickly over the land, in time to the music, catching the metamorphosed terrain in its glance. Each tracking shot dissolves into a subsequent one; shots of wind farms, inactive power stations and, eventually, the city center itself. Each successive shot reveals a planet swathed in pollution. The buildings are brown and towering; the waste is brown and towering, the air thick and also brown. City is no longer distinguishable from countryside. Buildings are no longer discernible from piles of waste. The spoils of society, in this illustration, are essentially suffocating the planet; these are the same spoils that have caused society to atrophy and

evacuate. It is through this environment that Wall-E wanders, collecting the remnants of human society.

Wall-E is not the only rendition of the dead city as stifling the natural. Depictions of derelict, empty cities can convey a dynamic between nature and synthetic creation that contrasts greatly to the overgrown roads of *I Am Legend* or *Twelve Monkeys*; these are representations of the complete negation of nature. The city should, in its wholly manufactured physicality and temperament, appear the most unnatural of environments. Yet these films demonstrate that in the absence of people the city becomes, if anything, more unnatural. As nature regains its stronghold over the artificial habitat of the human being it is demonstrative of an absence, of some form of societal disequilibrium. In these cases, nature itself becomes abnormal. The absence of the natural, however, is represented as equally disruptive to the flow of the city. If the city is an organism, then surely it is representative of another form of nature. What these films really depict is a fear of stasis. While the films both celebrate and are phobic about the solitude of unusually empty urban environments, they all appear to concur that the inertia of the city is far more unnatural than any building or invention implemented by human hands. Even *Wall-E*, which seemingly criticizes construction and waste production (the byproducts of society), mourns the loss of the urbanized organism. As the people and traffic cease to flow through the veins of the city, its pulse slows to a static beat and its cohesive body decays and feeds the ecosystem around it. If the fictional city is so prone to death, then, conceivably these films call for a post-mortem, before stasis truly strikes.

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