The Prophecy of *Code 46*: *Afuera* in Dubai, or Our Urban Future

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Using the premise of *Code 46* — a science fiction film whose setting blends existing cities and locales to envision a global metropolis — the article argues that the city of Dubai is emblematic of this imagined dystopian future. The movie is pertinent since it relies on existing locales in Shanghai, Dubai and Seattle, rather than stage sets, and thus evokes a future that is thoroughly grounded in the present. Following a discussion on the role of dystopia in urban studies and science fiction, the article shifts to an investigation of Dubai, focusing on its marginalized district of Satwa. Satwa is revealing because of its outsider status, its proximity to glamorous new developments, and the currently stalled effort to replace it according to a utopian urban renewal plan. The case of Satwa perfectly captures what can be termed the Dubai paradox, containing as it does both utopic and dystopic conditions. As such, it evokes a poignant sense of realness and humanity, a recurring theme within the utopian discourse of science fiction. The article concludes with a discussion of the relevance of such analysis to our understanding of globalizing cities.

> *They don't care what you think if you are* afuera — *to them you don't exist.*
> — *Code 46*

The director Michael Winterbottom's 2003 film *Code 46* presents a dystopian vision of a society in the near future in which major cities have been transformed into gated centers protected from the dangers and unpredictability of those on the margins of society, who are dubbed *afuera*, or "outside" in Spanish. The cities depicted represent an amalgam of the deserts and highrises of Dubai, the gleaming towers of Shanghai and Hong Kong, and the villages of Rajasthan. Within these cityscapes a new managerial class moves freely, seemingly uninterrupted, from one space to the next — an intentional strategy the

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filmmakers have described as a form of "creative geography" using "found spaces."

Yet what is striking about the movie is that its dystopian vision relies not on stage sets, but on real spaces. By blending images of existing places, it evokes a future that is thoroughly grounded in the present. The city of Dubai plays a key role in this scenography through incongruous images of its business and residential towers rising from the desert, juxtaposed against its marginal spaces. The movie's protagonists escape to Dubai (*afuera*) from the sterile and minimal settings of "high-class" Shanghai, and in its spaces they find solace and peace, a sense of realness that has escaped them elsewhere. Winterbottom has said that his choice of Dubai as a setting was based on its large transient population and the fact that it epitomizes a multicultural future. Utopia thus becomes, according to urban scholar Malcolm Miles, "an intellectual space of criticality."[1]

Using this premise as a point of departure, I will examine here how the city of Dubai is currently emblematic of this dystopian future. My aim is twofold. First, I offer an alternative dystopian narrative, one that does not rely on apocalyptic visions of a city buried under mounds of sand — a trope in use as long ago as the early-nineteenth-century poem "Ozymandias" by Percy Bysshe Shelley. Specifically, by adopting the vision and strategies of *Code 46*, I will examine Dubai's Satwa district, the quintessential space of *afuera*. Until the recent financial crisis, efforts were underway to replace it with Jumeirah Gardens, a futuristic development scaled to overshadow all that has been built in Dubai to date. Second, through an interrogation of how cities have been represented in science fiction movies, I will reveal themes pertinent to the current discourse on globalizing cities. Operating under the guise of neoliberal urbanization policies, such cities have become sites of homogeneity, alienation, inequality and loneliness. The depiction of these cities in science fiction as "dystopic sites" — places of humanity and resistance, where a sense of realness competes against the artificiality of spaces of global capital — potentially offers many lessons for architects and planners.

My analysis here is divided into four sections. First, I look at how cities have been represented in science fiction movies, focusing on the concept of dystopia. As part of this effort, I attempt to understand the emphasis on dystopic aspects of urban life in contemporary urban theory; I examine the extent to which this has been used to envision the city of the future; and I discuss specific movies and their spatial strategies to establish a conceptual and theoretical framework for understanding *Code 46* and critiquing Dubai. In the second part, I elaborate on *Code 46* and the degree to which it extends the science fiction genre and offers a prescient view of contemporary urban conditions and their pitfalls. In the third section, I discuss the city of Dubai. I have labeled this section "The Dubai Paradox" because the city, in my view, contains both utopic and dystopic conditions. I conclude by looking at how such analysis can shape understanding of cities today and offer lessons to guide their development.

CITIES AND SCIENCE FICTION

The Dystopian City of the Present. From its inception, the science fiction movie genre has displayed a fascination with dystopia (the opposite of utopia), a negative version of a futuristic society. Dystopian elements in these films are usually based on aspects of the present, and in this regard they mirror the present fixation on disorder within urban studies. The question is, why has there been such interest in dystopia — whether in fiction, movies, or urban studies?[2] The question is particularly important because it has implications for spatial practices.

Andy Merrifield has dubbed those fascinated by the practice of disorder "dystopian urbanists," who "subvert received meanings of pain and pleasure in the city [and] graphically illustrate that there is a perverse allure to urban horror and pain and squalor."[3] In an article on the "Dialectics of Dystopia," he questioned the basis for our attraction to squalor, which he described as both titillating, thrilling and appalling. Such views have been echoed by other writers. Elizabeth Wilson, for example, has talked about the romantic vision of the city as dystopia.[4] And Susan Sontag has elaborated on the notion of disaster as being quintessentially futuristic.[5]

Merrifield traced such ambiguity in perceiving and reacting to the city to the work of Baudelaire, who was fascinated by both the high and low life of Paris. He observed how Baudelaire saw in urban loneliness — in losing oneself in the crowd and being exposed to the unpredictable — a sign of freedom and liberation that often lies at the core of urban living and constitutes a way to strengthen one's identity. The writings of Dostoevsky were based on a similar vision. As Merrifield wrote, Dostoevsky "craves for intensity of experience [and] the darker side of humanity," which he "finds . . . in the city's depths, in the shady underworld of Russia's great imperial capital."[6] Poor tenement blocks, back alleys, and dingy streets are the settings where Dostoevsky's tormented protagonists act out their twisted impulses. The writer thus conveyed both the intensity and the hidden "luminosity" of the city. The disorderly, with its accompanying sense of surprise, eroticism and fantasy, is what characterizes great cities — which partially explains their fascination. According to Merrifield, "painful and dangerous encounters offer an intensity of experience and feeling which equips us to be whole people."[7]

Ackbar Abbas, echoing Roland Barthes, has expressed a similar appreciation for the eroticism of urban settings, derived from "uncertain sociality."[8] Conflict is at the heart of urban living, and spaces such as New York's Times Square and Lower East Side and London's King Cross were once all energized by it. Yet, given the sanitization these spaces have recently been subject to, Merrifield argued, our "current fas-

cination with the dystopian city is similarly symptomatic of our very own cultural collapse." It is a reaction of sorts to the homogenizing influences of "multinational capitalism."[9]

Yet, clearly, the fixation on the dystopian — even characterizing it as such — may have its downside, as it suggests or projects a negative image that may not be useful. Gordon MacLeod and Kevin Ward, in discussing the contemporary city, have argued that even though efforts are geared toward creating "utopias," there is a "flip-side": "spaces that remain untouched by such endeavours are gradually assuming dystopian characteristics."[10] Their reference, of course, is to neo-liberal urban policies, which have catered to the privileged and relegated the less privileged to the urban edge. Their marginalization in ghettos and enclaves is a form of "spatial apartheid" that has been observed by other commentators. Yet, as MacLeod and Ward have pointed out, the discussion seems to rule out the role of agency, since "for some groups not incorporated as part of the contemporary 'imageable city', the urban spaces popularly represented as dystopias may actually be practised as essential havens, transgressive lived spaces of escape, refuge, employment and entertainment."[11] The use of language is critical here, since the incorporation of terms such as "deprivation" or "peripheral housing estates" can lead to a "process of 'othering'" that may obscure the various social and economic relationships that constitute the essence of these so-called "dystopian" spaces.[12] It seems it is these positive qualities — both in how they are perceived as well as in their spatial dimension — that are now being used by writers and filmmakers to depict the city of the future.

The Dystopian City of the Future. In film, the city of the future is usually envisioned as a dystopian place. Urban historian Nezar AlSayyad, for example, has observed that in movies, the utopian and dystopian are "inextricably intertwined."[13] In this assessment he echoed other writers such as Janet Staiger, who has noted that "Utopia is the harbinger of dystopia."[14] This fixation on the dysfunctional was forcefully expressed by Sontag in her 1965 essay "The Imagination of Disaster." As she put it, "science fiction films are not about science. They are about disaster." The genre is largely concerned with the aesthetics of destruction and the "peculiar" beauty to be found in wreaking havoc. As she observed, it is "in the imagery of destruction that the core of good science fiction movie lies."[15] Such films reflect "the deepest anxieties about contemporary existence" as well as the "condition of the individual psyche."[16] Staiger made a similar observation with respect to the depiction of cities in science fiction — that they are "commentaries about the hopes and failures of today or, inversely, dystopian propositions, implicit criticisms of modern urban life and the economic system that produces it."[17] Thus, they adopt a strategy in which the "signifiers of modern life" are transformed into signs of a troubled society.[18] These psychological underpinnings have likewise been identified by Frederic Jameson, who has argued that science fiction "defamilarizes and restructures our experience of our own present," and that because we cannot envision the future, science fiction must be dystopic.[19]

In an examination of cities and cinema, Barbara Mennel has further observed that, beginning with the first science fiction movies, such as Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), the city represented the future, and was thus a prime site for the negotiation of utopian and dystopian visions — a pattern that has continued ever since. According to Mennel, "contemporary, postmodern science fictions narrate the difficulty of distinguishing reality and representation from one another." Thus, "the more we move into the future, the more these films show cities of the past or in decay." For her, science fiction movies — especially in their depiction of decay starting in the 1960s and continuing through the 1970s — are above all a disillusionment with modernity.[20]

According to the film critic Lucius Shepard, science fiction movies dealing with this dystopian future fall into two categories: the postapocalyptic and the Orwellian. In recent years, given ecological disasters, technological threats, and a sharpening distinction between rich and poor, the latter has become more dominant. As Shepard put it, "what remains are essentially variants on the Orwellian dystopia."[21] The term Orwellian, of course, refers to the futuristic society depicted by George Orwell in his novel *1984*: a society dominated by a totalitarian government. AlSayyad has made it clear, however, that this choice of "Orwellian modernity" enabled the relationship "between people and the state, and people and machines . . . [to] be charted, explored and contested."[22] At another level, AlSayyad argued, these dystopian films have also continued a tradition that started with *Metropolis* of using an architectural language of "towering high-rises occupied by the ruling classes, and a medieval underground allocated to labourers and common folk." This division and expression of a striated society has been a way to "critique the false utopian visions of corporate and state monopoly capitalism."[23] It is thus an expression of alienation and disillusionment with contemporary conditions.

Dystopian Cities in Movies. I will now turn to a brief discussion of some well-known dystopian films to illustrate the significance of *Code 46* within the genre of science fiction movies. I am particularly interested in their settings, which generally adopt one of two approaches: confine oneself to what already exists, or create different things in accordance with the dictates of the imagination.[24]

As Mennel has explained, in later science fiction films the city is no longer the site of modernity and technological innovation, but a grimy place of the present and the past that has more in common with the city of film noir — i.e., with explorations of rundown ghettos and barrios. Thus, the cities of *Dark City*, *The Matrix*, and *Blade Runner* are dystopian sites of decay that embody a view of technological advancement not as utopian fantasy but as extreme dystopia.[25]

Lang's *Metropolis* is the quintessential example cited in any discussion of futuristic cities. Its repeated shots of mag-

nificent, towering skyscrapers, creating canyons crisscrossed by overlapping highways through which airplanes travel, produced one of the most memorable scenes in modern film — and one of the most influential. But perhaps equally important, as David Desser has noted, are its linked associations between high and low, inside and outside, self and other.[26] The movie expresses an age-old dilemma: the distinctions between rich and poor; and in this case it is represented spatially, with workers relegated to cavernous underground spaces while the rich cavort in sunlit gardens above ground. Yet, according to Mennel, the movie also fetishizes the city and technology. In actuality, this city of the future was created using a fantastic film set whose references were drawn from H.G. Wells, Le Corbusier, the Bauhaus, and New York City.[27] Indeed, urban historian John Gold has argued that the film was strongly anchored in the present: "*Metropolis* was less a prediction of the world of 2000 AD than it was a model of the 1920s scalped up to nightmare proportions and overlain with a pastiche of the latest New York could offer."[28]

In its reliance on stage sets, *Metropolis* paved the way for such later films as Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) and Alex Proyas's *Dark City* (1998). *Blade Runner* attempts to depict Los Angeles in 2019 through an amalgam of references, contrasting modernist pyramid-like structures for the elite with a ghetto for impoverished migrants. People move through its spaces in floating cars — passing next to neon-lit advertising in one memorable scene. Similarly, *Dark City* relies on technology to portray the dystopian future — although it also borrows elements from Depression-era New York. Vivian Sobchak noted that its entire stage set (and the fact that the city literally changes overnight according to the dictates of the narrative) creates a sense of dislocation.[29]

By relying on constructed sets rather than existing locales, these depictions proved highly influential. However, as the modern city evolved, and as disillusionment with its premises set in, other films began to find in the alienating spaces of modernity itself new ways to articulate the dystopian city of the future. For instance, Jean-Luc Goddard's *Alphaville* (1965) was filmed in Paris, but without reference to any of the typical signifiers of that city. According to Sontag, the movie's locales were "in unretouched sites and buildings existing around the Paris of mid-1960s." Thus, "the fables of the future are at the same times essays about today."[30] This allowed the effect of alienation to be achieved not by "estrangement in design," but by seeing the familiar in unfamiliar ways.[31] The movie's haunting images of modernist highrise blocks, long and sterile corridors, and endless highways provide the backdrop for an Orwellian society controlled by a computer, whose citizens have become mindless and robotic. The movie likewise suggests that this futuristic utopia/dystopia is located in opposition to a "real" place, whose inhabitants have retained their emotions and to which the protagonists escape in the end. A similar theme is present in *Code 46*, and, as I will show, is also a reflection of the urban conditions of Dubai.

Among other films, Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972), while mostly taking place in a pastoral setting or aboard a spaceship, includes a similar brief scene of a city of the future. Early on in the movie, a scientist drives his car through what seems like an endless succession of tunnels leading to the city. As he arrives from below, viewers are confronted with a cityscape that seems familiar, consisting of highrise concrete blocks, intersecting highways filled with moving cars, and signs. But the views seem unfamiliar because they were shot in Japan. Some have noted that the director had to rely on existing cityscapes due to budgetary constraints. In addition, for a Soviet audience in the 1970s the sight of a Japanese city would have been as futuristic an image as any. But there is also a slightly disconcerting quality to the portrayal because it is accompanied by an increasingly loud electronic soundtrack.

Likewise, the by-now-classic movie *Brazil* (1985), directed by Terry Gilliam, also uses defamiliarization to convey a sense of the future, although its settings were strategically enhanced with elaborate stage sets and decorative juxtapositions. In line with the movie's theme — the oppressiveness of state bureaucracy and the powerlessness of the individual — it emphasizes a monumental architecture. Ministry scenes, for example, were appropriated from unused industrial buildings, and other scenes were based on buildings by postmodern architect Ricardo Boffill. The torture chamber at the end of the movie is located within an abandoned power plant (now demolished), and the interior of the reconstructive surgery clinic is within the famous "Arab room" of Leighton house in London.[32] This collage-like collection of locales is intended to avoid direct reference to any specific city; instead, it offers glimpses of industrial wastelands hidden behind billboards continuously placed along highways. Unlike *Alphaville* or *Solaris*, which do rely on existing sites without alteration, *Brazil* exaggerates the present, thus creating a heightened reality.

Perhaps the common theme uniting these movies is a desire to depict contrasting conditions of urban life. Starting from *Metropolis*, where the privileged live in highrise towers and the deprived underground, such a spatial strategy has reappeared in varying forms. These include the pastoral setting of *Solaris* vs. the inhumane qualities of the spaceship; the slums of Los Angeles as opposed to the oppressive spaces of the "Corporation" in *Blade Runner*; the menacing alleyways of *Dark City* contrasted with highly stylized interior spaces and a utopian dream-like island; and, of course, *Alphaville*'s disturbing portrayal of the oppressive qualities of modern environments. Furthermore, the films all display empathy toward alternative sites, which are portrayed as being "real," and which accordingly suggest a sense of humanity — what urban sociologist Richard Sennett has referred to as "lived-in spaces," which stand in stark contrast to modernist, stylized settings.[33]

THE GLOBAL METROPOLIS OF *CODE 46*

Director Michael Winterbottom's 2003 *Code 46* continues the genre of the science fiction movies discussed above, picking up their theme of alienation. Similar to *Alphaville* and to some extent *Dark City*, it evokes the future without relying on elaborate stage sets or fetishizing technology. Technology here is the "wet" variety — i.e., advances in genetic engineering and biotechnology. According to Brian Goss, it "pivots on a deepening of primordial human experiences. Viruses that enable empathy or learning new languages intensify capacities that are already written into the DNA of the species."[34] In this manner it approximates Andrew Niccol's 1997 *Gattaca*, which envisions a future dominated by genetic testing.

The movie takes place in an unspecified distant future, where damage to the ozone layer has caused large swaths of land to be turned into desert wasteland. People are confined to cities, which are entered via elaborate checkpoints, and movement is controlled through a system of *papelles*, identification cards containing, among other things, genetic information about the carrier. Those without *papelle* — the poor, the disenfranchised, criminals and violators — are not allowed into cities. They are instead confined to living outside, or *afuera*, in a realm where freedom of thought and movement coexist with danger and deprivation.[35] "Code 46" of the title refers to a law that criminalizes any cohabitation between two people of a substantially similar genetic code, which is necessary because of genetic tinkering and excessive bioengineering.

The narrative revolves around the film's heroine, Maria Gonzales, and a corporate investigator, William (**FIGS. 1, 2**). Looming in the background is a large, anonymous transnational corporation that produces the *papelles* and in general controls the lives of the city's inhabitants. The investigator moves deftly between various locales: his home town (Seattle), sleek airport interiors, endless highways, extensive security checkpoints surrounded by swarms of informal vendors (*afuera*), and ultimately the site of his investigations (Shanghai). He meets Maria during an interrogation involving the production of false *papelles*, suspects that she is behind this, and falls in love with her. Subsequent developments involve their entanglement, a suspected "Code 46" violation, and their escape to *afuera*, or what is referred to in the movie as "Jebel Ali" — i.e., Dubai. Their sites of encounter are contrasted: gleaming and anonymous office environments and sterile and hygienic hospital rooms and corridors vs. the vibrancy and vitality of nightclubs, Metro railways (the London Jubilee line), and ethnic restaurants. The final scenes in "Jebel Ali" were actually filmed in the slums of Rajasthan, but could as well have been in Dubai. They depict a somewhat rundown but nevertheless comforting hotel, which Maria and William reach after crossing Dubai Creek in an *abra*, or wooden boat, and after traversing the crowded streets of Deira, home of the city's South Asian migrant population.

Throughout the movie these locales are to some extent interchangeable; in other words, they blend into each other — a deliberate strategy used by the filmmakers to mark this new future and introduce an unsettling element to help defamliarize the present. Everything looks familiar but seems strange at the same time. The filmmakers have referred to their strategy as a form of "creative geography," made possible through the use of "found spaces" and "guerilla filmmaking."[36] Right at the outset, the movie introduces viewers to this approach by seamlessly splicing together scenes from the desert, slums, and the highrises of Shanghai. Moreover, inhabitants of this futuristic world speak a language that is a mixture of English, Mandarin, Arabic and Spanish, further highlighting its transnational, cosmopolitan and interconnected character — by which it resembles present-day Dubai, home to more than 180 nationalities.

FIGURE 1. *Maria, walking through the streets of the future. Source: MGM Media Licensing.*

FIGURE 2. *William, standing triumphantly in front of Dubai's Emirates Towers. This scene did not appear in the movie, but was used in promotional material (DVD covers and the like). Source: MGM Media Licensing.*

Compared to its counterparts — *Blade Runner, Brazil,* or *Dark City* — *Code 46* has not received critical acclaim or cult status. Instead, it has been criticized for its slightly exaggerated narrative and acting. Yet, as many movie critics have pointed out, it is a highly stylized film, in which the director uses various strategies to evoke a mood suggestive of the future, including voiceovers, dream sequences, overlit and overexposed shots, discontinuous cutting, point-of-view shots (mainly from William's perspective), and canted compositions rolling across the screen.[37] These qualities were observed by the London *Guardian*'s Peter Bradshaw, for instance, who located the film in "an alternative present," buttressed with imagery, "profoundly mysterious and intriguing, that lingered stubbornly in my mind for days."[38] *New York Times* movie critic A.O. Scott noted that Winterbottom "delineates a time of global mobility, extreme inequality, and radical loneliness, distilling the fugitive moods of contemporary life into an ambience of muted, abstracted longing."[39]

Science fiction movies are, of course, invariably a critique of the present, and *Code 46* is no exception. It hauntingly reflects a time of global mobility, when increasing numbers of migrant workers live a transient existence in anonymous global cities, in which there is an intensification of social divisions, and where extreme squalor coexists with pristine, gleaming new architecture. As such, its use of existing locales seems to further intensify this notion without great exaggeration. In his discussion of the "New Metropolis" and the role of *Code 46*, Scott wrote that "there is luxury and squalor, a mobile elite served and enriched by an army of transient workers, an architectural hodge-podge of pristine newness and ancient disorder."[40] This is the very stuff that dominates contemporary literature on global cities. Indeed, as Scott keenly noted, this is "the kind of thing you see everywhere." Similarly, architectural critic Geoff Manaugh has argued that the movie "finds trace elements of tomorrow in the unremarked landscapes of today."[41] Brian Goss, in perhaps the only scholarly discussion of the movie, made a somewhat similar claim, observing that *Code 46* is a clear critique of the present, explicating a spatialized, striated global class by highlighting the inside/outside division. Thus, the movie "interrogates and refuses a facile assumption of a 'Narrative of Progress,'" and becomes a "penetratingly critical re-visioning of Now."[42]

The choice of Shanghai, Hong Kong, London and Seattle as settings for the film is no surprise, since these cities are representative of a Western/Asian modernity, and thus are suited to casting the city of the future. However, the choice of Dubai to enhance and intensify the narrative — especially some of the chosen locales within it — is intriguing. As I will show in the next section, however, the choice was deliberate and reflects characteristics of the city's contemporary population, architecture and landscape that make it quintessential as a representative of the city of the future.

THE DUBAI PARADOX

Dubai as a Fictional Site. In *Code 46*, the city of Dubai, referred to as Jebel Ali, offers the two protagonists a haven, a refuge. Parts of it are *afuera*, but it is in these places that they are finally at peace — in the midst of a mix of cultures, languages and people. Interestingly, these scenes were shot in the alleys of Deira — Dubai's historic center — across the Khor (Creek) from and in the shadow of its skyscrapers. It is here that Maria and William manage into escape to a run-down hotel for a passionate encounter, away from the prying eyes of an all-powerful corporation. These scenes, taking place at the end of the movie, are key to our understanding of the paradox of Dubai — the juxtaposition of the utopian and the dystopian.

It is rare for Dubai to be represented in movies. There are a few exceptions, including the political thrillers *Syriana* (Stephen Gaggan, 2005) and *Body of Lies* (Ridley Scott, 2008). The former, in particular, delves into social/political commentaries pertaining to the city, and it uses its skyline as a backdrop for the unfolding of the narrative. Both films, however, play on the notion of Dubai as a transit point for goods, ideas and people. Along these same lines, Dubai is briefly noted as a global magnet for call girls in Steven Soderbergh's *The Girlfriend Experience* (2009). In addition, a recent local movie by the Emirati filmmaker Ali Mostafa, *City of Life* (2009), focuses on the lives of Dubai's migrant and local population — more or less exposing clichés about various ethnic groups. The use of the city as a backdrop for science fiction is unique to *Code 46*, however, even though its rapid growth, spectacular (and sometimes bizarre) architecture, and elaborate infrastructure (roads, metro, etc.) might lend it to futuristic visions. Dubai's demographic composition, consisting of a majority of transient workers and a minority local population, raises further pertinent issues about the future of cities in an age of globalization and transnational networks.

These same issues were cited by Michael Winterbottom when he was asked about his choice of Dubai as a locale. First, he pointed out that his selection was partially based on the city's "look" — skyscrapers rising from the flat desert — which is an "artificial, arbitrary kind of building." He compared this to the recent rise of Pudong/Shanghai, since both cities have been developed in a short time and thus defy easy categorization. But he also said he was interested in the social/political implications of a city that is not directly part of a nation, and one whose population is largely transient. "You're in the system or outside the system," he said.[43] Brian Goss, in his analysis of the movie's locale, made a similar claim, noting that Jebel Ali (Dubai) is "presented as a 'free port' that is Outside of the regime of metropoles that are incorporated into the global management/production/consumption chain." In a further insightful description of the liberating qualities of *afuera*, he suggested that the director deliberately presented the city as "lively and full of visual
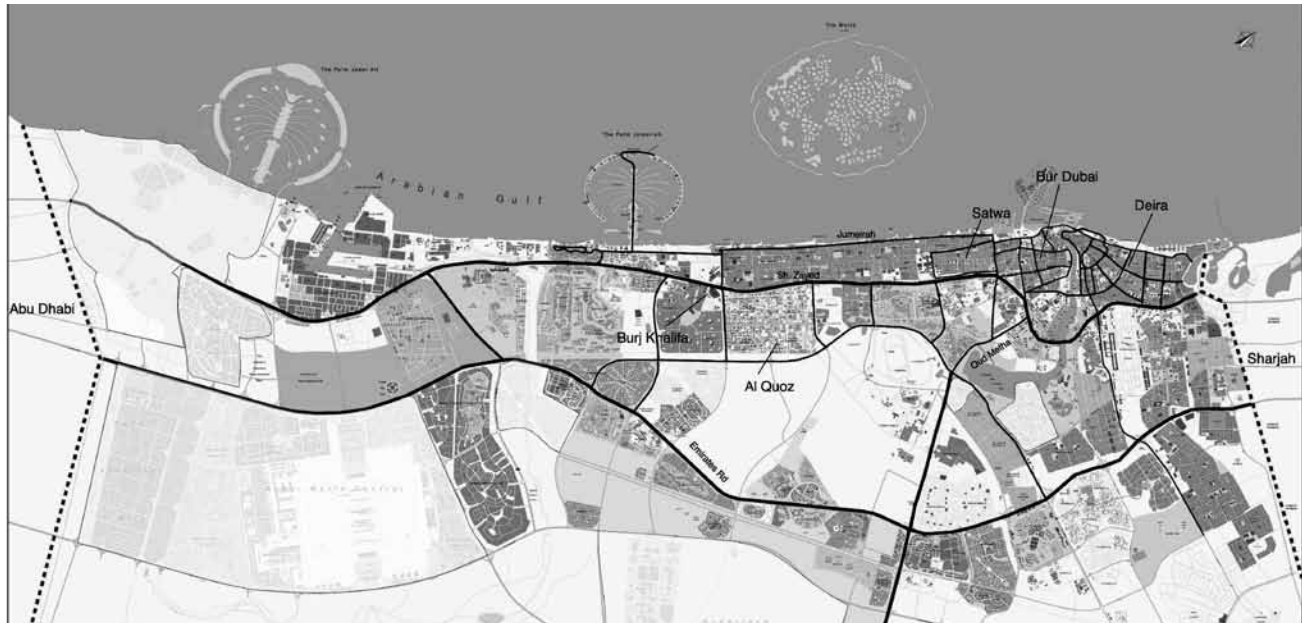
FIGURE 3. *Map showing Sheikh Zayed Road and the district of Satwa within the larger context of the city. Drawing by author based on map from the Road and Transportation Authority, Dubai.*

idiosyncrasy as compared with the sterile vistas inside the globally-incorporated metropoles. . . . [T]he place is neither sentimentalized nor pathologized."[44]

The scenes involving Dubai may be familiar to those who have lived in the city, but they may appear wildly exotic to others. For example, they do not include any of the city's familiar landmarks; instead, its architecture is framed within a context that highlights the surrounding desert. Early on, the film offers a swooping aerial view of the desert, showing isolated compounds and huts in the foreground with high-rises emerging in the background — a magical and highly unsettling portrayal. Another recurring image is of moving endlessly along a highway through the desert. And perhaps the movie's most poignant and romantic moment comes when the two protagonist are on a wooden boat (*abra*) crossing the creek, surrounded by an army of transient workers from the Indian subcontinent. Subsequent scenes merge/blend streets and alleyways of Dubai and India.

The Context of Dubai. The particular choice of Dubai as a locale for a science fiction movie is intriguing, but it seems perfectly appropriate given that the city contains both utopian and dystopian elements in its built environment. It is beyond the scope of this article to delve into the city's specific patterns of urban growth, but I should note that it has grown in a way that has led to this futuristic appearance.[45] Its linear extension from the historic core of Deira/Bur Dubai toward the manmade free port of Jebel Ali, at the border with Abu Dhabi — a stretch of approximately 40 kilometers, mostly along Sheikh Zayed Road — has created a settlement pattern characterized by isolated communities and "cities" branch-

ing from a single axis **(FIG. 3)**. This narrow expanse is surrounded by desert areas still waiting to be filled, which creates a situation where new buildings are set off against a prevailing emptiness. The recent opening of Dubai Metro, whose raised viaduct traces this linear pattern, further contributes to the sense of futuristic alienation **(FIG. 4)**.

Given the financial crisis, many of the projects planned to fill in spaces along this development axis have been either cancelled or put on hold. They were, however, coming to rely increasingly on the bizarre and utopian, with each new plan seemingly more spectacular than the last. These included the ill-fated Waterfront by Rem Koolhaas, a bizarre attempt to transplant Manhattan into the desert **(FIG. 5)**; the massive Arabian Canal project, which aimed to carve a canal — reaching a width of more than 200 meters in places — through the desert; and the Bawadi project, which would have contained the world's largest hotel, Asia-Asia, and a re-creation of the Las Vegas strip (without the vice). These ultra-luxurious developments were planned to rise in sight of scenes of extreme squalor and deprivation — in true dystopian fashion. These include the city's notorious labor camps in Sonapur and Jebel Ali, set in remote areas of the desert. But they also include areas within the city itself, such as Al Quoz, which contains numerous worker accommodations, and illegal residences in Deira, Jafliyah and Satwa.

The presence of these sites intensifies societal divisions and spatializes inequality. In this way the divisions expressed in *Metropolis, Blade Runner, Brazil*, and *Dark City* find affirmation in Dubai. *Dark City*, in particular, in its depiction of a constantly shifting cityscape, echoing the disloca-

tion of its inhabitants, seems to resemble the Dubai of today with its constantly changing skyline and rapid urban growth (until the financial crisis). And in *Blade Runner,* where the streets of Los Angeles are taken over by migrants speaking multiple languages, the extent of deprivation comes close to that in some parts of Dubai. Yet what is of more interest to me is the coexistence of squalor and wealth and the degree to which residents in these spaces have carved out an existence that seems to defy marginalization.[46]

The Case of Satwa. The one site which truly evokes the Dubai paradox — that best captures these utopian/dysto-pian imaginaries, and thus perhaps the ultimate location of

FIGURE 5. *The Waterfront project by OMA/Rem Koolhaas. Courtesy of Nakheel Media Center.*

afuera (without the checkpoints) — is the Satwa district. It exemplifies the modern urban condition and is a site of contention and struggle involving the state, local citizens, and migrant workers (both legal and illegal). Its very location and existence defies the official Dubai narrative, suggesting an alternative mode of urbanity that is indicative of a potentially more viable future.

The district is nestled in the shadows of Dubai's skyscrapers on Sheikh Zayed Road, and was developed in the late 1960s by Sheikh Rashid, the city's previous ruler, to provide decent housing for the local population on identical 60 x 60-foot plots. Nationals eventually moved to outlying suburbs in the 1970s and 80s, and turned their houses over to low-income workers. Today these houses are mostly occupied by people from the Indian subcontinent, but they are also home to a sizeable population of Arabs and, interestingly, Bidoon, who are stateless people, immigrants from the 1970s who for various reasons did not apply for citizenship when the United Arab Emirates was formed in 1971. They and their descendants are without official papers — *papelles* — and thus are deprived of various privileges allotted to Emiratis. Many Bidoon hail from Iran and belong to the Shiite sect, further adding to their marginalization. Some symbols of their presence exist, such as yellow flags indicating political allegiance to Shiite factions in Lebanon, as well as the presence of Husseiniyas, sites of religious celebrations.

Satwa is among the most densely populated areas of Dubai, housing more than 100,000 people. Given the high concentrations of low-income workers and illegal residents (those whose permits have expired — another allusion to the *papelle* system), the area is popularly perceived among locals as a site of criminal activity and gangsterism. This sense of insecurity is intensified as one enters the district, passing down its narrow alleyways. There one can observe various signs of "disorder" such as graffiti, broken sidewalks, outdoor drying of laundry — all a stone's throw from the city's most visible landmarks: the Emirates Tower, seat of Dubai government, and the massive Burj Khalifa. Some of these houses are nothing more than metal shacks cobbled together from found materials; others feature living areas — sofas and couches surrounded by wooden fences — outdoors. At night the district's alleyways become sites of gathering for residents and visitors, who appear as shadowy figures among the ruins (**fig. 6**).

The neighborhood's reputation as a home to outlaws, a space that defies the city's official representation, and its closeness to the seat of power eventually prompted officials to plan for its redevelopment. This task was allocated to a governmental entity, Meraas Holding, which was supposed to operate as a real estate agency, developing various sectors of old Dubai, including Satwa. Detailed plans were kept under wraps until October 2008, when a model of the development was unveiled at the Cityscape exhibition under the name "Jumeirah Gardens." The cost of the project was estimated at Dh350 billion (US$95.28 billion). It was described as "a

figure 6. *An outdoor living room in Satwa. The skyline of Sheikh Zayed Road appears in the back. Photo by author.*

fully integrated, mixed-use development project located in the old Satwa area west of Sheikh Zayed Road and flanked by Al Diyafa Street and Safa Park," which would cater to 50,000 to 60,000 residents. According to the developer, "[It] will redefine living in one of the most popular neighbourhoods of Dubai," which, it was casually observed, is "currently undergoing demolition to pave the way for the new project."[47]

The master plan included three buildings by the Chicago architects Adrian Smith and Gordon Gill (Smith+Gill). The centerpiece was 1 Dubai, a building comprising three towers connected by sky bridges. Other buildings would be spread throughout the gigantic development, along with smaller towers and a park "half the size of Central Park." Among its features were also seven islands to be built just off the coast as sites for mostly lowrise, residential buildings. A 14-kilometer boulevard with a tram system would snake through the project, while water taxis would be available on a network of canals. According to Gill, the project was envisioned as a utopian site — given the lavishness and extravagance of its architecture — implicitly acknowledging that it was not that realistic to begin with.[48] But this was not how the government saw it. It announced that Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid, vice president of the U.A.E. and ruler of Dubai, had created Meraas to help "make Dubai a global city." It also noted the significance of this project for Dubai by observing, "Every great city has a great park. London has its Hyde Park, New York has its Central Park. This will be Dubai Park" (**fig. 7 a & b**).[49]

Various media reports have since lamented the old district's supposed demise — describing it in almost mythical terms as Dubai's version of New York's Greenwich Village — a multicultural nirvana. Yet, clearly, this vision was in conflict with how officials viewed it — as a blight on Dubai's urban landscape. To them, the demolition was necessary because of the large number of "illegals" residing in the area. "Around 60–70 per cent of people in Satwa don't have pass-

ports or UAE visas," according to the developer of Jumeirah
Gardens. "They live, six to a room, in buildings completely
unsuitable for inhabitation. When the Land Department
come round to research how many people need rehousing,
they have already scarpered."[50] This view is shared by many
local residents who have told me that they would never dream
of setting foot in Satwa, since it is place infested with gang-
sters and illegal residents. No doubt such views have been
encouraged by media reports.

Thus, following the announcement of the project, steps be-
gan in earnest to implement it. Residents were issued eviction
notices, and building owners — all locals — were compensated
in a somewhat contentious process. Some houses were marked
for demolition using large green signs, and a large open area
was cleared for the developer. Subsequently, fences were erect-
ed among some houses and actual demolition began. However,
in 2009, following the slowdown of the real estate market in

Dubai, the development was put on hold. Consequently, evict-
ed tenants began to return to their "homes."[51] All that is left of
the Jumeirah Gardens fantasy today are fences used to mark
houses slated for demolition and a lonely sign heralding the
construction site lying on the street, a reminder of the results
of excess, greed, and unbridled ambition (FIG.8 A&B). More-
over, some of the remaining ruins have become sites for nightly
criminal activities such as consumption of drugs and liquor,
and others have turned into makeshift residences for illegals.
Satwa, it seems, has received a new lease on life.

Satwa does, in my view, exemplify the modern urban con-
dition by being both a site of utopian ambition as well as a dys-
topian space — marked by otherness and marginalization. Its
residents are excluded and perceived as a threat. Yet, as I have
pointed out already, the discourse on the dystopian marks an
otherness that may disguise real and innovative ways in which
spaces are utilized. For instance, for me, one of the most

FIGURE 8 (A&B). *Remnants of the project can be found throughout the district. Photos by author.*

memorable sights from Satwa came during Ramadan in 2007. It is quite common in various parts of the city to set up what are known as Iftar tents, areas for the city's low-income Muslim population to break their fast. These also serve as communal gathering spaces where residents can reinforce their sense of religious identity and belonging. While they are usually indoors, in this case a large parking space adjacent to the Satwa bus stop was used. The ground was covered with large pieces of cloth while volunteers dispensed food to hundreds of people. In the background to this rather remarkable scene was the Sheikh Zayed Road skyline — representing a stark contrast to the more down-to-earth activity in front of me **(FIG.9)**.

On my way to the Iftar area I also passed various street vendors selling traditional food from India and Pakistan. These scenes provided a stark counterpoint to the flashy image of Dubai. Poor and not-so-poor immigrants gathered together to celebrate a religious event, which in some way also represented an attempt to subvert the surrounding spectacle. Similar to the *afuera* in *Code 46*, it was also a space of comfort and freedom.

THE FUTURE HAS ARRIVED IN DUBAI

> *"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:*
> *Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"*
> *Nothing beside remains. Round the decay*
> *Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare*
> *The lone and level sands stretch far away.*
> — Percy Bysshe Shelley, 1818

According to some observers, Dubai is a present-day version of Winterbottom's future. It is a land of contrasts — rich and poor, desert and greenery, big and small, real and sur-

FIGURE 9. *A gathering of low-income Muslims during Iftar (breaking of the fast) in a parking lot in Satwa. Photo by author.*

real.[52] And some of its most iconic landmarks, such as the Burj Khalifa, have been inspired — it seems — by fictional movies. Indeed, Adrian Smith, its architect, has admitted to being influenced by the gleaming towers of Emerald City in *The Wizard of Oz* rising in the midst of poppy fields: "I just remembered the glassy, crystalline structure coming up in the middle of what seemed like nowhere."[53]

This notion of buildings rising from the desert, and being surrounded by the desert, was a drawing factor for the director of *Code 46* as well. But, as I have tried to argue here, the surreal landscape and architecture, while certainly evoking the future, does not suffice to explain the utopian/dystopian qualities of Dubai. Instead, my focus has been on its marginal spaces, inhabited by the excluded and the forgotten, a recurrent theme in most science fiction movies — and one that is particularly pertinent in interrogating the city of Dubai and its place within the global network of cities and as a site for a migrant and transient population.

What should be noted is that these "marginal sites," by definition, cannot be "designed." They are places that celebrate the informal, the spontaneous, and the incidental. Providing design recipes in the form of guidelines, for example, would undermine their very essence. Instead, architects and planners need to develop an empathetic understanding and provide a framework that allows for such settings to develop without hindrance. Literature on informal urbanism already deals with this issue in great detail.[54] Policies should not be aimed at sanitizing spaces and removing unsightly activities — a common thread uniting all aspects of urban development in the Gulf region; rather, they should be inclusive, aiming to incorporate all aspects of city life, instead of focusing only on what is deemed appropriate or safe.

In the final scene of *Code 46*, Maria has been relegated to *afuera*. She is lonely, aged and desolate, but finally free and liberated, as can be glimpsed from the glimmer in her eyes and her fond remembrance of William. This is contrasted with his mindless existence — induced by forced amnesia — in Seattle, going about his daily routine in the midst of gleaming towers and an immaculate apartment. While there is certainly a danger here of romanticizing deprivation, such imagery suggests an implicit critique of present-day conditions which relegate inhabitants of global cities to anonymity and deprive them of their humanity. Instead, these sites of resistance have important human qualities and testify to the resilience of the human spirit in a manner that is sometimes forgotten by urbanists and planners. Urban sociologist Abdoumaliq Simone has poignantly noted that in striving to make cities more livable for all, architects and planners should not just focus on the "misery" of inhabitants, which will inevitably make their conditions worse. Instead, they need to uncover the world that these residents inhabit, "however insalubrious, violent, and banal they might often be."[55]

The choice of Dubai as a site for the examination of these issues is significant because it suggests that the future has already arrived in this city — unlikely as that may seem. More common are references to Shelley's "Ozymandias" in the wake of the financial crisis, suggesting that the city has reached a dead end and that it will finally be swallowed by the desert. If the focus is on the spectacular and the unusual, such prophecies may have some value; but the city has much more to offer, and in its forgotten spaces are the locales and sites of our urban future.[56] As Merrifield has noted, while we may invent utopias, we never really want to live in them, for "living in them means the end of novelty, fantasy and curiosity; everything would become routine, never adventure, the death-knell to the human spirit."[57]

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