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The In/Visible City: Cinema, Control and Contemporary Hong Kong

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Introduction

Starting from the mid-nineteenth century, fiction authors began to write novels in which 'the other side of the city' was key. Unlike the sci-fi adventures that we had already seen with writers like Jules Verne and H.G. Wells, there were now quite some attempts (more philosophical, more political) to somehow capture how the city was in change on a more 'unconscious' level; what happened at the dark side of the city, the unseen part of the city, the city unheard of and so on. Two books need to be looked again. First, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, in his *Notes from Underground* ([1864] 2018), asks us to take a second look at life in St Petersburg, claiming that beneath its glittery surface, it was actually the most artificial and intentional city of his world. Later, Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* ([1920] 1972), published in English translation in 1924, introduced us to the glass city of One State, a city set up and very much under control of a

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new 'type' of government, a highly influential theme it turned out, notably to Aldous Huxley, George Orwell and the writers of that generation (Fig. 10.1).

Of course, both books (Dostoyevsky and Zamyatin) reflect the crisis of the city as these writers experienced it in their times. Dostoyevsky had just visited Paris in 1863 (a year before publishing his *Notes*), its centre being almost completely rebuilt by then (in a neo-classicist style), and the existentialist experiences of a city which now seemed to have been

Fig. 10.1 Sticker featuring Joker, decorating the streets of Hong Kong, 20 October 2019, photo by the author

covered up by uniform facades drive the narrative of the book. *Notes from Underground* makes us feel what it is like to live in such a 'modernized' city, a city which one does not recognize anymore, and in which one is also not recognized anymore. Its grand boulevards, its open construction, but also the people that walk its streets, show us how the 'facelessness' of the new city, its utopianism and denial of pain and fear, does not match with the lives of underground man and the people he engages with. But *Notes from Underground* is thereby not just a reflection upon the impossibility of life in the modern city in his day and age. This book talks just as well of the cities yet to come. This is the urban life not just of people of St Petersburg or of Paris; what Dostoyevsky foresaw has been realized in many ways; it is the new invisibility that we, city dwellers, all inhabit. It is the new invisible city we live.

Zamyatin gave us a reflection on the city of about sixty years later, a 'nearly-the-end-of-the-world' futurism, with an almost transparent city, a city of harmony and wonderfully organized, thanks to the strong presence of the state. Of course, the narrative unfolded here resonates with the way especially Soviet communist rule was able to redefine urban life ruthlessly, and how it managed to realize a new society in peace/fear. Zamyatin confronts us with a city of numbers; the schools, the butchers, everything was numbered (which indeed happened in Soviet times, and is still quite common in contemporary Russia). In the book even the main characters were numbered. Zamyatin presented us the datafied city (often strangely referred to in our days, as a 'smart' city). And the society he foresees is equally real to the one presented to us by Dostoyevsky. This time, however, the glass city is new visibility we, city dwellers, all inhabit. It is the new visible city we live.

The times of Zamyatin, the 1920s, were, even more so than the mid-nineteenth century, revolutionary. The many changes that redefined the city also gave it a new form of expression. A 'medium' which, compared to the written word, seemed much more integrated into city life itself, materially, ideologically, economically. Or perhaps I should say that this new form of expression matched the new and exciting cities that had rapidly reshaped urban life since the interbellum much better, on a global scale. Of course, I am referring to cinema now. The medium of appearance and disappearance. It is no coincidence that in the 1920s the work

of Georges Mélies, an illusionist by training, was appreciated again, and considered to have given the moving image its foundation. Cinema had always been the medium of appearance and disappearance, of making things visible and of making things invisible.

During the interbellum, cities like Shanghai, Moscow, Berlin, Paris, New York and Chicago all exploded in terms of energy, size and height (with New York as its icon), giving the city a new fabric, a new image, a new feel. In no time, the idea of the city had little in common with the cities as we knew them from before World War I. And with this new city, we saw this new medium, cinema, gaining importance. Of course, there was a very good reason, that the prominent intellectuals of the days, from Bergson to Eisenstein, felt the urge to analyse this new medium for the masses, its technical and aesthetic possibilities and its political dangers: they understood that somehow, cinema mattered to how the city and its communities were in change, to how we witnessed the rise of a new city, a new life. These were proper philosophers, as they understood that "Philosophy is an anticipation of future thoughts and practices" (Serres and Latour [1990] 1995, 86). Cinema had to be analysed thoroughly, in the name of the future.

Published in German in 1925, Thea von Harbou's novel *Metropolis*, in many ways, combined the speculations of Dostoyevsky and Zamyatin. Situated in a uniform, technologically advanced city in the future, run by a very powerful government, von Harbou's protagonist who lives a decent life in the high-rise city falls in love with a person from the underworld, the dark and unknown parts of town, home to the lower classes. With flares of existentialist philosophy, and a strong spiritual, reflective tone, the book gives us a good idea what the novel can do, and how the city and the novel together, since the mid-nineteenth century, revealed the realities of social change, of class struggle and of the 'existential crises' that the whole process of modernization was unfolding.

Thea von Harbou was married to Fritz Lang, and together, two years after the publication of the novel, they finalized the movie *Metropolis* (1927). The movie was terribly expensive and didn't do very well in the theatres at first. But in the end, this movie would, in every way, reveal the new visibility/invisibility of the city differently.

Many Metropoles

In two ways, the movie *Metropolis* expressed the new ideas on the visible and the invisible city very differently from how this was done in the novel *Metropolis*, or even, different from how this was expressed in the history of writing. Or more precisely even: in two ways the movie *Metropolis* introduces us to the in/visible city that could not exist in the novel. This city came into existence because of cinema.

First of all, in the movie, it was not so much the people, but the massive skyscrapers that seemed to form the most important population of the newest cities (mainly in the new world, of course). This is obvious if we analyse how movies like *Metropolis*, and the many movies that practice this theme afterwards, work with their chiaroscuro. Chiaroscuro, the Italian Renaissance technique of painting with shadows, is translated in how the moving image practices appearance and disappearance with light and shadow. And this time, it is not the human face but the skyscraper, or better, the cluster of skyscrapers and the way the cameras and the sun (or an artificial source of light) relate to them, that matters: "Shadows of houses pursue the man running along the street" (Deleuze [1983] 1986, 51). Chiaroscuro was of crucial importance to the affordances of humanism since the renaissance, and now, with cinema highlighting this new urban space, its character and its style became of crucial importance to the affordances of the (new) city and the kind of life it allowed.

Secondly, much more so than in the novel *Metropolis*, in which the idea of the city was translated into existentialist and spiritual reflections of the protagonist, the movie explores the technological environments of humanity. In the movie, this new (shady) urban space seemed to ask for all sorts of (future) information, communication and transportation technologies. Unknown and unforeseen, all of these technologies were in many ways alienating us from each other. Through technology, the movie portrays a society subjected to objects of technology, to its powers and their consequences. Powers that were unimaginable to us before. This is the part we did know: that technology would somehow always benefit the powerful (or those who owned the technology and knew how to make use of it, for their own benefit). Technologies are not primarily

tools to redact one's environment. Technologies are ways of sharpening the hierarchies (of capitalism) and of gaining social and political control.

In the movie *Metropolis*, technology plays a key role in the opposition between the powerless and the powerful. The high-rise apartments of the upper class, enlightened, spacious, clean and with tall windows, form a sharp contrast with the overcrowded, dark and dirty alleys of the underworld. This is the same opposition, as between the 'workers' and the 'thinkers'. Whereas with the first image the distance is realized by architecture, the intervention of the robots and by what was called 'the M-Machine' was needed to secure the second. Of course, in the movies that would continue this line of thought, this relationship between technology and power became more and more complex, and important, for both cinema and the city.

We need to keep in mind though that in our times cinema works differently from the cinema in the Interbellum and plays a different role in the everyday life of the city. The movie theatre (or the bioscope, to use its old and (etymologically) much more interesting name) is, on the one hand, no longer a dominant force in the streets, in the city centres of the world, as today, if these theatres are even 'in' the city, they have often moved to its outskirts, and are hidden within big multiplexes. On the other hand, the projection is no longer the analogue reflection of the city lights, but much more its digital imitation (the digital fakes reality, it is by all means a simulation as D.N. Rodowick so nicely puts (2007)). Cinema expresses symbolic information; it is not indexical anymore.

Nonetheless, although cinema itself may have transformed beyond recognition, movement-vision, which is that which produces our shared cinematographic eye, still functions in a similar way. Movement-vision still produces the vanishing point; an imaginary black hole located at the horizon into which all diagonals seem to disappear. It still desires a single light source, that is the sun, which organizes colour, produces illumination and shade, according to which the eye and the spectacle move. And lastly, mirroring the vanishing point, it is within the cinematographic eye (of the beholder), the focal point, where entire presentation, where the resonating lines and colours scattered around the picture turn into a fixed rhythm, come together and form the scene. In other words, the way cinema practices subjectification has not changed at all. In fact, with the

further rise of the city and its new forms of control, the cinematographic eye seems to have become only more important.

What matters to analysis is therefore not so much the type of sign that cinema produces (the way in which the image re/presents reality). Rather, what matters is how the moving image resonates with the contemporary, how the rhythms of visual culture and the city respond to one another, mimic one another, develop, in relation to each other. One could say that cinema, as it came into existence in the 1920s, has been lost for good, since it is not related to 'space' in a similar way (movies are produced on the computer (and not in the city) and consumed in the suburbs, and perhaps even primarily, on the mobile phone). The cinematographic eye, on the other hand, needed the event as a starting point (the city during the interbellum), which, since then, became crucial in the realization of the kino-city, as Kochhar-Lindgren calls it, or the in/visible city as I referred to it. The rise of this new city in the end means that we entered an age in which the dominant forces of change turned visual/material, as he concludes (2020, 112):

> Screenings now organize the space of the city as the spheres of entertainment, surveillance and law enforcement, the economics of banking and shopping, the politics of social movements and elections, and the multiple modes of transportation that are folded together into overlapping digital networks.

Cinema needed the event to come into existence, and to persevere in being, similar to the in/visible city itself.

An Idea in Cinema

The in/visible city is in many ways an idea in cinema. Notwithstanding the way in which novels have explored this theme from Dostoyevsky to Zamyatin to the current writings of authors like China Miéville (think of his novel the City and the City (2009) in which two cities occupy the same space at the same time), or even questioning the reality of literature's cities in the contemporary even. All the cities that literature

proposed to us already exist and come into existence over and over again; the 'other sides' they portray will continue to step forth from, and resonate with, the urban realities that we are engaged in today. Yet, the urban narratives explored by the movement image are in many more ways resonating with the urban spheres today.

Perhaps this is because, notwithstanding the existentialist and spiritual questions that contemporary city life is posing us, the megalopolises that dominate the world today (the clusters of cities that can often be found at the bigger deltas of the world, and rarely in the 'former West') are more than ever dominated by the dehumanizing BIGNESS (as Rem Koolhaas once called it in his manifesto Bigness, or the problem of Large (in Koolhaas a.o. 1995)) of their construction work rather than by the people that live there. The web of faceless skyscrapers masters the light and darkness (day and night), and the workers (the 99% as we now tend to call them) live according to them. Also, the communication technologies that traverse these spheres, not so much labelled 'robots' or M-machines but known—more abstractly—as algorithms, are the other dominant players of today. Buildings are the body of the megalopolis today, the algorithms of communication technology, their soul. Much like Fritz Lang and Tea von Harbou explored this with their movie on the in/visibility of Metropolis.

Perhaps this is also the case because the moving image, more so than literature, was able to show us, since the 1920s, how the city was being pulled apart, that those in power (the 1%) lived a completely different life compared to the 99%. When Karatani rereads Marx and Hobbes, he tells us that the kind of governance we associate with the state—but which he considers fundamental to all 'advanced' sedentary social organizations, to any kind of 'social contract' in the Hobbesian sense if you will—is never realized within a single community, and "that this kind of sovereign is not born from within the community through a process of self alienation, but rather originally comes from the outside—in other words, that the sovereign arrives as a conqueror" (2014, 69). This is very much in line with how Deleuze and Guattari ([1972] 1984), in Anti-Oedipus, talk about the merchant and the tradesman in the 'the primitive system' as they called it (within which the state/capitalism existed but was prevented to surface), whereas in the societies that followed, the merchant and the

tradesman (and especially the network they were a part of) became the dominant form of social organization; in other words, "the death of the primitive system always comes from without" ([1977] 1983, 195). The rise of the city, which is the rise of a new capitalist sovereignty, is expressed through the cinematographic, as it is the moving image which shows us best how this new sovereignty arrives (necessarily) as a conqueror; aiming to redefine all that matters according to a new spatial regime, making the politics of visibility central to its idea.

Let me be very precise on what it means to 'have an idea in cinema'. In a lecture given at the FEMIS film school on 17 March 1987, Gilles Deleuze starts by saying that having an idea in cinema is a rare thing, just as having an idea in philosophy or in any other field doesn't happen very often. Henri Bergson, in the beginning of the twentieth century, had already said that philosophers, no matter how many writings they produce, had only one key idea, one main principle that was their guidance throughout their career. Deleuze seems to follow this line of thought, would perhaps say that 'having an idea' is even more rare. To have an idea in something happens only several times in a generation.

There are two very important thoughts connected to how Deleuze talks about ideas, which should be explored here. Firstly, there is Deleuze's insistence (we may call this his materialist insistence) that ideas cannot but happen 'in something'. As he puts it (2006, 312, italics in original):

> Ideas have to be treated like potentials already engaged in one mode of expression or another and inseparable from the mode of expression, such that I cannot say I have an idea in general.

This 'engagement' Deleuze refers to means that the in/visible city is inseparable from the 'mode of expression' called cinema; that the in/visible city expressed itself in many (different and profound) ways in cinema. The in/visible city happens in the moving images of skyscrapers, in the technologies that surround them, and in the people living according to them, as the analysis of *Metropolis* (the movie) above already shows.

The second thought that I find particularly useful in Deleuze's lecture, and that has not received enough attention in what has been discussed (but that will change), is the thought that such an idea in cinema realizes

itself, in the moving image, through a 'cycle'. He introduces this term as such (idem, 319/20):

> a cycle that suddenly makes cinema resonate with the qualitative physics of the elements. It produces a kind of transformation, a vast circulation of elements in cinema starting with air earth, water and fire.

To claim that the in/visible city is an idea in cinema deeply engaged with the current city, then it starts by acknowledging that such a 'cycle' cannot be found in literature, in theatre or in other artforms of importance before. I started this chapter by showing that in literature there have been many writers who have an eye for the other side of the city, the dark side of town. And of course, these interests have also surfaced in other art forms. Of course, looking at how the Futurists—already in the 1910s—imagined the cities to come, the high-rise buildings combined with rapid transportation systems (as we saw them in the drawings of Antonio Sant'Elia for instance), may remind us of the cities that cinema presented them to us later. But let us not forget that for the Futurists, especially as they got more fascinated by fascism, cities were an ideal, something to strive for. For them, these modern cities (that seem to miss out on people, that seem not interested in the human scale, in human interaction even) were not only technologically but also psychologically and sociologically a major improvement to life.

In cinema, however, almost since the industry properly took off in the last years of the nineteenth century, this kind of optimism seems pretty much impossible. In cinema, the city, with its many different hierarchies (visibly and invisibly), almost has to imagine underground narratives of hopelessness and despair, as the numerous films that somehow tried to capture the radically new and 'inhuman' realities of urban life tell us. The coldness of the concrete, the images of walls spreading darkness, the ongoing technical procedures, that take up so much time; haunted by the high shadows of buildings, the in/visible city leaves little room for reflection, according to the movement image. New York City (a.k.a. Gotham City) served as its favourite example. Since the 1970s, Hong Kong appeared as its oriental double.

Emphasizing the importance of the 'cycle', means that, when we talk about the in/visible city being an idea in cinema, we need to stress that this idea makes both the materialities of cinema and of the city (the megalopolis) to resonate with the narrative on screen. The cycle is thus not so much 'limited to cinema', and actually I guess that the cycles of all ideas necessarily work in at least two modes of expression. In this case it runs through the elements of cinema, but also through the elements of the city. Like a screw, the cycle turns and twists, and connects the different modes of expression, makes them resonate together, makes them belong together, cinema and the city, this time. Deleuze already told us that such 'engagements' are not random, they are a necessity. An idea like in/visibility is thus never simply 'thought of', meaning it is neither a product of the human mind; it is not the I-think (the Cartesian perspective) neither a critique (the Kantian perspective) in response to city life. On the contrary, the cycles of the in/visible city are "given rise to", as Deleuze would put it elsewhere (280), by cinema and the city together. Great filmmakers could only have picked up this idea in relation to how both the matters of cinema and the matters of the megalopolis resonated together. Different in/visibilities were distilled from the vital fabric it functioned in/anticipated upon.

Joker

Todd Phillips' movie *Joker* (2019) offers us an in/visible city, more or less imagined in New York (or more specifically, in the South Bronx) in 1981, the place where he himself (like many of his crew members) grew up. A city which was dominated by worn out, red-brick and concrete high-rise buildings, garbage and waste, sets the stage for an environment that is poor in every way, offering no perspective, no future, to any of its dwellers. The light is dimmed, the rain keeps falling from the sky, there are no trees and hardly any birds in the city. In most of the scenes, when the protagonist returns home late from work, the streets are desolated, as if even the humans have retreated from public space.

Philips situated Arthur Fleck in this environment in a tiny rental apartment with his mentally ill mother. It is an environment in every way

different from the place where his alleged father, Thomas Wayne is said to live. Thomas Wayne, (also) the father of Bruce Wayne, a young boy still in this film but later also known as Batman, is extremely rich, chairperson of Wayne enterprises, a multinational company also in charge of the city's most important media outlets. Wayne enterprises is situated in Wayne tower, and Thomas has already announced running for mayor of Gotham.

Whereas Thomas Wayne is 'connected' to life in so many ways (technologically, socially, economically of course), the life of Arthur Fleck, the person about to transform into Joker, and of his mother, is part of a city where alienation, in the post-industrial sense, is key to how people live their lives. Alienation determines how the 99% relate to the (run down) built environment, the outdated and hardly functioning technology, to the absence of companions with whom we share this earth, including, to our fellow humans. Obviously, this is reflected in Arthur Fleck, the main character of the film, present in almost every scene. Alienation dominates the film, as the individual scenes show us what the forces of capitalism, the powers of Modernity, have accomplished by now; Fleck, the protagonist, supposedly surrounded by others (living in the heart of the city), has to live his life alone, detached from everything around him. Everything that surrounds him is not sympathetic to him, is not in touch with him. Arthur Fleck is invisible.

Invisibility, in so many ways, has turned into the major wound of late twentieth-century (and early twenty-first-century) 'modern times'; both the lives on-screen (in cinema, in all the new mobile and public screens) and the lives off-screen (our neighbours in the condensed megacities that are now populated by 60% of the world's population) take place in solitude. Screamed at by adds, by the masses in the subway, by the fellow travellers with whom we all flow through the interconnected networks of imagined and urban life (if there is any difference between the two at all), one moves alone. And this is not the fate of only 'the lowest' of classes in society, not just the untouchables or the working class; it is the life of the 99%. Especially today, all of us are invisible; all of us live in solitude.

Except, of course, to those in power of course. Big tech firms and states have a very clear vision of every single city dweller on this earth. Practicing intensive human farming, where the subjects are continuously ear

tagging themselves with their mobile phones (paid for by themselves too), all of us are visible in every step that we take.

Perhaps I should refer to this as 'the Marxist moment' in their plots: movies that are somehow playing with the idea of the in/visible city; all seem to be in search of a possible revolution, for a way to turn around the in/visible organization. This revolution is always sincere and needed, and is, in contemporary cinema, all too often embodied by the radical unworldliness of a deeply complex and (often) deeply sadist protagonist. A complex figure it is, as this aesthetic figure necessarily embodies a series of 'layers' (histories, conditions, phantasms) that are twisted and cracked, that are more or less mirroring and incorporating the 'idea' of the city they find themselves in. Embodying the in/visible city, the figure has to be sadist, ready to destroy its loved ones. The twisted and cracked layers of history that come together in this figure always have a very strong desire to express themselves by means of a series of highly aggressive physical attacks, directed at the status quo, at normality. A scattered and scattering persona, Joker, as he completes the last stage of his metamorphosis, and acts and looks like the character we remember from the comic books, seems to have switched positions with the 1%, but not by taking over the power to keep the status quo. On the contrary, still the underground man, its aim is to finally dismantle society, to dismantle all of its inhabitants. Always happy to feed our deepest, darkest and most destructive desires, Joker, with a smile, not so much 'introduces' evil to the city, but rather unveils the frustrations and darkest desires that were essential to the in/visible city in the first place.

Of course, the smile is crucial here. The smile is often symbolizing the Joker's madness, his abnormality, and places him in sharp contrast with the Batman, the saint, he who wants to restore normality, and who has never been caught smiling. This time, however, is it the smile which grants Joker his visibility. Like a Cheshire cat, it is the smile that remains.

It is remarkable that, although with little knowledge of what caused the smile, we, the spectators, have previously always been convinced of the presumed madness of Joker, even when he was played by Heath Ledger (in the *Dark Night* trilogy), whose performance already gave us a Joker that actually could have been one of us. Still, we were not supposed to sympathize too much with this figure. On the contrary, the response

to Joker has always been that we were longing for the moment the horror was over (near the end of the movie), we were longing to see Gotham City return to normality, the city as it was 'before' the revolution. The Batman, the invisible disguise of the super wealthy Bruce Wayne, fortunately, restored normalcy. Joker was of course not so much defeated, but at least he was invisible again. Taking off his mask (/paint) Joker left the scene, the bat could return to its cave. Alas, Bruce Wayne and his companions were visible again, in control of Gotham City. Normalcy had returned.

So many histories come together in this idea. Growing to fame in the 1920s, the comic books that gave rise to the superheroes were already working with an urban dystopia, though one could argue that for them, it was—more simply—the dysfunctional city that they were struggling with. Perhaps we should say that this was even the era in which the dysfunctional city was seen as the dysfunctional society, as the epicentre of the many wounds that had surfaced in European and American cities after World War I and that would necessarily lead to World War II. In the 1920s, too much happened at the same time, in terms of economics, in terms of art, but of course also in terms of politics (the rise of Fascism) and urbanization. A traumatizing time, in many ways, and perhaps only the superheroes (the abnormal, not to be confused with the 99%) were considered capable of bringing bring back the normal again. In different ways, in different times, they kept on doing so ever since. Todd Phillips' 2019 version of *Joker* might be interesting as a 'character study' of how an extremely violent and narcissistic villain comes to be (as the director himself has put it in interviews), it is even more interesting as a cinematographic tale of late capitalism, in which the idea of in/visibility is expressed through the invisibility of Arthur Fleck and the 99%, and the visibility of the smile.

How telling it is that the violence and the destruction, which had always been part of the city, which had been destroying the lives of many since long, are only caught on camera in relation to the smile? Note that Joker started his killing spree only after he was harassed by three young men, 'coincidentally' Wayne Enterprises businessmen, whom he shot as an act of self-defence. Perhaps it was only with the last character, whom he killed while he was already wounded and laying on the floor

defenceless, that Joker took control, replacing Arthur Fleck. As expected, the killings are condemned by Thomas Wayne, who, remembering that the victims were his employees, immediately concluded that all those jealous of his success (of the success of the people in power, the 1%) were clowns. The newspapers, owned by Wayne, immediately, classically, copied this narrative. The people, however, sympathize with Joker, who had always been one of them. They start wearing Joker masks to reveal their sympathy, to make visible that their lives too need to be seen.

"We are all clowns", it is said (and written, on banners during protests) several times near the end of the movie. Not because the people envy 'the success' of Wayne, but because putting on a clown's face makes them visible to their conquerors (the ones in power). Putting on the mask that smiles reveals how their lives, their cities have been destroyed. The mask that smiles expresses the idea that the people and the city share a bad childhood, that remained unnoticed, indeed invisible. Unable to express themselves, since the technology was in the hands of Wayne enterprises.

The cinematographic cycle of in/visibility may have been set in 1981, but in every way 'takes place' in 2019, the year of its release. In so many ways, this cycle connects to city life today, to the late capitalist struggles of today, to the invisibility of those with no power at the start of the twenty-first century, that the idea in cinema it expresses demands a reading of the contemporary.

Just before its release, on 26 September 2019, NBC news reported that movie theatres in America banned Joker costumes in their theatres, following a warning from the US Army. Movie chain AMC banned face masks, make-up or anything that would 'conceal' the face, while Landmark Theatres forbade costumes of any kind. The US Army called Joker a 'potential threat' and spread memos with a warning for a mass shooting in movie theatres, inspired by the violence in the movie. The US Army was following an FBI warning even, in which the bureau signalled the popularity of the Joker character with some seemingly violent internet groups. Given all the publicity that followed and the way it sparked fear with the industry, and the fact that the movie was therefore instantly condemned for its violence, for its 'dangerous message' and for the overall 'nihilism' that marked its main character, it is quite a miracle that in the end the movie turned out to be such a global success. Financially the

movie was a huge money maker with a budget of around sixty million dollars, it raised over one billion dollars with the box offices, making it (and this is very interesting) the highest-grossing R-rated film of all time. In terms of accolades, it was especially the performance by Joaquin Phoenix which gained the film professional recognition, though also the music score (made by the cellist Hildur Guðnadóttir) received much critical acclaim.

Hong Kong

> Whether it's good or bad, it is sometimes very pleasant, too, to smash things. (Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground*, 31)

I was living in Hong Kong the moment I first saw an announcement of *Joker*, in May 2019 already. Hong Kong, the former British colony, 'returned' to China after a hundred-year lease in 1997, saw its rise in the 1970s and 1980s. An unprecedented rise that, as always, happened on many levels. Most obviously, the number of skyscrapers that dominated the city grew dramatically; Hong Kong is still the city with by far the highest number of skyscrapers in the world, with 480 buildings higher than 150 metres, almost doubling New York. Of course, the economy skyrocketed; Hong Kong has since long considered itself the freest economy in the world, and, for the past half a century, it became one of the world's most significant financial centres and commercial ports. Hong Kong also quickly became a global centre for technology and media for East Asia and of course became one of the world's most iconic centres for contemporary cinema, with a thriving industry of itself (with Bruce Lee as a major accelerator in its early days) but also as an iconic image in practically every movie in which the East, the 'Global city', or simply the contemporary urban sphere, had to be expressed.

Regarding its wealth, one final thing needs to be added here: being the freest economy in the world really means that its rulers implemented a quite radical 'laissez-faire' style of capitalism, inspired by Milton Friedman and the Chicago School of Economics. This among others has led to the fact that after its acceleration in the 1970s and 1980s, Hong Kong has by

now turned into the most expensive city in the world, especially in terms of real estate, and is known for its high level of income disparity. Housing a large number of millionaires and billionaires (only New York is said to house more of them, which can be questioned since these days, an almost equal amount of wealth is 'officially' living in neighbouring Shenzhen, and the borders are not waterproof), a significant part of its population lives in poverty, in the tiniest apartments (sometimes no more than 'caged beds'), working long hours under bad conditions.

As with many colonial governments, the Hong Kong government (in colonial times and in the current situation) has hardly implemented any trade control. Termed 'positive non-interventionism' by its financial secretary John Cowperthwaite in 1971, Hong Kong, instead, has been under control of the global forces of capitalism since long. So many of its transformations, as they were realized over the past fifty years, were symptomatic for how capitalism imagines the city, its architecture, its technology, to develop. It makes perfect sense to consider Hong Kong, more even New York, a deeply cinematographic city; to consider the city so very much entangled with the global cinematographic cycle, that the city shapes and is shaped by the movement image. Its neon signs, the Kowloon Walled city with its maze-like street plan controlled by triads, its martial art fighters and street prostitutes, have been replaced by extremely expensive apartments, white-collar (fin-tech) crime and its vertical organization, but its signature is Hong Kong all over. Of course, especially the idea of the darkness is embodied by it.

With unprecedented speed, Hong Kong, over the past decades, has become the model for the contemporary 'glass city', very much according to Zamyatin's ideals; a transparent city run by OneState, known as capital in this case (though the difference between capital and data is practically inexistent these days). Zamyatin's emphasis on numbers (as said, everything is already datafied in his 1920's novel), on totalitarian rule and on seeing the city as a technological organism is still the dream of Communist China it seems, 100 years after Zamyatin saw this happening in the Soviet Union. This way, Chinese cities have already become great examples of how the control societies, that Deleuze predicted in his famous 1990's essay, have been realized. Many of its major cities (including Shenzhen, the city bordering Hong Kong) seem to at least strive to become societies

in which all forms of disciplining (the prison system, the school system, the hospital system, the business system) have merged into one entangled digital system of domination. In Hong Kong, it is (still) capitalism which rules, subjected to the ideals of the 'free market', an equally complex and hierarchical system of organization (as Karatani showed us) but in many ways very different from how the state functions. In fact, over the last decades, Hong Kong is probably the best example of an urban centre made of high-rise glass constructions and data flows. More than any other city in the world, cinema therefore sees the city of Hong Kong (and especially its top floors!) as the archetypical city of control.

Of course, being so much a part of the global arena of capital, Hong Kong cinemas had been the home of many Marvell/Disney superhero narratives in recent years, many of them at least partly shot in this city (or at least pretending to be so). The online trailer of *Joker* was intriguing as it immediately broke with its typical narratives. As we all know, superhero narratives voice the longing for a return to normality, for the defeat of madness; for society's 'strong arm'—in whatever fantastic form—to regain control. And although these films often take place in the major cities of the world, their 'idea' does not so much resonate with the undergrounds (as Dostoyevsky would call them) that have firmly nested themselves in the cities of today. The architecture and the technology are superficially present in these movies. But none of these movies seems to worry about the lives that populate these cities. Practicing an almost fascist desire to return to normality at any cost (not uncommonly, buildings and lives (of the common people) are destroyed in exchange for regaining the status quo without any regret), none of these movies is engaged with the in/visibility of these cities as conceptualized above. The cinematographic lessons learned from *Metropolis* and movies alike are superficially reflected in the chiaroscuro of the skyscraper city, and the camerawork that comes with it. In sum, your average superhero seems to be interested only in restoring normality (the rule of capitalism and the state, and their in/visible strategies) in Hong Kong or New York. The trailers from *Joker* showed us something very different.

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> No hesitations, no delusions. There is only one truth, and only one true way; this truth is two times two, and the true way-four. And would it not be an absurdity if these happily, ideally multiplied twos began to think of some nonsensical freedom—that is clearly, to error? (Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We*, 67)

Unfortunately, after seeing the trailers online, I found out the release date for *Joker* was set for October that year. After spending the summer in Europe, I did return to Hong Kong in October. However, while I was gone, Hong Kong appeared to have turned into a very different city. In the years after the handover in 1997, I had spent more and more time here, and the difficult relation between Hong Kong society, as it was formed under capitalism (under colonial 'rule'), and the new Hong Kong leadership, in ever closer cooperation with the authorities from mainland China, turned out an increasingly problematic issue. The Hong Kong communities had always been ruled by outside forces and when their British rulers were exchanged by rulers from Beijing, they were never even consulted (the handover itself was a deal set up in the 1980s by Margaret Thatcher and Deng Xiaoping and did not involve the voice of the people from Hong Kong). Looking down upon the city, from their multi-million-dollar apartments, the ruling class, made up of capitalists before (with a strong input of the British financial system which connects Hong Kong to New York, Singapore and London and which still rules the world), is slowly being replaced by statesmen from mainland China. And as these rulers, still, more than anywhere in the world, live a life completely different from how the 99% struggles its way through, Hong Kong offers the best possible mis-en-scene for a current day Metropolis.

It is not surprising that the protests that had always been key to this territory, because of its strong rule, and strong hierarchy, have intensified since the handover (especially since the 2014 Occupy Movement in Hong Kong, also known as the Yellow Umbrella Revolution). Starting in May 2019, however, when more and more people got sceptical of a bill would have allowed extradition to jurisdictions with which Hong Kong did not have extradition agreements (including mainland China), a

renewed protest movement grew rapidly, which lead, among others, to a peaceful protest at Victoria Park attended by two million people (which is one third of the total population of Hong Kong) on 16 June 2019. But as results stayed out (the law was abandoned after a while, but the other demands of the protesters were never met), the protests were more and more dominated by frustration and disappointment.

On 20 October, I was in Mong Kok and Tsim Tsa Tsui, on the Kowloon side of Hong Kong, roaming the streets of a city under siege, when police and protesters played cat and mouse. Gone were the days in which the general public went out for peaceful protests, in which they jointly asked their leaders to change the course. Of course they had long felt that things were heading in the wrong direction, that they were heading for a catastrophe, probably since the signing of the Sino-British joint declaration on 19 December 1984. Since May, they turned to the Hong Kong SAR Government, and more in specific, to Carrie Lam, the chief executive of Hong Kong. Who else to turn to? Perhaps their five demands were unreasonable/impossible to meet, but there simply was no road that would lead them to the rulers, there was no way to get inside of the impregnable fortress, as Kafka would have put it.

How else can one express a deeply felt fear, that a disaster is upcoming? In *Joker*, since the start of the movie, Arthur also felt that things were about to go very wrong. He tried everything to prevent it. So, he went to his (nameless) therapist/social worker, played by Sarah Washington, and he complained about the fact that his medication wasn't able to let him live according to the cause of things. Of course, medication could never solve the problems, it was only meant to suppress (or delay) the consequences. And after higher powers decided to stop the counselling and the medication, Washington tried to explain to Arthur that she was not able to get him inside the fortress, and concluded: "listen, nobody gives a shit about us. They don't care about you and they don't care about me either."

It is not easy to see how Carrie Lam could have said anything different to the Hong Kongers. In her media performances she tries to figure as Maria, the character from the movie *Metropolis*, the maternal figure from the working class, noble and idealist, who is able to unite the haves and the have-nots. In the eyes of the protesters, however, she became

Robot-Maria, the artificial double, a sinful and chaotic entity, tasked with leading the change towards the mass destruction of the city.

It was obvious that at the end of October 2019, after the people of Hong Kong found out there was no way to get inside the fortress, that their therapy and medication had stopped and that, despite all their efforts, they would remain invisible to the outside powers that controlled them. Of course, the protesters got bitter, more violent and very frustrated.

Masks

And so, the people of Hong Kong put on their masks. They covered their faces, dressed in black, put on big plastic glasses and sometimes added a yellow construction helmet, in order to become visible, to unite as a group, to speak truth to power. Sometimes they completed their gear with an umbrella, preferably yellow, as a reminder of the 2014 'yellow umbrella revolution', Hong Kong's part of the global occupy movement, in which they, kickstarted by other legislative developments but by the same histories of pain, also protested (and occupied key areas in Admiralty mainly for 77 days). Photo number 2 shows 'Lady Liberty', a statue created by the protesters, dressed accordingly. It was placed at Lion Rock (a rock in Kowloon which offers a view of the city, considered to represent the spirit of the people of Hong Kong) for one night in October 2019 (Fig. 10.2).

The response from control was telling; on 4 October 2019, Chief Executive Carrie Lam invoked the Emergency Regulations Ordinance to impose a law to ban wearing face masks in public gatherings. Confronted with ever more violence, this move could be interpreted as an attempt to curb the ongoing protests, but in every way, its aim was to make those communities searching for a way to be seen, unrecognizable (invisible) as a group, and easily recognizable (visible) for the rulers. Back to square one. Similar to how Thomas Wayne projected all the violence upon the clown, the rulers of Hong Kong projected all the violence upon the single 'rioter', dismissing the long history of violence that preceded it, that lead to this explosion and that would tell the real problem (which was complex, and 'invisible').

Fig. 10.2 Lady Liberty at Lion Rock, Hong Kong, photo by the author

The protests I witnessed on 20 October seemed by all means a highly ritualized scene. A very significant one though. It was a 'regular' protest, the kind of protest that would take place almost every evening back then, and one which, before the corona virus dominated all of our lives, could also take place in many places around the world (from Barcelona to Santiago de Chile, from La Paz to Beirut to Delhi (Jamia Millia Islamia University)). There was a spectre haunting the world in 2019, its presence was caused by many different histories, but everywhere, somehow, the community felt under threat of its outside rulers (capitalism, the state), everywhere the oppression became too much, and caused uproar, violence. Everywhere, city life, somehow, became impossible, and needed to be given a face, needed to be seen. It was no coincidence that the mask of Joker was spotted at many of these protests, in the Halloween celebrations (or local variations upon this theme), at posters, or via stickers.

Somehow, the idea that "we are all clowns" matched the state of the city everywhere. Somehow, the ruins of colonialism, the expanding hierarchies of capitalism, made life impossible. The warning signs were not picked up, an explosion had to follow.

Hong Kong, however, should in many ways be seen as the starting point of these unrests. Or at least as its fulcrum, as so many of the wounds of the world came together here in Hong Kong. With one third of its population hitting the streets, what happened, with a bitter undertone, could be referred to as the choreography of our time.

On that day, a large group of people from all generations was walking down Nathan Road, singing and chanting, up until the moment riot police arrived. This was the sign for the 'civil guard' to step forward. Whereas Joker protected himself with a smile, the black-clad youngsters protected themselves with (yellow) umbrellas and facial masks against heavily armed combat soldiers, many of them were wearing CCTV cameras, had stroboscopes on their helmets (in order to confuse their 'opponents'), and were covering their faces with gas masks. Roadblocks, assembled from stones, building material and fences as found with nearby construction sites, were built to stop the one, water cannons and tear gas, produced in high-tech arms factories across the world, were used to disperse the other. Out of nowhere, the international press and the first aid volunteers rushed to the scene, gathering at the no-man's-land, where the two sworn enemies would never meet, like empires at a boxing match that never commenced. Here, and only here, the images were made that filled the news broadcasts all over the world for months; this was the twenty-first-century warzone, where so many of the wounds from the past 200 years were opened up; reminiscences of colonial pasts, the rise of a twenty-first-century global power, or, more generally, the ongoing struggle for control.

I was standing, with my partner, together with the press and some other 'onlookers', at less than a metre from the scene, on the pavement. Protesters warned us to be careful, perhaps because we were wearing black like them. Overseeing the scene, we saw the protesters pulling back, dispersing across the main street and some backstreets. The front line was only visible because of how the police operated; in large well-organized legions, they marched forward, clearing the streets. Through a

megaphone, in Cantonese, they were ordering the protesters (who had already left the scene) to "stop the violence". Next to the policeman shouting, there was some graffiti of a gun and the words "stop shooting people" and "stop tyranny". Before, the protesters had vandalized stores with public sympathy to mainland China, and the entrances to the MTR stations (following the orders from the SAR Government to stop their services during protests, the company was seen by protesters as a collaborator). Afterwards, facial recognition technology would allow the police to identify perhaps some of the protesters, charge them with rioting, taking part in an illegal assembly, and prosecute them. At this hour, however, there was hardly any violence, from neither side. One protester got tear gas in her eyes and was taken care of by volunteers from the Red Cross.

Joker was released in Hong Kong on 3 October 2019. On 5th at midnight, the anti-mask law went into effect, forbidding any form of face covering (including paint) at a lawful rally or march, unlawful or unauthorized assembly or during a riot. At the protest we visited, the iconic phrase of the movie "we are all clowns" was sprayed with graffiti on the roadblocks and flyovers. Posters and stickers featuring Joaquin Phoenix as Joker, accompanied with the sentence "Mask on, Hong Kong 2019", were to be found throughout town.

The idea of in/visibility, as imagined in cinema and in the post-1920 city, disrupted normality in Gotham City as it disrupted normality in Hong Kong. And this was not just because the protesters copied the face of Joker but because they sensed a common ground. On the contrary, what happened in Gotham City and in Hong Kong, happened simultaneously, by which I mean that the 'cycle', as Deleuze called it, of the idea of the in/visible city, mattered to Gotham City while it mattered in Hong Kong.

The next day, the sun rose for the happy few in the top floors of the skyscrapers and not for the 99% that lived 'underground'.

Towards a Technology of Affect

Deleuze said "The act of resistance has two faces. It is human and it is also the act of art" (2006, 324). This is obviously reflected in *Joker* as a figure, fabricated as a consequence of many histories of violence and especially of how 'the smile' had made his existence since childhood possible and impossible. But of course, all of the make-up, the green hair, the colourful suit, they were all necessary in order for resistance to be realized, to stand out, to be seen. But the creative intervention that was realized with Joker of course included the whole of Gotham City, all of the masks did not cover up the sad face, but uncovered the anger of the people, the frustration. In the end, even, all the violence, the burning of cars and the smashing of the windows, as it happened in the rage when finally, things exploded, uncovered the anger of the people. Contrary to the technologies owned by Thomas Wayne (think of all the media firms that were part of Wayne Enterprises), Joker and the 99% aimed to take back their city through what should be called 'technology of affect'. Grounded in challenging the in/visible, creatively reimagining the objects within reach, a resistance of the underground was realized in a final, ultimate, attempt of the community to question the power of the sovereign. Clearly connecting the deeds of the Hong Kong SAR Government to the will of Beijing, it was a surprise to many that the protesters more and more turned against the forces of capitalism too. But of course this made sense, as especially in rage, blind of fury, the clusters of powers clustering all these histories that caused this impossible situation had to be pushed out of the city altogether. This was the moment that all the sovereigns had to go.

More than ever (in the globalized world of today), control comes from elsewhere, from outside the community, and the means to realize control, especially now, have little to do with what is available in the streets anymore. The facial recognition cameras, the high-tech gear worn by the police, billions of dollars have been spent on new technologies, new data systems that are all developed in far-away expensive military labs are at the service of those in power and are employed with the sole goal of establishing a system that is able to gain back the control over the city as soon as possible. The protesters on the other hand prove themselves very much

a grassroots movement with their use of everyday utensils like umbrellas, laser pens, yellow helmets and black clothing (and occasionally with make-up and colourful suits). The use of traffic cones to extinguish tear gas canisters, carpets of bricks to stop vehicles and all sort of material from construction sites to stop, distract or attack the riot police are all perfect examples of a technology of affect. It is a creative and artistic way of occupying the streets you love, occupying them by heart, by will and by chance, in order to gain back control over them. Never designed as weapons, as means to defend one's ground, all of these objects are discovered anew. The rage, therefore, is not about creating chaos at all. On the contrary, this creative act is always a battle against chaos. Destroying the streets, and even destroying the shops of one's city, can also be done out of love, which we know since antiquity; sometimes destruction is needed in order to facilitate new life, new more sustainable forms of living.

It asks for the utmost creativity, to find ways to turn a lyre into a bow.

In his famous text Postscript on control societies, Deleuze says that there is no need to fear the new integrated systems of free-floating control, nor should we hope for the best; we need to find 'new weapons', that allow communities to resist, to step up, become visible again, as a community. Bruce Lee's famous adagio, "be water, my friend", has often been memorized by the protesters as a strategy to deal with those in power. Artist Kacey Wong remembered Bruce Lee's words and concluded in his TEDxVienna talk "How can I become formless and shapeless in a protest? When you put people in the street, they have to become the street."

What Remains

When stores were damaged, they were quickly covered with wooden planks. The walls filled with graffiti were often painted over the next day. Hong Kong photographer Chris Gaul perhaps captured this best with his photo series called 'Erasure' where he, right after the cleaners (working on orders of the government), quickly erased the man-size characters that were placed on the glass plates of bus stops and similar locations just the night before. Gaul himself said in an interview:

> Even though most were unreadable, I was struck by how they capture the energy and essence of the moment in Hong Kong: upheaval, collision, anger and violence—but also resistance and hope.

Arthur notices that the complexities of life (the city and its others, the histories and their presences) have deformed him, made him unrecognizable to himself. Arthur was used to playing the clown. It was what his mother taught him to do; it was how he, as a grown-up, hoped he could mask his out-of-this-world-ness, his nervous laughter, his 'weirdness'.

Arthur tried hard to be a clown. Arthur made jokes that no one understood, like all of the wounded, tragically deformed by the powers of the father, the mother, by the powers that control. The moment he starts to live his wounds beautifully, is the moment he is not dancing alone anymore, invisible in a shady bathroom or in a shabby apartment, now he has a huge audience cheering for him.

But he couldn't persevere in being like this because of society. In 1947, French theatre maker Antonin Artaud, whose physique keeps reminding me of Joaquin Phoenix's *Joker*, always in a struggle with his mental condition, wrote a beautiful homage to Vincent van Gogh entitled *Van Gogh, the Man Suicided by Society* in which he stressed that van Gogh, also struggling, did not kill himself; society "had him punish himself" (2004, 1443) for how he dealt with his alleged 'madness', his weirdness, his out-of-this-world-ness. Artaud himself died of an overdose of chloral hydrate in a psychiatric clinic a year after he wrote this text.

The movie *Joker* ends in vain. It is unclear whether Joker will continue his life in a psychiatric clinic, in jail or anywhere else. It would not make sense, as it happens with so many of the movies on superheroes, that there would be a part 2 in which Joker returns, disturbing normality again, after which he would become invisible again. That is not how the visible and the invisible city work. That is not how revolution works.

In an interview, Deleuze once stated ([1990] 1995, 171):

> They say revolutions turn out badly. But they're constantly confusing two different things, the way revolutions turn out historically and people's revolutionary becomings. These relate to two different sets of people. Men's only hope lies in a revolutionary becoming: the only way of casting off their shame or responding to what is intolerable.

People's revolutionary becomings will never be understood by their conquerors if only because they cannot see what happens underground, they cannot see how a new community is already in the making, how new weapons are being forged. It is a mistake to think that the desires of Joker could even be fulfilled by his visibility. That is not how visibility works.

Wounds never heal. They transform and transpose until one day, they surface again, unforeseen and unrecognizably, to speak truth to power.

Put on a happy face.

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