

Pretending the city: Cinema as urban planning tool

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Abstract

Rose's connection of the City Digital Twin and its visual logics and ideologies to the disaster film is an illuminating one, but is articulated through the intensive usage of CGI, formal and stylistic strategies, and narrative and thematic content closely affiliated with the disaster film and other subtypes of the action film genre. If we move beyond the confines of a generic exploration and instead approach the CDT through an ontological model of cinema and cinematic-descended screen media in general, other facets of not only the CDT, but also the city's relationship with image and representation, emerge.

Keywords

DUR commentary, CDT, Cinema

As Rose argues, the City Digital Twin's anxieties about what it leaves out – that it fears some element of the city is innately untwinnable – are best understood through an analysis of what any city digital twin innately includes: a 'visual form of power' attached to a white masculinist image of the city as 'transparent and actionable' (Rose, 2025: 148). CDT are always aiming to contain or narrate any 'excess' through the logics and systems of power and control that they reinscribe and in which they are enmeshed. Rose explores the ways in which these same visual logics of power, control, and manipulability underlie the pre- and post-production cinematic technologies, as well as diegeses, of disaster films. Rose's connection of the CDT and its visual logics and ideologies to the disaster film is an illuminating one, but it is based on the intensive usage of Computer Generated Images, formal and stylistic strategies, and narrative and thematic content closely affiliated with the disaster film and other subtypes of the action film genre. If we move beyond the confines of a generic exploration and

instead approach the CDT through an ontological model of cinema and cinematic-descended screen media in general, two other facets of not only the CDT, but also the city's relationship with image and representation, emerge. First, Rose argues that the CDT and the disaster film both deploy a volumetric logic derived from their joint reliance on three-dimensional (3-D) digital animation, which, for Rose, is part of a contemporary 'much broader shift towards three-dimensional imagery' (Rose, 2025: 150). This historical claim must be reconsidered, and the CDT not compared to a type of film but rather understood as embodying a transhistorical cinematic impulse towards a totalising, indexical reproduction of social and spatial reality. Second, that same

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reproductive ability means that cinema and cinematic-descended screen media like CDT must be understood as part of the urban ensemble and mutually constitutive with it, rather than as representations of it. Considering cinema in this light helps illuminate the power of alternative depictions of the city as models or ‘pretendings’ of it that articulate logics and ideologies at odds with those of the CDT.

The CDT should be understood as a contemporary iteration of the aerial surveys by Fairchild and Kodak in the 1910s, documentaries by the American Association of Regional Planners in the 1930s, and photo essays ranging from those affiliated with the Committee on Slum Clearance in the 1940s to the visual aids utilised by the Lindsay administration to illustrate their never-implemented Plan for the City of New York in 1969. As Sonja Dümpelmann, Eric Gordon, Samuel Zipp, and McLain Clutter have separately shown, early- to mid-twentieth century city planners in North America and Western Europe adopted photographic and cinematic technologies as both internal tools and as a means of communicating and justifying their plans to the public from the time of the City Beautiful movement on (Clutter, 2015; Dümpelmann, 2014; Gordon, 2010; Zipp, 2010). They did this for two reasons. First, film had a multi-scalar ability to capture an entire city, its suburbs, and surrounding areas in great depth and detail that would illuminate, say, a regional planner’s arguments about how a city, its environs, and near neighbours needed to be thought together as a single system. Second, these same characteristics enabled film to visually access and represent the intimate, daily activities of life as it was lived in alleys and tenements, aspects of the urban that, even then, critics argued planners ignored (Dümpelmann, 2014: 88–95). Drawing on depth of field photography, high-speed film, and relatively lightweight 16 mm cameras, these kinds of cinematic projects could convey an easily parsable, apparently objective, and highly authoritative view of the city. That authoritative nature, and cinema’s innate affinity with the external and specific, was also a potent tool for marshalling public favour and judicial decisions in favour of proposals that relied on extremely abstract, ambiguous terms and ideas like ‘blight’ (Zipp, 70–78).

The logic of the CDT, particularly its production of ‘transparent geographies’ and positioning of its

user/wielders as demi-gods, owe as much to this history as they do to the other eighteenth and nineteenth century imperial visual regimes Rose identifies. In particular, Rose argues that CDTs ‘must be understood as a fantasy as much as a feasible technique for urban management’ (Rose, 2025: 151). That fantasy is not only resonant with the history outlined above, but also with the desire that the classical film theorist Andre Bazin called ‘the myth of total cinema’. For Bazin, cinema exists as an accreted history of technological innovation that stretches back to early Enlightenment camera obscuras, through the development of photography, and to the incorporation of sound, colour, and related innovations. At the same time, Bazin argued that these innovations are an attempt to fulfil the millennia-old ‘myth of total cinema’, or the fantasy of human ability to reproduce the physical world as an indexical moving image – that is, one that transfers, like a decal, fundamental aspects of reality as it is lived to an automatically recorded image of it (Bazin, 2005: 17–22). Contemporary interlocutors of Bazin have drawn out the implications of this fantasy and its connection to visual technologies of knowledge and logics of power in more recent cinematic-descended media. For example, the film theorist Anne Friedberg and new media theorist Lev Manovich both understand virtual reality, augmented reality, and gaming technologies (many of which share a 3-D animation and volumetric design with CDT) as offering users a bargain (Friedberg, 1994; Manovich, 2001). In exchange for the kind of visual omniscience and omnipotence that CDT users, or gamers, imagine for ourselves, we accede to a certain kind of surrender: the greater our visual absorption in a virtual environment, the more we perceive of it and the more we perceive ourselves to control it, in exchange for restricting the movement of our bodies to gestures required for continuing to play.

To me, this suggests that the ultimate fantasy offered by the CDT isn’t that nothing escapes its representational ability, but rather that the planner themselves remains outside of, unaffected, by the representation of the city they create, in part because they imagine that there exists a city separate from representation, or prior to a model. The myth of total cinema and the history of cinema’s use as

an urban planning tool, on the other hand, remind us that urban environments must also be understood as representations, that to consider a city volumetric, or twinnable, or 'transparent and actionable' in the first place is to have already constructed a model of it. The limitations of the CDT are ultimately not that of the technology, but rather, as Rose notes, that of the users' perspectives, which are indicative not only of a long line of urban planning shortcomings, but also of highly conventionalised cinematic perspectives. Yet the myth of total cinema, and cinema's indexical qualities, also has much more progressive implications and applications. The architect and film theorist François Penz argues that the cinema can be understood not only as an urban planning tool, but as 'a form of urban modelling' that also reminds us that architecture and urban space are themselves 'narrative forms' (Penz, 2022: 15). For Penz, cinema is an especially good model because it is able to retain and express the 'affective, emotional, and poetic attributes' of urban life that other urban models lack – I would argue that these attributes are the exact ones CDT's worry escape them (Penz, 2022: 16–17). Penz reminds us that cinema can – and often has, especially in marginal and politically engaged traditions such as independent media and experimental documentary – produce alternative models that foreground ideas about and possibilities for the city that do not lay outside the CDT's ability to twin as much as they exceed the particular vision and social position that orients the CDT.

I would like to turn to a recent, and quite mainstream, documentary that exemplifies these possibilities, *Pretend It's A City* (Scorsese, 2021). This Netflix documentary series follows the raconteur Fran Leibowitz as she relates her life experiences and her life-long, cantankerous love of New York. The centrepiece episode, in which she lays out her interpretation of what's gone wrong with the city and how to fix it, inverts the logic of the CDT on both a visual and rhetorical level, and does so by foregrounding a monument to mid-twentieth century planning that captures this logic in an analogue form. In this scene, shot at the Queens Museum, Scorsese films Leibowitz from above, as he stands on the observation deck that encircles the Panorama of the City of

New York and she stands in the Panorama's East River. The Panorama was commissioned by Robert Moses for the 1964–1965 World's Fair, and designed to highlight his accomplishments—bridges, public-private urban renewal projects like the United Nations, parks, and public housing (Sabat et al., 2014: 282). Moses's hope for the Panorama was that it would shore up his authority and accomplishments at a time when his policies, and personal behaviour, had come increasingly under attack, and so the Panorama at once demonstrates how urban planning has reshaped every aspect of the city through its exacting, proportional representation of every built structure in the five boroughs, and, through this same plenitude, positions any future changes or plans other than Moses's as unnecessary. Press photographs showed Moses standing squarely in the midst of the model, referencing earlier images that showed him viewing or holding elements of table-top miniature models of various planning projects of his. These images were shot from a classic low angle, emphasising Moses's height and power as he bestrides the city in an embodied version of the visual 'demi-god' powers a CDT user assumes.

By contrast, Leibowitz is filmed from a high angle, in conversation with an off-camera Scorsese. Throughout the scene, Scorsese cuts from Leibowitz to an overhead shot that combs through the valleys created by the street grid, providing an intensive impression of 3-D space in a two-dimensional (2-D) image. That space is not so much volumetric as it is geometric, detailed, and orthographic, concentrating on the spaces and spatial variances that urban structures create through their differences from one another. This scene creates a multifaceted relationship between the on-screen speaker and the space she occupies, while the director, metaphorically occupying the place of the planner/CDT user, asks her questions about, and privileges her insights into, the city. It is as though a CDT had interactable nonplayable characters standing in for the governmental infrastructures – community boards, tenants associations, environmental agencies – that would necessarily shape the policies and plans CDT users want to implement and with which they needed to negotiate. The interview questions Scorsese asks Leibowitz similarly modify the implicit model under which CDTs operate that define what a city is

and determine what urban planning should do. Rather than ask her what her ideal city would be like, or to point out her favourite neighbourhood, or to speculate on the impact of current policies, Scorsese asks: ‘what makes a model citizen of New York?’ Leibowitz’s reply focuses on reflexive, critical questioning of, and strategies for opposing, city leadership’s attempts to modify city policy and civic life for the sake of ‘bringing money into the city’, money that follows established patterns of investment and disinvestment, and exacerbates working- and middle-class displacement and accumulation of capital in the hands of financial institutions and their backers.

This question presupposes an active and central role for inhabitants in the life and functioning of the city, just as Leibowitz’s response foregrounds what is missing from CDT, not because the technology is incapable of ‘twinning’ it, but because it is fundamentally not of interest to CDT users: a dialogic relationship with the people they’re planning for, and treatment of them as fellow planners. Leibowitz’s response calls on citizens to do a kind of city planning through community organising and activism, to be citizens who ‘model’ the city through their behaviour. Here and throughout the documentary, when Leibowitz admonishes us to ‘pretend it’s a city’, as she does in an earlier episode, she’s not talking about the Panorama, or a disaster scenario, or other nascent urban planning projects. Instead, she is demanding that pedestrians look where they’re going, and adopt good urban manners that enable urban citizens to mutually use and enjoy the city. To ‘pretend it’s a city’ is to be mindful that one is not alone in the city, that the city is not for one’s singular use, but rather is something we pretend into being together, through actions that mutually impact one another. That is the very kind of pretending Rose notes is absent from the CDT, and which must be simulated and managed through the logic of the patriarchal narrative – and CDT-aligned pre- and post-production – of the contemporary disaster film.

It is also worth noting that what prompts Leibowitz to exclaim ‘pretend it’s a city’ is specifically her irritation at people not looking where they’re going because they’re on their phones. In addition to the complex relationships between cinema and planning and cinematic vision and the vision of the CDT, screen media is also indelibly a component of the built and social

environment of the contemporary city. From digital urban platforms to the pre- and post-production labour centres that build the technology behind both CDT and disaster films, to television tourism, to location shooting, to public information screens, cinema and its descendants are core components of daily urban life, generating it rather than merely representing it. This means we need to rethink the relationship between ‘real cities’ and their ‘representations’. In doing so, we can more easily access cinematic traditions that critique totalising visions like the CDT and, in doing so, offer different ways of pretending cities.

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