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# Through the Lens of the Glossy Urban Dystopias

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In the current post-crises, post-pandemic (and post-political) conjuncture, the future is often portrayed cladded with potential emergencies and disasters. Post-disaster films and novels have created numerous imaginaries of dystopic futures – some eerily familiar. Similarly, critical theorists have highlighted the rising tendencies of governments and institutions to use future emergencies in order to justify further securitization, pacification coercive governmentalities and inequalities/injustices (Anderson, 2017). If we also consider the current increase of future research (and studies), then one might argue that the future is here in the present (especially since the present seems an untenable situation to deal with or to change).

Prominently, this present–future substantiates through discourses and representations which incorporate present and looming crises and emergencies as well as their often-prescribed modalities of resolution and avoidance (Jeffrey & Dyson, 2021). Yet, simultaneously this present–future also substantiates through alluring spatial imaginaries that portray forthcoming (urban) transformations as an attractive future possibility for the spectators/inhabitants (us).

Urban, spatial imaginaries, as discourses and as representations have extensive histories for being used political technologies for ‘managing Otherness’ and for achieving consensus. E. Said (2003), D. Gregory (2004, building on Said’s work), Bialasiewicz et al. (2007) and many others have greatly illustrated how imagined geographies and spatial imaginaries legitimize imperialist and colonial interventions and violence (over those represented as Others) as well as prescribe internal and external ‘enemies’ – often people not conforming to such imaginaries, or not fitting with the economic and social model behind them – and the strategies for their pacification and/or expulsion.

While geographic imaginations of Otherness, of (in)securities and emergencies and of managing a ‘dangerous’ future have prevailed in theoretical / analytical explorations, rather limited interest has been shown for urban imaginaries of the present – future, that neither form the landscape of utopian/dystopian fictions not refer to better or lesser-known discussions about models of the ideal city.

Dystopias have often reflected conscious and unconscious social fears and anxieties, provided critical commentaries – even warnings – about the world to come as well as about the problems and the failings of the present. Thus, they substantially rely on imaginaries of emergencies, of disasters and of diverse forms of oppression (among others). Yet, as is often written and discussed, oppression doesn’t solely come from repressive regimes or violence and authoritarianism; it also comes through delimiting interpretations of the ‘necessary’ and the ‘attractive’, ‘the good life’, the ‘ideal city’ and ‘the’ perfect human’ (among others) that inherently privilege certain social groups, ideologies and practices over others who are oppressed or even annihilated. Discourses and representations, as ‘regimes of truth’

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(Foucault, (2003[1997]), legitimate but crucially 'naturalize' these representations in politics and in the social and spatial imaginaries (Hall, 1997).

There lies our interest in the significations of alluring or glossy dystopias: on the pivotal role that spatial imaginaries of urban transformations, and of 'new urban worlds', play in framing and in legitimizing possibilities of urban futures and on the 'naturalization' of the prescribed futures as the best possible scenario, without challenging the overt or covert repercussions that such future transformations might entail. Or in other words in colonizing both urban life and urban imaginaries.

When we turn our attention to the urban, commonly, narratives of urban crises and decline come together with narratives and representations of regeneration, rejuvenation and rebranding of the cities 'in crisis' trying to convince about a better promised future – if only. And this better future is cultivated via spectacular, alluring, enticing images of urban phantasmagorias where 'problems' (people, neighbourhoods, politics) have been 'photoshopped out'; erased.

Contrary to the post-apocalyptic dystopic futures, these 'glossy attractive urban dystopias' do not warn about the dangers that a given socio-political trajectory might entail. Rather, in our hyper-spectacularized times, these 'glossy dystopias' pacify anxieties by providing a 'picture-perfect future' which becomes imprinted into social imaginaries with a positive – albeit unquestioned – signification. Even more so, their 'unchallenged' attractiveness does not solely legitimize and naturalize the proposed representations of the future but simultaneously 'normalizes' both the visible and the invisibilised (those excluded and erased from it) but also tends to limit, or disallow, or even remove the possibilities for articulating critique and alternative futures.

So, for whom is this glossy dystopic future planned and who is excluded from it?

Which discriminations, inequalities and injustices are 'normalized' for the desired future to materialize?

How are these glossy dystopias constructed, which politics do they necessitate, and which actors facilitate and promote them?

And how can these glossy dystopias be challenged and countervailed?

Dorreen Massey has offered a conceptualization of the spatial "as an ever-shifting social geometry of power and signification" with places (but also 'cultures' and 'societies' as she writes referring to Hall, 1995) being "imagined as particular articulations of these social relations, including local relations 'within' the place and those many connections which stretch way beyond it. And all these embedded in complex, layered, histories".

By naming these imaginary spatialities as glossy dystopias we wish to interrogate and illuminate the underlying relations of power, exclusion and oppression that hide behind these 'beautified' dystopias and aestheticized futures. Therefore, we perceive glossy urban dystopias as an analytical lens that allows us to illuminate these legitimized, naturalized and unchallenged social and spatial urban imaginaries that prescribe our 'improved' cities, neighbourhoods and lives, while obscuring the inherent discriminations, inequalities and dispossessions they might entail.

Glossy urban dystopias can be perceived both as an analytical 'terrain' and as a methodological vantage point. Rather than suggesting one method of critical analysis, critique or praxis it wishes to be embedded in a multiplicity of methods and approaches which could, potentially, challenge and contest discourses, representations and politics of and for urban redevelopment, renewal, and renaissance, presenting us alluring, but not alive, places where the complexity and the inequalities are just hidden as solved. They actually produce an image that looks at us, portraying a 'desired' or 'desirable' future in which 'we' can happily be without others; others have been erased; invisibilized from the im-

age; and often violently displaced and excluded from the experienced reality when the image gains life (materializes and becomes embodied)

Finally, we wish to highlight the potential that the critique of such glossy urban dystopias bear for counter-praxis; for cultivating counter-rationalities that may, in the future, challenge the normalization of dominant worldviews and politics and hidden dimensions of power-relations that reproduce injustices and inequalities and restrict the articulation of counter-imaginaries (social, spatial, political etc).

In this sense, glossy or alluring dystopias may work provocatively by allowing for or by developing a counter-imaginary that illustrates the hidden, invisibilized oppressions of the glossy future imaginary.

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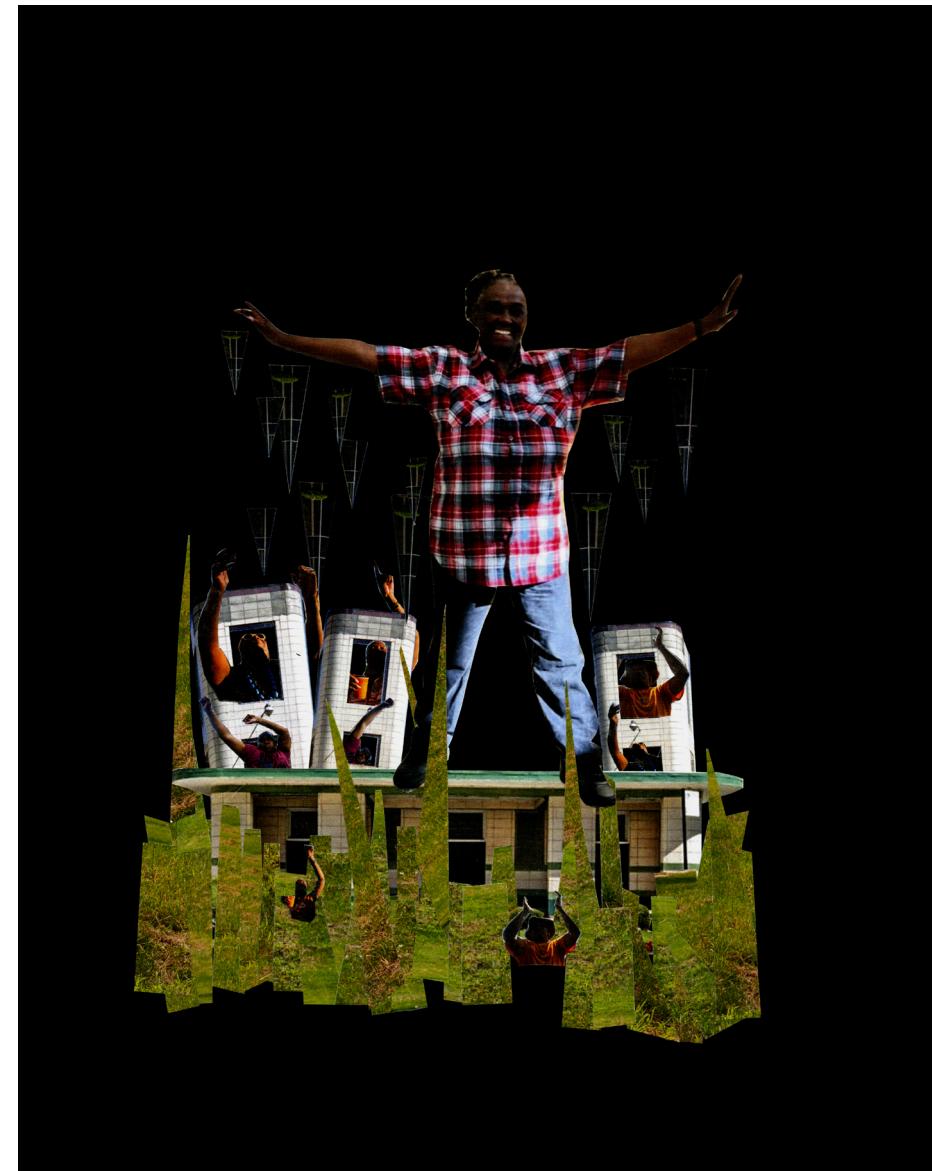


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## Io Squaderno 66

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*Io Squaderno* is a project by Andrea Mubi Brighenti, Cristina Mattiucci & Andrea Pavoni.

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